AMERICA'S PARKING ADDICTION
MAX HOLLERAN

THE HUMAN PRICE OF BIDEN'S ICE
MARÍA INÉS TARACENA

THE NEW REPUBLIC

May 2023

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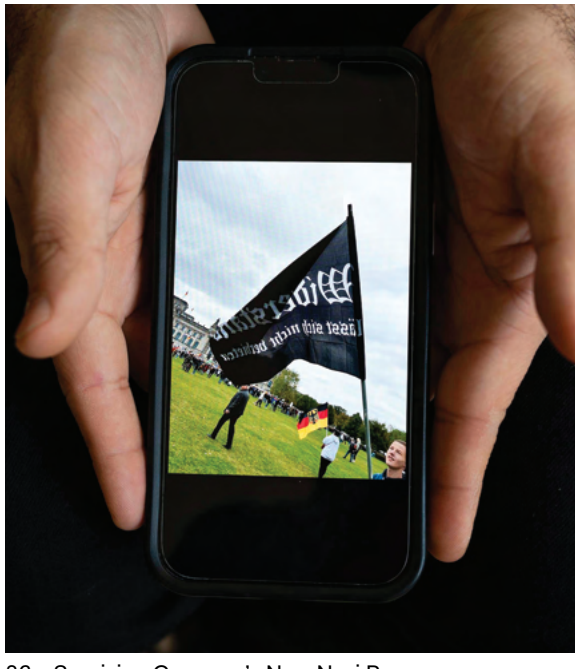

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The Dark Truth of Biden's Immigration Policy

The administration once promised to close privately run immigrant detention centers. Instead, it's packing them full.

By María Inés Taracena

Illustration by Adam Maida

THE LAST TIME Eduardo saw his best friend, Kesley Vial, a 23-year-old asylum seeker from Brazil, Vial was unconscious. He had been found hanging from a shelf in his cell at the Torrance County Detention Facility, a sheet tied around his neck. Seven days later, at a hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Vial died.

Eduardo, who is from Ecuador and was also being held at Torrance, a private Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center about an hour southwest of Albuquerque, was already depressed. But Vial's death pushed him into a crisis that's still difficult to talk about. Kesley "was a joyous person, a good person. He danced that morning. He danced almost every day," said Eduardo, who asked to go by a pseudonym for safety. "But being locked up in there is hell."

After Vial's death, Eduardo attempted suicide himself. For at least two straight months, he reported having suicidal thoughts nearly

GETTY (X2)

every week. He was released from Torrance in December, once the detention center's medical unit finally diagnosed him with suicidal ideation, said Sophia Genovese, supervising attorney at the New Mexico Immigrant Law Center, a pro bono legal group that works with asylum seekers locked up in the state's detention centers. In total, Eduardo was held at Torrance for nearly eight months.

That Torrance pushed Vial and Eduardo to such mental anguish does not surprise immigrant-justice advocates. In 2021, the facility, which is operated by the corporation CoreCivic, failed a government inspection performed by the third-party contractor Nakamoto Group. The inspection cited dangerous understaffing and squalid living conditions, including inedible food. Last year, the Homeland Security Department Office of Inspector General twice recommended Torrance's closure. And in a September report, it noted concerns with the facility's inadequate medical care. (ICE disputed the findings, and refused to respond to my repeated requests for comment.)

Torrance "exemplifies everything that is wrong with immigration detention and why the detention system must be abolished in its entirety," said Luis Suarez, field advocacy manager at Detention Watch Network, in a statement. According to Genovese, by late December 2022, the number of people held at Torrance had gone down to just a handful.

President Joe Biden once promised to phase out the use of private immigration detention centers. But his government continues to jail asylum seekers, and in March reports emerged that the administration was considering detaining asylum-seeking families apprehended along the U.S.-Mexico border, after largely stopping the practice over the last two years. Biden's proposed budget for 2024 includes nearly $25 billion for ICE and Customs and Border Protection, an $800 million increase in funding compared to 2023. For all his claims to the contrary, Biden has built on Donald Trump's legacy of intensified crackdowns on asylum seekers and ignored mounting evidence of the physical and mental harms—including death—triggered by detention. Between January 2021 and the first quarter of 2023, at least eight people died in ICE custody.

In fact, the Biden administration is not simply "willing to stand by and allow torture to take place"—it's actually facilitating it, said Ariel Prado, co-director of Innovation Law Lab's Anticarceral Legal Organizing program. Immigrants are being maltreated in places that aren't "fit to hold any human beings, in order to cause fear." In late December, ignoring the plentiful warnings about conditions at Torrance, the administration began transferring hundreds of immigrants into the facility.

EDUARDO'S FRIEND VIAL, who was apprehended in El Paso, Texas, arrived at Torrance back in April 2022. He failed his "credible fear" interview, the initial screening that determines whether a person can apply for asylum in the United States, and in June an immigration judge ordered his deportation. The next month, Vial was transferred to a facility in Florence, Arizona, to prepare him for his removal to Brazil. But instead he was brought back to Torrance, according to ICE's death review report. During mental health evaluations, he repeatedly said he was suffering from depression, anxiety, and insomnia, and explained that he was extremely frustrated by the lack of information he was receiving from ICE about his case.

One August morning, an ICE official told Vial that his deportation had been delayed again, this time until the beginning of September. Early that afternoon, he hit a wall with his hand and sat on the ground, crying, according to ICE's death report. He was sent to another mental health evaluation. About 30 minutes later, he returned to his cell. He was found unresponsive later that afternoon, when officers entered his housing unit for count.

Advocates blame Torrance's inhumane and abusive conditions for Vial's death. The death report, said Ian Philabaum, co-director of Innovation Law Lab's Anticarceral Legal Organizing program, "is the watered-down version of a young man crying out for help and receiving poor services while he's being mistreated in this facility." It's also the end of the story for ICE and CoreCivic, which "get to wash their hands off it and continue modus operandi."

Following Vial's death, some of his fellow detainees went on a hunger strike, but the protest was broken up after about two weeks. ICE quickly deported most of the people involved, and advocates say conditions at Torrance—including serious due-process violations—have only gotten worse in the months since. There have also been several more suicide attempts, according to Innovation Law Lab, including, in November, that of Rafael Oliveira do Nascimento, an asylum seeker from Brazil.

JABIN BOTSFORD/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY

NEVER FORGET

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

TRAGEDY

In May, Trump announced the reinstatement of crushing economic sanctions on Iran and withdrawal from the multilateral, Obama-negotiated 2015 nuclear deal. The move was likely made at the behest of the new national security adviser, John Bolton, who years earlier claimed that the simplest way to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear arms would be to just bomb the country itself. Iran's inflation soon skyrocketed, 1.6 million Iranians fell into poverty, and—far from causing the regime change the administration envisioned—Iranian security forces clamped down on civilian protest, resulting in more than 300 deaths.

FARCE

House Republicans nominated Trump in May for the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to "end the Korean War" and "denuclearize the Korean peninsula." Eight months earlier, Trump had referred to Kim Jong Un as "rocket man," and during a U.N. General Assembly session said that the North Korean leader was on a "suicide mission for himself and for his regime." If the United States "is forced to defend itself or its allies," said Trump, "we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea." In their nomination letter, the lawmakers said there was "no one more deserving of the Committee's recognition in 2019 than President Trump for his tireless work to bring peace to our world."

FASCIST

Trump called on the military to "secure" the U.S.-Mexico border in April, after he'd claimed "Caravans" of Central American migrants were bringing a "massive inflow of Drugs and People." "Act now Congress," he tweeted, "our country is being stolen!" Soon after, Trump ended Temporary Protected Status for nearly 57,000 Honduran immigrants, many of whom had been living in the United States for decades.

—Indigo Olivier

Other asylum seekers formerly held at Torrance—along with people from Otero County Processing Center in Chaparral, less than half an hour north of El Paso, Texas, and Cibola County Correctional Center in Milan, about an hour west of Albuquerque—described similar stories of psychological abuse, prolonged detention, threats and retaliation from guards, due-process violations, and a sham and unfair immigration process that leads to wrongful deportations. There's also wide documentation of severe medical neglect, poor or nonexistent mental health care, inedible food, chronic sleep deprivation, and other conditions that rapidly deteriorate the well-being of asylum seekers and immigrants detained at the three facilities.

Cristian, a Venezuelan asylum seeker using a pseudonym because he fears retaliation, said he was placed in solitary confinement for 15 days at the Otero facility, which is operated by the Management and Training Corporation, after he accepted a note from one of the kitchen staff members. Cristian's stay in "*el hueco*"—the hole, as many detainees refer to it—is just one example of what advocates and lawyers have long denounced as an excessive and arbitrary use of solitary confinement inside ICE detention centers in New Mexico and nationwide. (CoreCivic and MTC deny allegations of abuse and inhumane conditions at Torrance, Cibola, and Otero.)

"This damages your mind," Cristian told me from a Telmate phone call inside Otero in mid-February. At the time, he had been detained there for nearly six months, despite passing his credible fear interview, having a sponsor in the United States, and being granted relief by an immigration judge under the Convention Against Torture, according to his attorney, Zoe Bowman, of the El Paso–based Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center. "Do you know what it's like to be in a hole, alone, for 15 days without speaking to a single person? This is not human."

Eduardo and Cristian were among the more than 6,200 asylum seekers and immigrants whose confidential information was neglectfully published on ICE's website last November. The data leak included their names, birth dates, nationalities, detention locations, and the status of their asylum cases. As a result of the massive leak, ICE released nearly 3,000 people in January. Cristian was finally let out in late March.

Solitary confinement is also used at the facilities to isolate people who say they're experiencing a mental health crisis, including thoughts of suicide and self-harm. A February report by Innovation Law Lab recounted the plight faced by those who are sent to "*los cuartos de tortura*," or torture rooms, as they're often called, at Torrance. Eduardo was placed in these rooms numerous times. His clothes were taken away and replaced by a thin hospital smock. The lights were on constantly, the vents blasted cold air, and for all three meals he was served raw carrots, bread, and water. He slept on the pavement floor. Such conditions force many detainees to claim that their suicidal thoughts have passed just so they'll be let out. In a statement to *The New Republic*, CoreCivic referred to the Innovation Law Lab report as "sensationalized."

> **"Their purpose is to instill fear in you, to abuse you psychologically so that you'll voluntarily ask for your deportation."**

EVEN UNDER THESE distressing circumstances, asylum seekers still find ways to resist. David, who's from Venezuela and also asked to go by a pseudonym, said he joined two hunger strikes last November and December while detained at Otero. "This was our only tool to make our voices heard," he explained. He knew of other hunger strikes at the facility, sometimes carried out by only one person. Often, he said, officials responded with threats of force-feeding the strikers. One man was taken to solitary to pressure him to end his hunger strike. In December, following a second collective hunger strike, David said an asylum seeker from the Dominican Republic attempted suicide at Otero out of frustration that nothing was getting better.

David's information was part of ICE's data leak last year, and after he was released on parole, he finally reunited with his pregnant wife. "Their purpose is to instill fear in you, to abuse you psychologically so that you'll voluntarily ask for your deportation," David said. "I think that's one of the main objectives of why Otero is so brutal, so that we'll ask to be deported."

Medical neglect is rampant at the three facilities. When Carlos, a Colombian asylum seeker, arrived at Cibola, he had broken ribs from being robbed and assaulted in Mexico. Besides acetaminophen, he said, he never received care. At Otero, David said, detainees were given handfuls of pills of different colors and told to take them without explanation of what the medication was actually for. The same has been reported at Torrance, where many say they're overmedicated with unidentified pills. Others don't receive the medication needed to treat their chronic health conditions.

While Biden's government has disregarded reports of these abuses, advocates continue to apply local pressure, with the aim of one day shuttering the facilities. In January, a bill introduced in New Mexico was part of a nationwide wave of similar measures seeking to ban contracts between ICE and state and local governments. Legislation has been proposed or enacted in at least eight other states, including California, Oregon, New Jersey, and New York. And the movement scored a massive victory earlier this year, when, after nearly a decade of grassroots advocacy, mounting pressure from activists led to the closure of ICE's troubled Berks County Residential Center in Pennsylvania.

In March, the New Mexico bill was ultimately voted down by the state Senate; its opponents successfully persuaded even some Democrats in the legislature to vote against it, arguing that ending immigrant detention would be bad for local economies. Advocates counter that detention centers are not, in Genovese's words, "profitable or beneficial" to the rural communities where they are frequently located. "We are working to fight now at the federal level to cancel these individual contracts one by one," she said.

As Eduardo attempts to recover from the trauma of his detention, he continues to fight for asylum in the United States. He remembered an ICE agent who oversaw immigration cases at Torrance who would often tell those detained that the only way they'd be released would be if they died. There were moments, Eduardo said, that he truly believed that. Today, he lives with his brother on the East Coast. "These places should not exist," he told me. "They are torture." TNR

María Inés Taracena *is a journalist from Guatemala who lives in New York City.*

SCOTT OLSON/GETTY

Elissa Slotkin spoke at an anti-gun rally in front of the state Capitol in February, following the mass shooting at Michigan State University.

Arms Control

She made her bones in foreign policy. Now, Elissa Slotkin is making gun legislation a centerpiece of her Senate campaign.

By Daniel Strauss

MID-FEBRUARY WAS supposed to mark a new chapter in the career of Representative Elissa Slotkin of Michigan. A three-term Democratic congresswoman and foreign policy veteran, Slotkin had been primed to kick off a long-rumored campaign for the Senate seat being vacated by Debbie Stabenow—and assume front-runner status for a seat Democrats desperately need to retain in 2024. Instead, she found herself at a podium on Michigan State University's campus in East Lansing—the site of a shooting that had just taken the lives of three MSU students—not to announce her candidacy, but to voice her fury over another mass shooting in her district.

"As the representative of Oxford, Michigan, I cannot believe I'm here doing this again 15 months later," said Slotkin, flanked by Governor Gretchen Whitmer and law enforcement and university personnel. "And I am filled with rage that we have another press conference to talk about children being killed in our schools. And I would say that you either care about protecting kids or you don't."

Oxford, of course, was the site of the November 2021 high school shooting by a student that left four other students dead and almost twice that many injured. At that time, there were vigils and funerals; this time, "I was just furious," Slotkin said in an interview a week later.

Indeed, three days after the shooting, her campaign email began with the jarring subject line, "I'm filled with rage." Previously, those emails—which Slotkin writes or edits herself—were used for fundraising. Now, they laid out details of the Safe Guns, Safe Kids Act, legislation Slotkin had proposed in the last Congress and has since revived. Among its provisions is a requirement that guns be safely stored if a minor could conceivably access them.

"I'm trying to mobilize different allies to change the conversation," she noted, aiming to appeal to Republican voters in her district—hunters, marksmen—to lobby lawmakers at the federal level. Slotkin had planned to run on her national security bona fides and a willingness to reach across the aisle; now, it was clear, she had another kind of security on her mind.

FOR DEMOCRATS, SLOTKIN has been an important centrist envoy to the Great Lakes State. The 7th Congressional District she represents, in the south central part of the state, has a population of less than 800,000, and she had won her first congressional campaign in 2018 by threading the needle between her farm-life experience in the district (she grew up in rural Holly, population less than 6,000) and her bipartisan foreign policy background: She was recruited by the CIA after graduating from Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs in 2003. She spent five years in Iraq with the CIA, and later, at the National Security Council, serving in both the Bush and the Obama administrations. (Subsequently, Slotkin worked at the State Department, then Defense.) It didn't hurt that the Slotkin name was well-known in Michigan: Her grandfather, Hugo, ran Hygrade Food Products, the company behind Ball Park Franks. Slotkin is also a member of the New Democrat Coalition and the Problem Solvers Caucus, groups that liberal Democrats occasionally feud with—a fact that may endear her to some of her constituents. (Like some in the moderate caucus, she declined to support Nancy Pelosi for speaker in 2021, but she's been a reliable vote on the House floor.)

Slotkin's reelection last fall was the third most-expensive House race in the nation, and Michigan itself has been trending blue lately, with both legislative chambers and the governorship now controlled by Democrats. It helps that Republicans have had difficulty recruiting serious-minded candidates for statewide office: Election denier Kristina Karamo was recently elected state GOP chair, and at press time Slotkin's only declared Republican opposition was state board of education member Nikki Snyder, who opposed masking and vaccine requirements in public schools during the height of the pandemic, and political novice Michael Hoover.

"In terms of the general political environment, the Democrats have just had the most remarkable three months I've ever seen out of the state legislature in terms of legislation they passed, starting with a huge appropriation bill," said former Michigan Democratic Party chairman Mark Brewer, who is currently neutral in the Senate primary. "All the in-state polling, both private and public, indicates that virtually everything they've done is very popular." That's good news for a national party that is defending 23 Senate seats next year—even if it encourages challengers from the left. (Slotkin is the sole Democratic candidate to date.)

So discussion of broader domestic policy may not be the electoral minefield for Democrats it was once was, especially for a candidate who can be "strong on defense but also focus on those things that are kitchen-table issues, because, in the end, those are the things that people are most in tune with day to day," said former Virginia Representative Elaine Luria, herself a Democratic foreign policy veteran, who lost her own reelection campaign last year in a Trump district.

Local infrastructure is one such kitchen-table issue. So on a sunny Monday, the morning of the MSU tragedy, she had traveled to an EMS facility in Livingston County to highlight her work securing federal funding for projects in her district, including a new truck for the Green Oak Charter Township Fire Department—part of a larger $24.5 million pot for local projects. It was a meat-and-potatoes constituent outreach, but reporters were far more interested in Slotkin's take on the strange objects spotted in the skies across the United States, including over Lake Michigan, prompting speculation about Chinese spy balloons and extraterrestrial objects. Ever the inscrutable intelligence analyst, she wasn't taking the bait. "I know there's lot of talk about UFOs and all of that; let's let our military do their job, collect the information," Slotkin remarked, for all the world making it sound as if the prospect of little green men was no bigger deal than the nuances of filibuster reform.

While foreign policy expertise has been Slotkin's calling card to date—she's been at the center of multiple pieces of legislation pushing the United States to aid Ukraine against the Russian invasion—her home state has been riven by extremism of its own: There were the unfounded allegations of voter fraud in the 2020 election; a mob attack on the state Capitol over Covid restrictions earlier that same year; a plot to kidnap and possibly assassinate Whitmer in 2021; and more recent purported threats to the current attorney general. In 2021, Slotkin chaired a House subcommittee hearing on the threat of domestic terrorism. Said Luria, "We saw a lot of things developing in Michigan that I think were later reflected in what we saw on January 6."

IN LATE MARCH, with Slotkin's campaign in full swing, we met again, this time in her congressional office in Washington, D.C. One side boasts a small shrine to her Michigan heritage: a painting of a hot dog made for her grandfather, the frankfurter magnate; a Michigan State University football signed by head coach Mel Tucker; a miniature tractor; and a small print of a can of Vernors ginger ale, a Michigan favorite. "I wouldn't have been given any of these opportunities if my great-grandfather had not come over here, and, in his mind, invented the all-beef frankfurter," she joked.

Slotkin's politics are rooted in personal experience. She was a Democrat from an early age—her mother came out as gay while Ronald Reagan was in office, and young Elissa took note of how gay people were treated during the early days of the AIDS epidemic. She'd just arrived at Columbia when the September 11 attacks occurred, reinforcing her interest in foreign policy. Years later, the memory of medical bills during her mother's cancer illness fresh in her mind, Slotkin challenged and defeated Republican Mike Bishop, who'd voted to repeal Obamacare. Now, she's taking aim at guns. "I've had friends close to me be killed by rockets," she said back in February, referencing her time in Iraq, but "our schools and our communities are not war zones. No one's being sent over to those communities knowing when they take an oath of office that they're there to risk their life. These are civilians."

Slotkin thinks a breaking point on gun control is coming. "There will come a time when enough people are personally impacted, and we will do something about it."

Her sense of urgency remained palpable: "I think in a certain way my national security experience is really affecting how I view this issue of gun violence," she told me. And her ability to link foreign policy to domestic policy may be key to winning over voters on other issues in a state still devastated by the abandonment of its manufacturing base a generation ago. "The issue of supply chains is really the issue of making sure we don't have critical dependencies on countries who don't always mean us well," she said. "No one wants to go to war with China. That's mutually assured economic destruction." And if she's elected, Slotkin may also want a seat on the powerful Senate Agriculture Committee, of which Stabenow is current chair. "I think we have to accept that things like extreme weather, extreme drought, food shortages due to climate change are going to be part of our national security issue set."

She may bring her considerable passion to bear on national gun legislation, but Slotkin is likely to be disappointed, at least in the short term. Although Congress passed, and President Joe Biden signed, compromise gun control legislation last year, passage of any further restrictions in the current Republican-controlled House is hardly likely. Still, she is pushing ahead. By late March, her office was preparing to help roll out a new set of proposals in Congress, such as $50 million in funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to finance gun violence research (co-sponsored with Democratic Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts), mandatory waiting periods for firearm purchases, and prohibiting those convicted of misdemeanors involving guns to own firearms for three years.

Slotkin believes a breaking point on gun control is coming and that, somehow, the country still hasn't reached it yet. "There will just come a time where enough people are just personally impacted by gun violence, where enough people have a personal experience with someone they love being at risk … and we will do something about it," she told me.

Slotkin knows the road ahead—with Democrats in the minority, an unhinged Republican Conference, and the specter of Trump 2.0 looming—will be a difficult one in the House. And she'll be pushing for controversial legislation and running a Senate campaign to boot. Still, if she's not exactly optimistic, she isn't pessimistic either. "If you would've told me in 1986, when I was hiding the fact that my mom was gay, that one day gay marriage would be legal, one day it would be a nonissue on TV, I wouldn't have believed you for the world," she said. "I'm not going to say it's soon, I'm not going to say it's easy, but that is how the tide of history moves," she said. Back in February, her tone had been grim yet determined. "I think I'm the only congressperson to now have had two school shootings in their district," Slotkin said. "I hope I'm the only one." TNR

Daniel Strauss *is a staff writer at* The New Republic.

Where's the Beef?

Inside the lobbying battle between Big Ag and cellular meat

By Andrew Zaleski

Illustration by Julian Gower

BRUCE FRIEDRICH BEAMED as he took the lectern at the inaugural Good Food Conference. It was September 2018, and as president and founder of the Washington, D.C.–based Good Food Institute, Friedrich was one of the leading voices advocating for alt-meat. Nearly 500 people had gathered at the University of California, Berkeley, including the biggest names in cellular agriculture—the would-be disrupters who envisioned slaughterhouse meat replaced with cuts made from the cells of cows, chickens, pigs, and fish.

"We need a new agricultural revolution," Friedrich announced. "That revolution is right here, right now. It's in this room."

At the same time that these upstarts extolled the potential for metamorphosis in America's meat industry, the companies and organizations that own it were preparing for a fight. Nearly six months before that Berkeley confab, one Big Ag group had filed a federal petition asking that the terms "beef" and "meat" be reserved exclusively for products from companies that don't make meat from cells.

In the Berkeley conference center hall, the innovators hoping to displace pastures with laboratories were preparing for the day of their inevitable showdown with the existing industry. In order to make sure their revolution wasn't blocked by the incumbent lobbying forces of Big Ag, they asked themselves, do we need to team up?

If companies engineering meat and poultry from cells are still overcoming technological hurdles, their eventual triumph appears more likely with each passing month. Less than three years ago, the world's first commercially available lab-grown chicken from California-based Eat Just hit restaurants in Singapore, the only country to date to approve such meat for commercial sale. But the United States doesn't seem far behind. Last November, Upside Foods, another California company, received the first-ever "No Questions" letter from the Food and Drug Administration, which agreed with the company's conclusion that its cellular chicken was safe to eat.

Observers of the field argue that cell-based beef and chicken will enter stores this decade. Planning for this eventuality raises important questions: Will people know what they're buying? Will the laws that govern the sale of farm-raised meat be the same for cell-based meat? In March, the FDA sent the same "No Questions" letter to Eat Just about its cell-based chicken.

For the various companies developing cell-based ag, the answer in 2018 was clear: If they didn't come together to address such questions, they could get hurt further down the line. Over the next year, in Slack chats and weekly conference calls, they created a coalition that could pave the way for cellular disruption of the meat market. Today the Association for Meat, Poultry and Seafood Innovation, or AMPS Innovation, is the first special-interest group in Washington, D.C.,

to represent the field of cellular agriculture. It counts nine members so far, including Upside Foods and Eat Just.

The group, as a formal trade association, has a manifold mission. Public education and outreach—explaining cellular agriculture to consumers and elected officials—are part of it. But the biggest challenge for these would-be rivals is around the corner, as federal agencies assemble the regulations to manage cell-based methods for producing beef, poultry, pork, and seafood. Grabbing a seat at the table as policymaking begins is a foremost concern for the companies making up the new coalition. As they're all too well aware, Big Ag is a force inside the Beltway: Tyson Foods alone spent $1.8 million last year on lobbying, compared to AMPS Innovation's paltry $20,000. Speaking as one voice, it's thought, will guarantee these newcomers more of a say in the policymaking process. "It's much more effective," said Josh Tetrick, CEO of Eat Just. "It just comes off as much more credible when you're speaking as a collective as opposed to speaking as a single company."

Much of the lobbying fight will come down to the label. Does the word "cultivated" go before "beef"? Is there a description of cell-based meat's origins?

CELL-BASED MEATS (the industry's preferred term is "cultivated" meat) are wholly unlike the more familiar plant-based offerings that proliferated over the past decade. Companies like Beyond Meat or Impossible Foods mix soy or pea proteins with other ingredients to mimic the taste and mouthfeel of real meat. Scientists at cultivated-meat companies, however, create their products from animal cells, not animal carcasses. That work takes place inside bioreactors, production chambers precisely calibrated for cells to multiply into muscle fibers. A burger made of ground beef product from a culture of cow cells is real meat—it just came from a facility that looks more like a brewery than a slaughterhouse.

So far, that process results in a much pricier product, although the numbers seem to be trending in the right direction. A few years ago, a single chicken nugget produced by Good Meat, the cell-based subsidiary of Eat Just, cost about $50. Today in Singapore, a restaurant dish with Good Meat's chicken might go for $17. (Not bad, considering the cost of a beef burger in many cities these days.) It's expected that prices will continue to fall as the technology improves, and as the costs fall, more people seem inclined to give cultivated products a chance, for a variety of reasons: animal welfare, the dangers to workers in processing plants, a continued threat of zoonotic viruses. "You can look at it through the eyes of compassion," Tetrick said. "You can look at it through the eyes of food safety. You can look at it through the lens of economics. Personally, I want to live in a world where the majority of meat that's consumed doesn't require the slaughter of an animal."

Following the current regulatory split proposed by federal agencies, the FDA will subject cultivated-meat companies and their products to the same food safety standards as other meat, poultry, and seafood currently on the market. The final word on labeling requirements then rests with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. (The one exception: Labeling for cell-based seafood falls within the purview of the FDA.) According to a spokesperson with USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, a proposed rule on labeling cultivated-meat products could arrive as soon as August.

What it comes down to is a fundamental interpretation of the nature of the protein on people's plates, and whether meat made from cells will be considered the same as meat raised on the farm. Members of the D.C. "barnyard"—some of the biggest organizations representing farm-raised meat—are already insisting it's crucial to delineate their products from meat nursed into being by science. "There should be some sort of labeling requirement that says it was developed in vitro, or in a petri dish, or in a lab," Lia Biondo, executive vice president of the U.S. Cattlemen's Association, told me. "We've spent decades building up an incredible brand, and we don't think this other product should be able to ride on the coattails of that." The USCA wrote the letter to the USDA in early 2018 asking that the terms "meat" and "beef" be reserved for slaughtered animals. The department denied the petition, but Biondo insists it "kick-started" a conversation: "We still hold out that these products should not be called 'meat.'"

POLICYMAKING IN D.C. tends to favor the established folks with entrenched lobbyists. Such a situation can be unfavorable to the cell-based businesses looking to influence the rules that, depending on how they're crafted, could spell doom or bloom for the cultivated-meat industry. "There are various ways in which Big Meat could squash its competitors," said Jennifer Jacquet, associate professor in the department of environmental studies at New York University. "One way is gobbling them up. The other is to litigate and make their life miserable and their expenses much higher and their products not marketable."

Keenly aware of this dynamic, the competitors-turned-compatriots of AMPS Innovation would rather be at the table than on the menu. And yet their move to band together into a trade association, they say, wasn't done to psych themselves up for a showdown with conventional meat producers. The association views cultivated products as complementary to what Big Ag already produces. Some of those behemoths are even investors in cultivated meat: Tyson Foods, for instance, took a minority stake in Upside Foods in 2018.

What these newcomers proposing to package meat made in labs recognize, instead, is that federal guidelines can sometimes be a silent killer of new industries. Moving fast and breaking things might work if you're interested in skirting taxicab regulations, but it doesn't exactly work in the world of food.

Eric Schulze, a vice president at Upside Foods and chair of the association's regulatory affairs committee, said the goal for AMPS is to have a clear viewpoint on guidelines and safety standards. Right now, the member companies want a voice in D.C. to make sure they're communicating the relevant aspects of their industry to officials in the FDA and USDA—so that the entire cellular agriculture industry can accelerate its push to market without circumventing any forthcoming rules. Cell-based meat makers, Schulze said, want to be regulated like the rest of the food industry, with the same sorts of food safety expectations and practices in place.

And yet, in the end, much of the lobbying work AMPS Innovation will have to do comes down to the label. It's not too dissimilar from the battle over what to call alternative milks. In February, the FDA published a draft

proposal stipulating that oat, almond, and other plant-based milks can call themselves milk, with the added recommendation that they also label the nutritional differences between their products and cow's milk. The question isn't quite the same, though, since oat milk is entirely different from cow's milk, whereas, from the consumers' perspective, the final product of cellular meat should be largely indistinguishable from the meat they're used to eating.

Still, the new industry largely agrees that customers have a right to know the origins of what they're buying and that their products should be labeled differently. The real issue is how best to describe that difference. Does the word "cultivated" go before the word "beef"? Or is there simply a description on the label of how cell-based meat, poultry, pork, and seafood came to be?

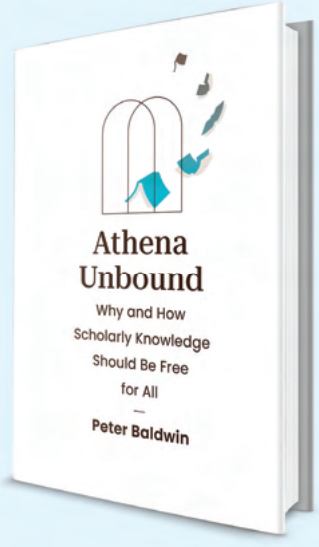
"The word 'cultivated' or 'cultured' or whatever term the U.S. government allows us to adopt is important to have," Schulze said. "The horse-trading, if you will, is around whether the term would discourage a consumer."

At the state level, that battle has been playing out for a few years already. Egged on by local farm bureaus and cattle ranchers, state lawmakers are passing legislation circumscribing the wording cultivated-meat startups may use. An Alabama law passed in 2019, for example, says that any "food product that contains cultured animal tissue produced from animal cell cultures ... may not be labeled as meat or a meat food product." But Schulze, who cut his teeth at the FDA regulating novel foods before jumping to the private sector, rests easy on this point. "State label challenges are almost never upheld," he said. That's because the USDA will have to approve the label of something like cultivated chicken before it ever goes into stores—making a clear set of guidelines all the more important for the companies of AMPS Innovation.

Over the coming decade, as cell-based meats maneuver their way into grocery stores, it will all come down to that moment when a person picks up a package and reads the cellophane wrapper. During a panel at the Good Food Conference in 2018 where AMPS first got its start, Upside Foods CEO Uma Valeti was direct. "There's no need for a prefix. There's no need for it to be 'cell-based,'" Valeti said. "It's meat, plain and simple." TNR

Andrew Zaleski *is a journalist who lives near Washington, D.C., and covers science, technology, and business.*

An excerpt from *Athena Unbound* by Peter Baldwin



A clear-eyed examination of the open access (OA) movement—past history, current conflicts, and future possibilities.

Torrents have been written about open access, but little comes from those who supply or consume knowledge: the scholars who produce the works that are to be accessible and their potential readers, whether colleagues or the general public. Instead, the drum is beaten by librarians, information- and data-science scholars, media professors, and others who populate a kind of second-order stratum of academia, scholars of scholarship.

A vast quantity of work has billowed forth, professionalizing the field by making it a full-time job just to keep up. Countless conferences, workshops, networks, study groups, Twitter feeds, journals, and blogs keep up a tireless outpouring. The caravan moves on, but where is it going? Founding and running open-access journals and publishers, organizing boycotts of the worst-offending academic presses, lobbying politicians to reform copyright laws, probing the boundaries of what counts as legal under current rules: such activities move us toward a freer exchange of information. What the theorizing and discussion contribute is less obvious. As so often in the academic world, noble intent does not necessarily produce tangible results. Process is often confused with progress.

Why, then, add another brick to the edifice? Because many participants come from a nimbus formed around the scholarly enterprise without being part of it, they often pay little attention to workaday academics' concerns. Especially in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, the professoriate is surprisingly ignorant of—and, if aware, often hostile to—open access. Because the well-funded sciences have been the first to warm to the cause, open access has been tailored to their specifications, with publishing fees paid out of generous research budgets. Including less well-endowed fields remains a hurdle.

Athena Unbound seeks to flesh out debates that often remain focused on the sciences. It situates current discussions in a long history of information's progress toward greater openness. Despite the mantra that "information wants to be free," much does not. Corporate R&D makes up the majority of research and is not striving for release. Most writers of fiction and commercially viable nonfiction sell their wares in the marketplace, hope to live from the proceeds, and have no interest in opening up. That holds for most producers of visual and aural content, too. Nor are privacy and open access harmonious bunkmates. We naturally resist freeing up information about ourselves except as we choose.

The problem of too much information is a leitmotif. Even without copyright reform or open access, as the public domain inevitably expands, freely available content will eventually dwarf what any current cohort of creators issues. What effect will this have on future cultural producers' motivations to bring forth novel work? What does the common complaint that we disgorge too much information mean? Can more information ever be a bad thing, even if some is mediocre?

Read the full OA ebook now

THE PARTY'S OVER

We asked four recovering Republicans if the GOP is salvageable.

Hint: They laughed.

Michael Steele
was the chairman of the Republican National Committee from 2009 to 2011.

Juleanna Glover
worked for Vice President Dick Cheney and Attorney General John Ashcroft.

With each passing month, week, and day, the Republican Party contrives to go a little crazier, one step more radical—to smash one more norm or tradition. If you still think that surely they'll come to their senses one of these days, you're just not paying attention.

What is to be done?

New Republic editor Michael Tomasky gathered four close observers of the party's decline and fall via Zoom in early March to discuss the current and future state of the Republican Party.

Their assessment is, in a word, brutal. And they agree: It's only going to keep getting worse. What can the rest of us do? Well, read to the end.

The conversation has been edited for clarity and space.

MICHAEL TOMASKY: My first question is a really simple one. Is the Republican Party as currently constituted salvageable?

NICOLLE WALLACE: For what?

(general laughter)

MAX BOOT: Salvageable for parts.

WALLACE: I think that the mistake that I continue to make is that it wants to be salvaged. I think it is constituted as it wants to be. You see new Republicans emerge in the mold of destructors and not builders. And I think that the people who want to salvage it aren't really vibrant, healthy parts of the Republican body politic anymore. And the people who like it as it is don't want to be salvaged.

BOOT: Nicolle has certainly put her finger on a lot of the dysfunction in the current Republican Party, which I, like a lot of the other folks here, don't recognize from the days when I was a Republican—when it stood for free markets, international leadership, was pro-immigration, was pro-NATO, pro- a lot of things that have been abandoned along the way. Although this has been a cruel period for a lot of us who were once affiliated with the GOP, I've kind of given up my expectation that I had a few years ago that this is going to lead to some giant crack-up that was going to lead to electoral annihilation, and the Republicans would come to their senses, because, unfortunately, I think the path that they're on is actually reasonably popular.

I mean, they took control of the House, right? They're not getting destroyed. They're very close to the Senate. They have a reasonable chance to take back the White House, especially if they nominate Ron DeSantis rather than Donald Trump, because DeSantis is basically going to give you Trumpism without Trump. So that's a formula that a lot of people think could be successful. Unfortunately, I think we're not going to have any time in the foreseeable future a sane, center-right political party in this country. We're going to have whatever the GOP is, which is largely this far-right populist construct. I wish that voters were rejecting it. But outside of the popular vote for presidential contests, they really aren't rejecting it. It's still a very viable political entity.

JULEANNA GLOVER: I feel as though the Republican Party is in a place where the Whigs were in the mid-1850s, which is

Max Boot is a *Washington Post* columnist and author of *The Corrosion of Conservatism: Why I Left the Right*.

Nicolle Wallace was President George W. Bush's communications director and senior adviser to John McCain's 2008 campaign. She now hosts MSNBC's *Deadline: White House*.

dissolute, racked over a moral question, i.e., slavery. Then it came to dissolve, and something new arose after that.

TOMASKY: What, if I may ask, is the moral question today for the Republicans?

GLOVER: It's Trumpism. Are our leaders people who we think should be, above all, principled, honest, exemplary human beings, or is this just about sort of thuggish survival of the fittest, whoever appears the strongest gets to rule the party? Of the Republicans who are currently going to run against Trump, I would not be able to support anybody except for maybe New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu and maybe Alabama Congressman Mike Rogers—people who have been adamantly anti-Trump. Any of the folks that have brooked him or collaborated with him, they're morally compromised. For whatever comes next, I think it's going to be among those who have cleanly broken with Trump and have the moral standing to build what's next.

MICHAEL STEELE: This has been a very difficult question for me. The easy one is, is the party broken? Is it repairable? Is it salvageable? In its current form, the answer is obviously no. And for all of the reasons that Juleanna and Max and Nicolle have put in front of us, for me, it's been a particularly difficult journey to stay in it. I am still a card-carrying conservative Republican, and I am for a number of reasons. One, because I know it pisses the rest of them off. Two, because I like to claim I was here first. I was in this party at a time when it was not easy, particularly as a Black Republican, to carry water for the party, even back at that time in the mid-'70s.

I remember door-knocking as an 18-year-old in Washington, D.C.—you haven't lived until you've door-knocked as a Black Republican in Washington, D.C.—asking people, "Would you like to vote Republican?" So I've been through those trials. Reagan was an animating figure for me, but even more animating than Reagan was Lincoln, which is why I've always termed myself a Lincoln Republican, because to Max's point about those principles and policy that foundationally formed and, I think, really influenced and shaped all of us to come inside this tent, it was critically important for me, because I was so outside of it growing up.

To consciously decide to join the party was a big deal. And here I sit today looking at this shit show, this absolute, god-awful train wreck ... actually, a train wreck looks better than this thing. And what pisses me off more than anything are the leaders, the Kevin McCarthys, the Mitch McConnells, the quiet enablers, the folks who sit there and wring their hands privately to Max and Juleanna and Nicolle and myself about how awful this is and "something has to be done." They're in the very position to do something about it, and they won't.

The final point is, I get asked all the time, why are you still a Republican? I say, well, I'm kind of a Motel 6 Republican. Someone's got to keep the lights on. And I'm standing there on the front porch, and I keep replacing the light bulb because these bastards keep coming by, shooting it out.

BOOT: I just wanted to jump in on the point that Michael was making about being a Lincoln Republican, which is reminding me that, let's be honest here, the Republican Party didn't take a wrong turn in 2016. Arguably, you could make the case that it took a wrong turn in 1964, when it really turned its back on the Lincoln legacy. I remember reading about the '64 convention, held in the Cow Palace outside of San Francisco. And Jackie Robinson, who was a great Republican, was just horrified by what Barry Goldwater was saying. He couldn't believe that the party of Lincoln was being taken over by the forces of intolerance and bigotry. Of course, that year, Goldwater was almost entirely wiped out.

Aside from Arizona, all the states he won were in the Deep South. That was really the beginning of the Southern strategy, the realignment of American politics. Obviously, things have gotten way crazier in the last few years, because we've gone from dog whistles on racism to wolf whistles. It's become much more blatant. It's become much more front-and-center in the Republican identity. There are roots to some of the current craziness that go back a long time. So that's why it's not going to be like turning a light switch, or one election, and it's suddenly going to change. It's not. There is a real appeal to a lot of the things that people like Trump and DeSantis are saying that goes back a long way in American history.

TOMASKY: Let me ask you all this question, because I give a lot of thought to this question, and I'm sure the four of you give more thought to it. You've basically said it's not salvageable, but let's pretend that it were. What would it take for there to be some kind of muscular, moderating force within the Republican Party? Every party has reward-and-punishment systems. Right now, all the rewards are for moving right, right, right. And all the punishments are for being moderate and reasonable.

I remember I read this interview with Barney Frank when he was leaving the House, and he told this story about people asking him about the Republicans in the House. They'd ask him, "Are you saying they're all Michele Bachmann?" She was kind of the sine qua non at that point of this brand of politics. Frank would reply, "No, they're not all Michele Bachmann. Half of them are Michele Bachmann. The other half are terrified of losing a primary to Michele Bachmann."

That rang really true to me, and I think that's the dynamic that we see. It seems to me the party can only change if that dynamic can be somehow dislodged. Nicolle, any thoughts on this? Is this just hopeless?

WALLACE: I think that's the political piece of this. You're talking about a way to break a cycle. I think that Liz Cheney sustained it over the summer during the period of public hearings for the January 6 select committee. Trumpism has to be repeatedly pushed through the frame of a threat to the democracy that it proved itself to be visibly on January 6, but that bears itself out as a threat of every single day. I mean, every voter integrity law is voter suppression being pushed through, predicated on a lie that there was fraud.

You can't talk about a political remedy, which is fixing the primary process, until you decontaminate the lies. Trumpism isn't just a bad idea, isn't just a direction right

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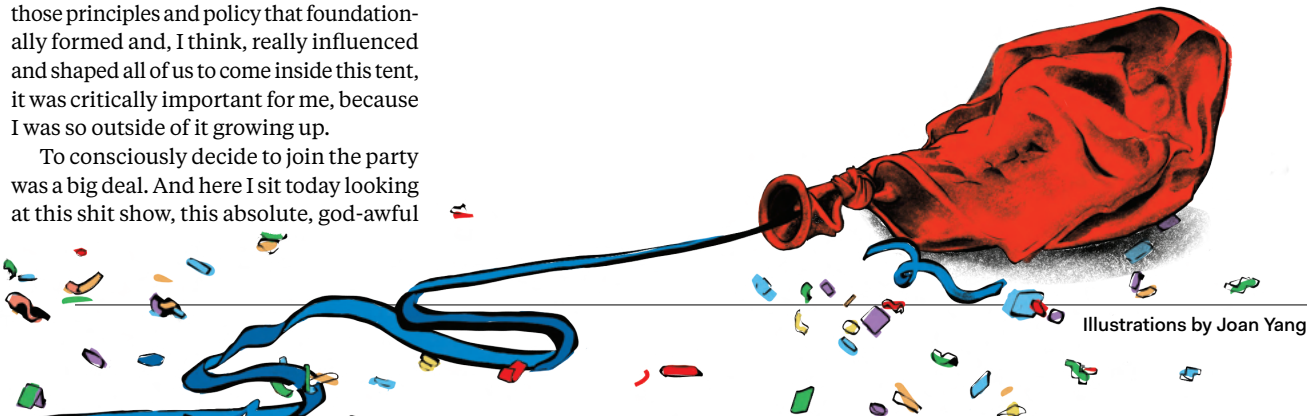


Illustrations by Joan Yang

or left on the spectrum. It's a delusion. It isn't real. He doesn't believe in anything. So the fact that anyone grappled with how conservative or moderate was Romney, the Romney-Ryan years? It doesn't matter. It's been superseded by something that is fantastical. I think until you treat Trumpism like a threat to democracy in a consistent and sustained manner, the way really only Liz and Adam Kinzinger were able to do because of their roles on that committee, you don't begin to wake up.

Rob Portman, to me, is the best avatar for why the country is at risk. I don't know of anybody who knows better than Rob Portman. He was George W. Bush's OMB [Office of Management and Budget] director. He also wore a second hat as sort of wise man and an adviser. And I knew the country was fucked when he didn't walk away from Trump after good people on both sides did, when he stayed with it after grabbing the you-know-what. So you can talk about breaking the primary process and gerrymandering, but they're all symptoms of the larger disease, which is going along with something that isn't an ideology, it isn't a direction on the right-left continuum. It is all a lie and a cult of personality.

STEELE: The Rob Portman example is so important and very telling and disappointing. I've known Rob since about 1985. But Rob Portman was probably, to Nicolle's point, one of the more disappointing moments in this devolution of the GOP.

It goes back to what I was saying before about leadership: You're going to need the leaders to do it. Max referenced the '64 campaign. Well, understand also what was happening prior to the '64 campaign, when the John Birch Society tried to rear its head up inside the GOP. What happened? The leadership pushed it down and pushed it out, at least to the greatest extent that it could. It stood up and said no, because it appreciated the party's civil rights history. It appreciated the party's legacy in protecting those Lincolnesque values about individual liberties. And that leadership has been absent throughout all of this.

This party needs a political enema. It needs it all cleaned out. To Nicolle's exact point, you cannot hem and haw. It's like cancer that has overrun an organ. At a point, you can't say, "Well, we can take out half the liver." We need to take out all of it. The reality for the party right now is, is it prepared to do that? The short answer is no. Which means that this thing only metastasizes further and becomes harder down the road.

GLOVER: I'm going to build on the Portman theme. In the summer and fall of 2016, the sort of wise men of the party—you know, the Dick Cheneys, the John Ashcrofts—didn't stand up to stop this. I think part of it was because they both had children running in a Trump cycle. I just wonder at the sense of self-abnegation within the Republican Party, the sense of denying yourself something that's important to you over a moral question. I think that's gone. Even among our most esteemed leaders, the people famous for trying to do the right thing. I believe in the theory of a moral slippery slope: Once you start down it, every bad, unethical decision after that is made easier.

I'd also pinpoint some of this back to the Romney campaign in 2012. That campaign was run in a way where it raised historic amounts of money, but some top Romney aides owned the vendors that were being used within the organization. So what are the motivations there? What are the motivations there now in the Republican Party? Have we since 2012 been in a place where the candidate consultancy class is only about making the most amount of money in each cycle, not necessarily about electing the great and the good? I don't know how to fix those systems-thinking flaws, other than just to try and do something totally different with like-minded individuals who are glad to forgo an immediate payday or a political benefit in order to be able to sleep well at night because they know they did or said the right thing.

NICOLLE WALLACE

Rob Portman, to me, is the best avatar for why the country is at risk. I don't know of anybody who knows better than Rob Portman. I knew the country was fucked when he didn't walk away from Trump after good people on both sides did.

PATRICK T. FALLON/BLOOMBERG/GETTY

STEELE: That was part of my problem as RNC chairman. My first month at the RNC, well, my first week, I was literally given about 15 to 20 million dollars in contracts that had been agreed to in the 2008 presidential cycle that were promised to be paid after the cycle, under the assumption that Mike Duncan would've been reelected chairman and not Michael Steele. Michael Steele comes in, they put 20 million worth of contracts.... I'm saying, what are these for? The presidential cycle's over. "Well, we promised that we would pay these on the back end." I'm like, nope. And I canceled all of the contracts, about 20 million dollars. Do you know who I pissed off that week? And do you know, literally about two weeks later, was the first call for my being fired as national chairman? So Juleanna puts her finger on an important aspect that undergirds a lot of the infrastructure of this corruption—the grifting and the moneymaking component of it, which drives a lot of the behavior of the leaders that we're looking for.

BOOT: I'm in violent agreement with everything that I'm hearing. In fact, I actually wrote a column a few years ago making the very case that Rob Portman is a bigger threat to the republic than Marjorie Taylor Greene, because Marjorie Taylor Greene is stupid and crazy, but Rob Portman knows better. He's just being cynical. And that's the Republican leadership class in a nutshell. But the problem is, you know, welcome to politics. There are very few super principled people who are willing to do the right thing at great cost. And my hat's off to Liz Cheney, because she is a profile in courage, the likes of which we have very seldom seen in American politics. But you can't expect all of a sudden a bunch of Liz Cheneys to go out there and to commit political hari-kari to stop Trumpism.

It wouldn't be effective anyway. Because the reality is that the politicians are responding to the signals they're getting from the voters. And it's not just the politicians, it's also the megaphones. Fox News. It's been fascinating to see, with this Dominion

lawsuit against Fox News [Dominion has charged Fox with repeatedly airing debunked election-fraud theories involving Dominion's voting machines, which saw heavy use in the 2020 election], the extent to which the hosts were not actually drinking their own Kool-Aid because they understood that this was all b.s. That there were not these conspiracies to change voting or whatever. But they are just complete cowards, people like Hannity and Tucker Carlson and others, and you can see it in their texts and emails.

They are terrified that if they say something that the audience doesn't like, the audience will turn against them, and then these guys will lose their multimillion-dollar annual salaries. So it all comes back to, there are very unfortunate tendencies that are out there in the Republican grassroots that I think have always been out there. I think what's changed is that, in the past, there were Republican leaders who would kind of pander to the grassroots at election time and then kind of ignore them while they were in office. The classic example being George H.W. Bush with his Willie Horton ads, and all this horrible catering to racism, which is not really what George H.W. Bush was about, but it's what Lee Atwater told him he had to do to win the presidency.

Then he wins the presidency, and he governs in ways that piss off the hard-core right. And he winds up losing his reelection campaign. That was the old Republican Party in a nutshell. What Trump did was he broke down the distinction between campaigning and governing. He governed exactly the way that he campaigned. He never stopped pushing those buttons. He never stopped appealing to the worst side of human nature. He never stopped promoting the most rancid impulses in the Republican base. Unfortunately, it's hard to put that genie back in the bottle. People like George W. Bush and George H.W. Bush, and McCain and Romney and all those others, we thought that they were RINOs, because in office they would not cater to our worst instincts. Now voters are basically demanding that they do that. It's just very hard to find any politicians who can stand up to that right now.

TOMASKY: I'd be interested in having you all reflect on Trump's rise. When this first happened, were you surprised, Nicolle, that the audience for that message and that messenger was that big? And what did it teach you or show you about the United States and about the Republican Party that took you by surprise, that you didn't know?

WALLACE: I was not surprised. My parents were big Trump supporters. They were in from go. I was on *The View* at the time, and I remember saying one day that he was an embarrassment not just to the Republican Party I'd been a part of, but to the country. People all over the world would see this rich buffoon with his beautiful wife calling Mexicans rapists and murderers and think that that's what we think of our neighbors. I got fired a few weeks later, and my parents at noon poured me a glass of wine and said, "I knew Donald was gonna get you fired." I said, "What are you talking about?" And they said, "You know, he's so powerful. You can't humiliate him like that."

I knew three things. One, that even people with advanced degrees were capable of going the whole Jonestown route with the Kool-Aid with Trump. I knew that every other Republican—and I knew most of them in that primary field—was fighting with their heads, and Trump had already grabbed them by the gut, and something lower. And I knew that Obama, and the Fox coverage of Obama for eight years, had radicalized previously normal Republicans into something totally different. Fox News' coverage of the Obama years had primed the pump for conspiracy theorists to come in and platform conspiracy as a replacement ideology. Because Trump never ran on ideology. I mean, the whole "Build a wall." That was almost like a branding exercise for American xenophobia, which is as old as time.

I also don't buy that Trump is hapless, but I don't buy that he's brilliant and putting in place a conspiracy to stitch together disparate pieces of the electorate. I think he's a flagrant racist, and racism is alive and well, and he had all sorts of tools in his tool kit to turn that into electoral strategy. But he was as shocked as anybody that he won. He's covered as both dumber and more accidental than he is, and more maniacal and conspiratorial than he is. He's just a run-of-the-mill Archie Bunker without all the sort of lovable personality traits.

TOMASKY: Can he be stopped in 2024? Juleanna, I looked this morning before we gathered at the last few multicandidate polls. He's up 12, he's up 16, he's up 2, there's a close one, he's up 30, he's up 18, et cetera. Can he be stopped in this election?

GLOVER: I'm not the person to ask on that. I mean, absent Sununu catching fire or former Maryland Governor Larry Hogan catching fire, I'm all in on reelecting Biden. So it's not what I'm focused on.

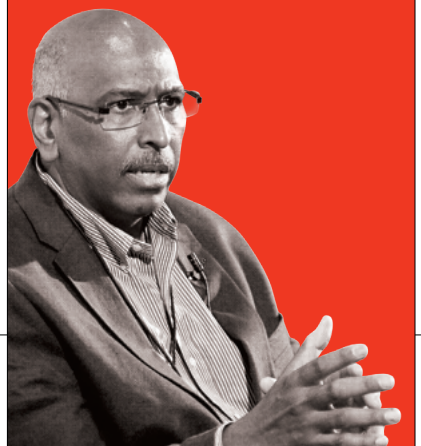
TOMASKY: Just as a handicapper, would you call him the favorite today?

GLOVER: If there are seven different candidates running against him, in various degrees of not being Trump? Yeah, he's going to win. The party's going to have to consolidate around a single entity at least coming into South Carolina in order to stop that.

STEELE: Trump is the nominee until someone is able to say, without hesitation, you need to sit your ass down, you're done, and I got this going forward. And if anybody wants to win again in this party, if anybody wants to put together a governing majority, then follow me. Otherwise, this ain't happening, folks. This can't be a primary of more than one other person against Donald Trump. Because if it's two, it's done. He's got a lock on a third of the base. And unless a candidate is prepared to go down that lane in which they smack the crap out of Trump every single time, every single day he opens his mouth, puts out a tweet, or even wakes up in the morning, and then follows that up with a strategy that meticulously reinvigorates the remaining part of the Republican base that doesn't vote in primaries ...

MICHAEL STEELE

This party needs a political enema. It needs it all cleaned out. It's like cancer that has overrun an organ. At a point, you can't say, "Well, we can take out half the liver." We need to take out all of it.



JOSHUA BLANCHARD/GETTY

Because we lose sight of the fact that you're not talking about a lot of people in a Republican primary when you look at the party writ large. You're only talking a fraction of the voters, that hard-edged right base that comes out and votes. There are lanes in which a Hogan, a Sununu, and others can create that space, but they can only do it if they're standing mano a mano. I just don't see anybody who has that capacity to do that. So Donald Trump has this right now. Those polls are reflective of that.

And the press needs to grow up, because the press gave him $3 billion worth of free advertising in 2016. So they're very much a part of the creation of this Frankenstein monster as anything else. And despite all of their protestations and machinations, they like the shit show. They like the food fight. They're already, we can see it, they're setting it up, the way they're hyping these polls and making all this noise and lulling people into believing that this is a legitimate race for the future of the country. It is not. This is not. If Donald Trump is on the other side, this is not legit. This is the delegitimization of our political process in our democracy. So, yeah, this is Trump's until it isn't. And I don't know who's going to take it from him.

BOOT: I think Michael's right that the party's kind of waiting for somebody who is willing to punch Trump in the nose. And right now it seems like it's too dangerous to do that. But in some ways, it kind of reminds me of what Trump himself did in 2015, 2016, where he did things that were so outside conventional wisdom. He punched the Bushes in the nose. This seemed like, wow, you can't do this. But it turned out there were actually a lot of people who didn't like the Bushes, and they liked the fact that he was this so-called fearless truth teller. I think right now there's a lot of dissatisfaction with Trump in the Republican Party, and people would actually like it if there was somebody who had the cojones to call out Trump and to his face and go toe to toe with him.

I think that there are only two people who could possibly be the Republican nominee. It's either going to be Donald Trump or Ron DeSantis. I don't think anybody else is even within spitting distance. I think DeSantis has a reasonable shot.

Trump is an ignoramus and a moron, but he does have certain branding and marketing skills, and he knows how to dump a load of toxic sludge on his opponents.

JULEANNA GLOVER

I still do believe that Tucker Carlson is going to run. He keeps doing what he's doing, watching what happens from his anchor chair. Then, the third week of December 2023, he says, "I've had it. I've got to step in and do this."

JOE SCARNICI/GETTY

He's doing that right now with DeSantis. Is DeSantis going to just kind of cower there and try to pretend that he's not getting smeared, or is he actually going to stand up and go toe to toe? That's the big issue.

The other issue of course is: Is DeSantis actually preferable to Trump? Because my vantage point is not from somebody who wants the Republican Party to win the presidency. My vantage point is somebody who wants to preserve American democracy. So my question is how big of a threat does a DeSantis presidency pose to American democracy? And I would say, very tentatively at this point, less of a threat than Trump. I think he is less of an unhinged authoritarian than Trump, but he also has displayed a lot of authoritarian tendencies. And I think really, in a cynical kind of way, catering to the Orbanism in the Republican Party, because I think a lot of Republicans really want somebody like Viktor Orban. In some ways, DeSantis is offering that, saying I'm a smarter and more disciplined Orban for America than Donald Trump is. I won't be as self-destructive as Trump. That's kind of a worrisome message.

If Trump does get the nomination, I think he's going to get annihilated by Biden. I put a caveat on it, because I thought he was going to be annihilated in 2016. But I do think that there is enough Trump fatigue out there that it would be very hard. It's very possible for him to win the nomination, very hard for him to win the presidency.

TOMASKY: Nicolle, do you see some kind of civil war inside the party if he is the nominee?

WALLACE: Who fights against whom? The Never Trump movement, we all fit on a minibus. There's only one side in this civil war. I keep fighting my capacity for shock. I'm tired of being shocked by it. At the beginning, it was shocking to me that after the *Access Hollywood* tape came out—I wasn't shocked that Steve Bannon was like, this is gonna be good, or Kellyanne Conway stuck around. I was shocked that Chris Christie didn't withdraw his support. I was shocked by other moments of his presidency, all of the Russia stuff. I mean, someone called me after Helsinki and said, you know what, maybe you guys were right all along. I'm sorry, we treated you like you were wearing tinfoil hats.

I think that what we have to stop waiting for is for a war to break out. The thing that the Trump people do really well is demonize people who say, "Hey, he's a big ignoramus who doesn't know what he's talking about." They say, "Trump derangement syndrome!" "You're so anti-Trump, you can't see what's in front of you." Well, no, what's in front of me is someone who is a political Frankenstein, as [Michael] has said. But the idea that some war is going to break out.... There's nobody who cares enough to fight a war. They're all zombies. They don't give a shit.

And they're afraid of Tucker Carlson. I mean, Ted Cruz called January 6 domestic terrorism, which is what Chris Wray called it, till Tucker Carlson admonished him for it. And then he went on Tucker Carlson and took it back. There is no courage. There are no spines. And the other thing that's sort of sliding along is the rise of political violence and the rising acceptance of it. What do Republicans think they've unleashed by inviting the Proud Boys and the militias to Washington on January 6 and not condemning the attack on Paul Pelosi? They have unleashed a new—and, you know, it hasn't played out yet—a new period of political violence in this country.

GLOVER: I did write a piece about how I thought Tucker Carlson was going to run. I still do believe that Tucker is going to run. I think the way he runs is he keeps doing

what he's doing, watching what happens from his anchor chair. Then, you know, the third week of December 2023, he says, "I've had it. I've got to step in and do this." And he does not need an operation. He walks into auditoriums of 30, 40,000 people across the country. So I think he runs and he wins the nomination. I don't think he will win the White House. But it's very possible.

TOMASKY: What's his argument against Trump?

GLOVER: That he's not Trump. He's much more media savvy. You know, Trump's too old. There are many facets he can pick up on: incompetence, stupidity, et cetera.

STEELE: Can I put a little pin in what Juleanna says and why her thinking along this line is not that outsized. Just keep in mind, Donald Trump did something that upset the political system as we knew it. And you know what he did? He spent 14 years on national television creating this persona, and he translated his viewers into his voters. They came out for the guy that they saw on television. They believed him, this fictional character, to be an actual real person with principles and values and ideas. Tucker has done that. I don't know if he actually does the thing, but the glide path to doing the thing is there, because we've seen it before.

TOMASKY: I want to move to talking about the rest of the party now. Let's talk about the House Republican Conference. Let's talk about Jim Jordan, James Comer, who surprises me a little bit more every week with the things he says. Where is this headed with these people?

WALLACE: Maybe they were always there. We haven't talked much about Democrats or the Department of Justice, but there's a price to a lack of accountability. I think Republicans in their current formulation represent a threat to our democracy. I think Democrats haven't adequately responded to that threat. I think Liz Cheney showed them the way, and I think Jamie Raskin has led on this, and other members of the January 6 committee. That's a long way of saying that the threat is in the body. That the members that threaten our democracy. What's DOJ doing? Have they called them? Have they asked them? Has anyone tried to hold any Republican House members accountable? Or senators, frankly, for their role in planning a coup.

Some of it is that the words take us a long time to tumble out of our mouth. At first, they sound crazy: a coup. A coup plot. An insurrection. And because it takes us a minute to get the words, the Republicans read the room. And then they emerge two years later as the power brokers. McCarthy really only has a gavel. He doesn't have the speakership. But the only reason he has a gavel is because he sought the approval of and won over the insurrectionists. That the other members are crazy is clear for everyone to see. The scary piece is that they're not just ascendant. They are the power brokers in the House Republican Conference. And that is a danger to our democracy.

BOOT: I would say not just a danger to our democracy, but a danger to democracy around the world. Because one of the weird things about the Freedom Caucus and the MAGA Republicans is that they are violently anti-China, but they're somewhat pro-Russia. They're kind of Putin friendly, and they're willing to get us into a war with China, but they don't want us to do anything to help Ukraine and fight its war against the unprovoked Russian invasion, which is another example of the upside-down world of the current Republican Party, because I was old enough growing up in the 1980s when Ronald Reagan was supporting quote-unquote freedom fighters who were struggling against the evil empire, the contras or the mujahedin or others. And now the Ukraine war is as clear an example of good versus evil as I think we've seen since World War II. These horrible crimes being committed for no reason by the Russians against the poor people of Ukraine, and about half the Republican Party saying we're doing too much to help Ukraine. And quite a few of them are saying we should cut off Ukraine.

We tend to watch the craziness in the House Republican Conference. It's like watching the animals at the zoo, and there's an entertainment value to it to some extent. We feed off of the insanity that you hear from the Matt Gaetzes or the Marjorie Taylor Greenes or whatever, and to some extent it's contained as long as there are more responsible voices in charge of the Senate, whether it's Democrats, or even Mitch McConnell's a lot more responsible than these guys. But they have the ability to wreak havoc in the world if they, for example, manage to hold up future aid packages.

And that really comes back to Kevin McCarthy. Does Kevin McCarthy have the spine to stand up to the lunatics in his own caucus? Because there's an easy majority in the House to support aid to Ukraine. It's all the Democrats and probably half the Republicans. But he's basically sold his soul to become speaker to the Freedom Caucus. And those are the people who are pro-Russia. Is Kevin McCarthy going to be willing to stand up to those lunatics to support Ukraine? On that question may turn the fate of Ukraine.

TOMASKY: And that breaks the Hastert Rule [an informal guideline followed by Republican speakers that says not to allow votes on bills that don't have support from "the majority of the majority"]. He can't pass something on that basis. Who thinks this is going to end up with Biden being impeached for some flimsy reason?

STEELE: There may be an attempt. There'll be some noise. When Marjorie Taylor Greene decides to bring that to the caucus and push it out, it'll be dependent on how Kevin McCarthy responds to that. My bet is he just bends over like he has so far on everything else. And it sets up the clown show that will be an impeachment trial. It was a promise made. We'll see if it's a promise kept.

GLOVER: I just think that the Republicans in the House will leap at any opportunity. And I think that the makeup of the Judiciary Committee in the House in particular, it's not a somber, deliberative population among Republicans. So I expect that it'll be cheap, flimsy shots.

BOOT: They know the verdict, which is that they want to impeach Biden. They just don't know why. They have to figure out a rationale.

WALLACE: I think they'll impeach [Biden] by the time they're done. I think they have designs on impeaching half the Cabinet. I think they would like to impeach Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas. I think they'll go after the education secretary over the woke agenda. I think they'll go after Pete Buttigieg maybe over the train. I think they have designs on impeaching half the Cabinet and the president, but so far they're out of the gate with this sort of quintessential Republican incompetence.

BOOT: I would say on the impeachment issue, Biden has to hope that they do try to impeach him. That would be the best thing that could happen to him—make them look like lunatics. It's going to help him tremendously in public opinion.

WALLACE: That's such a good point. We haven't talked too much about how this version of the Republican Party may really be this thing that Biden couldn't manufacture in a political laboratory. I mean, you watch the State of the Union, if that's a sign of the general presidential election to come, I think even Republicans acknowledge that that was a great night for Biden. And the Republican Party is that and then some. It really does turn all of his potential weaknesses, like his age and stature, into things that make him look pretty stable against a bunch of nuts.

TOMASKY: Let's move toward talking about the future. I was once having a conversation with a Congress watcher and a political analyst. This was a few years ago, and I was saying something like, "Yeah, a lot of extremists have been elected to Congress, but this fever has to break. Right?" He looked at me and he said, "Have you looked at the kind of Republicans who are in state legislatures around this country?" He said, "As soon as this generation leaves, the next generation is going to be worse, is going to be more extreme."

That sobered me. I started looking at some of these people, and he was right. So, is this just going to go on forever? Are they just going to get more and more and more extreme? And what does that mean for our country? What country are we going to be in 2040, 2050?

BOOT: Well, I do think if you look at the trajectory of the Republican Party since 1964, every single generation has been much more right-wing than the generation before. So you have this phenomenon where some of the original revolutionaries, the Barry Goldwaters and others, by the 1980s and 1990s, they were being seen as these left-wing squishes in the Republican Party. Then you had the Newt Gingrich generation, and then Newt himself was overtaken by the Trumpkins. Every generation is getting more extreme. Even Trump in some ways has been overtaken by his own base; he was actually in favor of the Covid vaccine because he paid to develop it, and now he can't even go out on his rallies and say something positive about the Covid vaccine, because the Republican base is riled up against medicine and science, and they hate the Covid vaccine.

So yeah, I think it's fair to say that, God help us, people like Marjorie Taylor Greene and Matt Gaetz are not going to be at the outermost edge of the Republican Party a generation from now. And there's not a lot of room, frankly, to their right. I mean, then you're truly getting into fascism there, you're truly getting into Orbanism. Where you wind up is a very, very scary place. The only check on that is, to the extent that it exists, the good sense of the American public. There have been certainly moments in the last few years where I have really had grave doubts about the good sense of the American public. But he was not reelected. There was a cost for his craziness. And you saw in the midterm election, the election deniers were not elected.

So I think that there is still a check and balance in the electorate. Unfortunately, then you get into the issues of the way our democracy is structured, where a small percentage of the population is disproportionately represented in the Senate and in the Electoral College. So certainly the right-wing base has their megaphone amplified. But as long as we have the rule of law, as long as we have functioning courts, as long as we have actual functioning elections, there's a limit to how far they can go in implementing their agenda.

STEELE: The ultimate check rests in three words in our founding documents, and that's "We the People." This new reality that we have publicly embraced boils down to how the American people see the future of the country. Do they still love America? Do they still have faith in it? Do they still support its ideals and accept its history and its past? The things that have rocked and roiled us over generations, we always found a way to recognize in each other the value that foundationally supports this concept that draws people to this day to want to be here. So you have a hardened right, to Max's point, that has been evolutionary over generations, going back arguably to the New Deal era. It's disguised itself in various forms over the years, but now it's exposed, and there is no mistaking what it is.

We cannot, as citizens, cut ourselves out of this. We are directly responsible for what happens next, because we are electing these individuals, and we're giving them the platforms. And we have to break that cycle. They're not going to do it. We have to do it.

GLOVER: The future for those who want to see principled leadership, or want to see our country become less complicated and more along the lines of economic fruition, is going to be using a frame or a filter for candidates and people thinking about running, which is, are they honorable, decent people? I think that in itself would be how we bring about the end of Trumpism.

TOMASKY: Nicolle, last word.

WALLACE: I think the opportunity before Democrats and before this president is to create a generation of "It's the democracy, stupid" voters, and to do away with all the bullshit, all the extraneous stuff that can be alienating. There are some really promising signs. Leader Hakeem Jeffries is an incredible leader for this moment of his caucus. I think Biden saw something in the opportunity he had at the State of the Union, and I think there are enough tea leaves to be read about the midterms that you can—and I think, again, Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger modeled this behavior for any Republicans looking for something different on the menu. You can put aside the other fights. Frankly, they're not the electoral winners they used to be. The Supreme Court has become a political dead weight for Republicans, even in places like Kansas. But you can put aside the fights of the last two generations and say, "It's the democracy, stupid." That might be our best hope. TNR

MAX BOOT

I think it's fair to say that, God help us, people like Marjorie Taylor Greene and Matt Gaetz are not going to be at the outermost edge of the Republican Party a generation from now. And there's not a lot of room, frankly, to their right. I mean, then you're truly getting into fascism.

ANNA WEBBER/GETTY

Katie Porter Will Tell You What She Thinks

The U.S. representative from Orange County, says her old law prof, Elizabeth Warren, has one speed: "full speed ahead."

She's made waves in the House. But can she whiteboard her way to a Senate seat in a hotly competitive race?

By Grace Segers

Photograph by Max Whittaker

Porter took questions from reporters at the University of California, Davis, in mid-March.

FREE-FOR-ALL HELLSCAPE.

This term was written in black marker on a small whiteboard, held—as whiteboards in House Oversight Committee hearings often are—by Representative Katie Porter. The words FREE-FOR-ALL were scrawled in lower case; HELLSCAPE was rendered in dramatic capitalization, accentuating its apocalyptic connotations.

The early February hearing on Twitter's response to the Hunter Biden laptop story was a priority for the new Republican majority. But Porter, typically known for her pointed grilling of hapless witnesses, kept her comments concise, asking no questions. Instead, she ended her remarks by quoting Twitter owner Elon Musk, who said in October that the site "cannot become a free-for-all hellscape."

"The Oversight Committee, like Twitter, or any other social media company for that matter, cannot become a 'free-for-all hellscape' where anything goes," Porter concluded with a flourish, pulling out the whiteboard to punctuate her words, as if the term "free-for-all hellscape" could not truly be understood without a helpful visual aid and portentous capitalization.

Porter's contribution befitted a hearing that she and her fellow Democrats viewed as a ridiculous waste of time. But the scribbled words were less important than the whiteboard itself, a prop that has become inextricably linked to the California congresswoman's identity. In the Monopoly board of political success, Porter's avatar would be a whiteboard, passing "Go" for every government bureaucrat or corporate official she questions, collecting social media clout and liberal adoration along the way. That February afternoon, the whiteboard fulfilled its purpose: A tweet from Porter's official account with a clip of her remarks went mildly viral, receiving thousands of likes and hundreds of thousands of views.

I spoke to Porter in her Orange County campaign office the week after the free-for-all hellscape of a hearing. She told me that she employed the whiteboard judiciously, depending on the subject of the hearing "and what kind of message I want to get across in that moment to the witness." She acknowledged that it had become somewhat of a calling card: "There are definitely people like, 'Sign my whiteboard.' I mean, there are definitely people who, they're captivated by it. They're like, 'You're the whiteboard lady!'" Porter told me. "I think that's a sign you're connecting with people. So I try to be thoughtful about when to use it."

Maryland Representative Jamie Raskin, the ranking member of the House Oversight Committee, told me that, as a former law professor, Porter—who specialized in bankruptcy law—is "uniquely suited to teaching bureaucrats in the country a lesson about how power works." He continued: "That's the effectiveness of her whiteboard. Has whiteboard, will travel."

Porter's prominence is unusual for a representative who just began her third term, but her sharp, precisely worded questions, authoritative mien, and savvy prop usage in hearings—not typically thrilling arenas for political jousting—have continued to propel her notoriety. She has a shrewd eye for powerful symbolism; the congresswoman garnered attention in January for wearing a bright orange dress while reading the book *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* during the many speakership votes of Kevin McCarthy—a tome that happens to have a bright orange cover, the same shade as her outfit. (Porter later insisted that the choice of book had been purely coincidental.)

As she embarks on a high-profile and likely high-cost run for the California Senate seat soon to be vacated by retiring Senator Dianne Feinstein, Porter's whiteboard is a distinguishing feature, an embodiment of her belief that the powerful should be accountable to the powerless in one clear symbol. Porter was the first Democrat to launch her Senate campaign in January, anticipating (and perhaps precipitating) Feinstein's retirement announcement. She was quickly followed into the race by fellow Representatives Adam Schiff and Barbara Lee, two established and respected lawmakers with longer résumés.

Porter has leaned into the branding: The cover of the congresswoman's new book, *I Swear*, features an illustration of Porter holding a whiteboard. A two-page spread is even dedicated to explaining to readers "how to whiteboard anyone about anything." But while the whiteboard represents some of Porter's greatest

Porter's transparency charmed supporters during the pandemic, as she spoke about the trials of working from home as a single mother, and the stresses of having three kids—one each in elementary, middle, and high school—trying to school-from-home at the same time.

political assets—sharp intelligence, ability to break down complex ideas into digestible bites, canny political instincts—it also highlights some of her hurdles as a representative and a candidate. Some of her colleagues in the House see Porter's questions as a performance, intended to elevate her national profile for personal gain. "The whiteboard, man. What is that about?" said one Democratic member of Congress from California, who requested anonymity to speak candidly. "You do more legislating by keeping your head down and building relationships."

Former Iowa Representative Cindy Axne, who served with Porter on the Financial Services Committee, joked that she had acted as Porter's Vanna White during one hearing, by holding her whiteboard—and as such, she can confirm the prop is not merely a stunt. "Katie's a workhorse. If she's also able to hold a whiteboard, and get more people engaged at the same time, well, good for her," Axne told me. "If she was just a showboat, I would be telling you, because there's plenty of just-showboats out there. That's not Katie. She's getting the work done."

But the work of Congress will jostle against the work of campaigning against formidable opponents in California. Porter and her supporters will learn whether the whiteboard is big enough for those high-profile committee hearings at the Capitol, and the intensive campaigning that a hotly competitive Senate run in the nation's most populous state will require.

KATIE PORTER ONLY HAS one speed, her former law professor, Elizabeth Warren, told me: "Full speed ahead." Warren ascended from academia to the halls of Congress six years before Porter and has remained a mentor and enthusiastic supporter of her erstwhile student and research assistant. (Porter's daughter, Betsy, is named for Warren.) Warren has endorsed Porter's Senate campaign, quipping in a video, "We need her and her whiteboard in the United States Senate."

Porter attended Warren's class on bankruptcy law at Harvard Law School in fall of 2000, after reading an article in *Time* magazine that quoted the professor. She distinguished herself in the difficult morning class characterized by bleary-eyed students cringing at the prospect of being called upon by Warren. After giving a mediocre response, she visited Warren after class and requested that the professor call on her again so she could provide a better answer next time. "She ended up, of course, making one of the highest grades in the class," Warren told me.

Warren chose Porter as a research assistant to aid in a project analyzing the reasons ordinary citizens file for bankruptcy. She recalled to me how Porter was greatly affected by the work, after spending time at a Boston bankruptcy court asking filers to fill out a research questionnaire.

"Katie comes back a couple of hours later and sits down across from me, and starts to talk about the people in the bankruptcy courthouse, and how awful the stories are, and how stressed and how broken many of these folks are," Warren said. "She has a big heart for kids and her friends, but she also has a big heart for people who struggle, people who try their best and can't always pull it together."

Porter's childhood in Iowa was deeply formative for the congresswoman, who saw her father go from being a farmer to working for a community bank, where his job was to collect collateral on unpaid loans—a busy profession during the 1980s farm crisis, a time when Midwestern farmers saw a precipitous drop in farmland values and a dramatic increase in foreclosures. A teenage Porter would ride along with her father as he repossessed cars and drove the repo vehicle after it was collected.

After a brief stint in private practice, during which she continued to conduct bankruptcy research, Porter entered the world of academia as a bankruptcy law professor in her own right. In her first brush with the national spotlight, a 2007 *New York Times* article cited Porter's research on the questionable practices of mortgage companies benefiting from foreclosures. "I had found a problem and I had gotten front-page publicity for it. What I hadn't done was anything to fix it," Porter writes in her book. Her star continued to rise in the circumscribed world of bankruptcy law, as she testified before Congress and wrote articles and textbooks.

In 2011, Porter moved from the University of Iowa to the University of California, Irvine. Bob Solomon, a law professor at UC Irvine who worked alongside Porter, described her as a dedicated teacher, well-liked by her students and respected by her colleagues. The two exchanged papers, each offering feedback for the other's research. "You will not be surprised to hear she was quite candid with her thoughts on all subjects, and was proud of it," Solomon said with a laugh.

The year after joining Irvine, she was chosen by California Attorney General Kamala Harris to monitor the statewide implementation of a national settlement by several large banks to end predatory mortgage lending practices. Despite having no actual legal authority, Porter helped hold banks accountable for their misconduct. "My approach to oversight got noticed," Porter writes in her book, citing newspaper articles and awards that followed her success; this taste of oversight responsibility, and the tantalizing accolades that accompanied it, augured the trend of her congressional career.

Mobilized, like many other Democratic women, by the 2016 election of Donald Trump, Porter launched her candidacy for Congress in 2017. Orange County had long been a conservative stronghold in California, but Porter spotted the crest of an impending blue

Porter with Senator Elizabeth Warren during a 2020 get-out-the-vote event in Concord, New Hampshire

The ubiquitous whiteboard made an appearance during a 2020 House Oversight Committee hearing on the costs of coronavirus testing.

wave. Warren and Harris, by now both senators, endorsed Porter almost immediately; she also earned early support from national groups like EMILY's List. Porter prevailed in a contentious primary, whose candidates included a fellow Irvine professor, Dave Min, and she squeaked out a victory against incumbent Republican Representative Mimi Walters. (Min was later elected state senator and is now running for the congressional seat Porter will vacate, with her endorsement.) During the 2018 race, "nobody thought that we could win," said Ada Briceño, the chair of the Democratic Party of Orange County. "And now she's held it, and the reason why is because she has found a way to inspire her base and her constituents," Briceño continued.

Matthew Beckmann, a professor of political science at UC Irvine and a neighbor of Porter's, told me that he had been surprised when she decided to run for Congress. Being a well-respected and tenured law professor is a "good gig," after all. Thus her former colleagues back home found her rapid rise in the House notable. "It's hard as a freshman to become well-known. You go from being this kind of big-deal law professor to being a lone freshman representative. And now all of a sudden, it's like, she's getting famous, not for saying crazy things or doing [crazy things], but for oversight," Beckmann said. "This is hard to get my head around. Katie from two doors down is on TV, famous for doing oversight hearings."

PORTER'S SMALL, UNASSUMING campaign office is tucked into a back corridor of a labyrinthine co-working space in Irvine. While this purgatory of bland professionalism is not an obvious locale for a would-be insurgent campaign, splashes of color rebelled against the drab surroundings: Porter's eggplant-colored dress, a bright wall hanging, a few awards arrayed on small shelves, the can of Black Razzberry La Croix that Porter nursed throughout our conversation. I sat across from her desk in a chair borrowed from the adjoining conference room, feeling somewhat like a student visiting a professor during office hours.

In her book, Porter sniffs that reporters mistakenly ask why someone is running for office, when obviously the purpose of running is to get elected: It is better instead to ask a candidate why they want to be in Congress. Seeking to thwart any expectations of another milquetoast campaign interview, I posed this corrected question to Porter. On Valentine's Day, just hours ahead of our conversation, Feinstein formally announced that she would be vacating that seat at the end of her term, lending her answer some new urgency.

"I think we need stronger fighters. I think we need people who think differently about government," Porter replied, a ready and confident answer, if more scripted than I had hoped to prompt. "I think, having been in Congress for five years, and having brought some fresh ideas about how can we connect with people—rethinking some of the assumptions, I would say, about politics as usual. And I think we need some of that energy in the Senate," she continued. Porter is roughly 40 years younger than Feinstein, an iconic lawmaker and the longest-serving Democrat in the Senate, who has been dogged in recent years by reports of mental decline.

Porter believes the Senate would grant her a "bigger and different platform" to conduct oversight, her great legislative passion. "You can serve on more committees, you can work more deeply, and you have a bigger staff," she said. "The Senate really is a body that can focus better on oversight, because it's a multiyear process to dig in on those issues."

Porter's transparency charmed supporters during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, when she spoke openly about the trials of working from home as a single mother, and the stresses of having her three children—one each in elementary, middle, and high school—trying to school-from-home at the same time. "People can jokingly say, 'Tell us what you really think,'" she told me. "And I try to be honest about what I think, and I think that my constituents and voters respect that and deserve that."

But the same candor that endears her to progressives and strikes fear in the hearts of unprepared witnesses may also occasionally alienate colleagues or sting subordinates. (Characteristic of a workplace wholly reliant on relationships, many of the House

FROM LEFT: BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS/REDUX; SARAH SILBIGER/BLOOMBERG/GETTY

members and staffers I spoke with for this piece would offer criticism of Porter anonymously, or would only talk off the record.)

New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who served with Porter on the Financial Services Committee in their first term and continues to work alongside her on the Oversight Committee, praised Porter's use of the whiteboard. "A major part of our job is building relationships with the public and building faith in this institution. And what she does, alongside many progressives in Congress, is really trying to breathe life into our committee process," Ocasio-Cortez said.

Porter's use of props in hearings occasionally grated on the Democratic chair of the Financial Services Committee, Representative Maxine Waters, a longtime member of the California delegation and an ally of former Speaker Nancy Pelosi. When Porter was not selected to serve on the Financial Services Committee in her second term, despite sending a letter to Pelosi requesting she remain, some Porter supporters blamed retaliation. Democratic leadership allies counter that Porter had not prioritized remaining on the Financial Services Committee over other committees she had selected, Oversight and Natural Resources. Two years later, Porter told me that she was "glad" she had tried to stay on the Financial Services Committee despite her lack of success, and that she had "no insight into how those final decisions were made." "I have tremendous respect for what Maxine Waters does," Porter said, adding that she felt prepared to lead a subcommittee in part because she "learned so much from watching Maxine run a committee."

Still, the experience left a sour taste with some in leadership. By annoying Pelosi during the brouhaha over the Financial Services Committee, a former Democratic leadership aide told me, Porter undermined her own statewide ambitions. "Leadership is led by Pelosi, and everyone in the [California] delegation is firmly a Pelosi person," the former aide said. While Porter's performance in hearings is "very effective," the aide continued, "it can be a little too much, and I think it can turn off other members."

Pelosi, a longtime ally and mentor of Schiff, has endorsed him for the Senate, as have well over a third of members in the California delegation. Rather than weigh in directly on Porter or her campaign, Representative Jared Huffman, a California progressive who is supporting Schiff, responded to a question for this piece by noting that Schiff works "in a way that's collaborative." "He's a really strong and decisive leader, but he brings others along, and he's super respectful of others. And people just appreciate that," Huffman said.

Even some of Porter's congressional allies privately acknowledged to me that her talents do not lie in diplomacy with other members. Or, as Beckmann, the political science professor at UC Irvine and Porter's neighbor, wryly observed: "If the choice is to make friends or get results, she's going to get results."

Porter attributes some disagreements with her colleagues to differences in generation, tax bracket, and in the competitiveness of her purple congressional district. "There's a different voter engagement pattern, because you just are running a full-on field campaign," Porter told me. "That's a lot of input that we got from our constituents about how I'm doing, and what I'm doing, and what they're concerned about, that, I think, if you don't have a competitive race, you may not necessarily get."

Porter's allies in the House, particularly those elected to competitive districts in 2018, laud her willingness to challenge the status quo. "I really honestly don't even know how many times I've seen Katie Porter push back against leadership, because it's been so many. And it's not to cause problems, it's to move an agenda forward that she's right about, one that's more focused on working-class families in this country," said Axne, who narrowly lost reelection in 2022.

Virginia Representative Abigail Spanberger, a friend who also flipped a red district in 2018, argued that Porter came to Congress with a sense of urgency that countered the established method of legislating preferred by leadership. "You have such a strong, sassy woman who's so incredibly smart and doesn't do things to hide it, right? [She] doesn't do the one hundred 'thank-yous' at the beginning of a meeting," Spanberger said. "People are like, 'No, no, no, we want you here, we just don't always want to hear from you.' And people like Katie were like, 'Yeah, but I've got a lot to say, and I'm going to say it.'"

Porter's high-octane, no-bullshit style also characterizes the atmosphere of her office: The congresswoman has a widely known reputation as a difficult and an overly demanding boss. In late December, the Twitter and Instagram account Dear White Staffers, which chronicles allegations of hostile work environments from current and former Hill aides, posted several anonymous messages from alleged former Porter staffers highlighting instances of inappropriate or even abusive behavior. (In 2020, Porter had the second-highest staff turnover rate in the House.)

One of those staffers, Sasha Georgiades, has gone on the record about her experiences as a fellow in Porter's district office. Porter castigated Georgiades over Signal for not testing immediately for Covid-19 when she began to feel unwell and blamed her own positive diagnosis on Georgiades. Georgiades, a veteran who had been employed through the Wounded Warrior Program, insists that she did not know at the time she came to the office that she had the virus, and that she followed protocol after testing positive. Nonetheless, she was banned from returning to the district office for the remainder of her fellowship.

Georgiades, who now works as a contractor (but would not specify in which industry), told me that she witnessed multiple instances of Porter being short-tempered toward her aides. "If you treat your staff like that, if you can be so cruel to people that you work with every day and that do nothing but give their time and their dedication and their effort—and literally sweat, blood, and tears—and you can still be that dismissive to them, then how are you going to act now that you're [running for] the Senate?" Georgiades said, arguing that Porter had "lost what the purpose is of why she's actually there."

She continued: "I just think she got a taste of what it was like to be more than just another person in Orange County. And she wants to stay more than another person in Orange County." (This was not the first time that texts sent by Porter have come under media scrutiny; she berated the mayor of Irvine over text after the man Porter was living with was arrested for allegedly punching a Trump supporter at a town hall event.)

For her part, Porter told me that she had maintained protocol. "We have office policies for a reason," she said. "When people break policies, they can't come back to the office and put others at risk. I don't think I'd be being good to my employees if I took a different attitude." Porter also attributed "most of what you've seen and heard" to the growing pains of her first term in office: "I don't think any of us were having fun."

Porter discusses her relationship with staffers in her book, a sort of mutual codependency. One chapter describes a frenetic interaction between Porter and her staffers early in her first term, after she failed to speak quickly enough to complete her thoughts in a one-minute speech on the House floor. "I trusted these staffers, and they let me down," Porter writes. "I was always going to be the one standing there doing it wrong when they made mistakes."

Speaking from the perspective of herself and several staffers—Porter wrote the recollected conversation but consulted with participants for accuracy—the congresswoman describes how her staff figured out how many words she spoke per minute, and therefore how to adjust her remarks. After much agita, Porter was given a fresh copy of the speech, and was able to deliver it within a five-minute time frame the next day.

Porter told me that the choice of anecdote was deliberate. "I'm certain I could have picked a moment in which, like, I was the hero. But to do that is to suggest that I'm not saved by my staff a million thousand times a day in a bunch of different ways, by their dedication, their hard work," Porter told me. "I think that's what hard work looks like. That's what grit looks like, is being able to say, 'That was not it.' Like, what did we do wrong? How do we fix it?"

Her staff can also be on the receiving end of some of Porter's more acerbic zingers. One two-page spread in *I Swear* outlines various "Katie-isms," that is, ways to respond to mistakes or shortcomings by aides. When a staffer spills Diet Dr Pepper on Porter's dress, for example, the reactive Katie-ism would be: "It's a good thing for you that I believe in gun violence prevention." Porter told me that she had sourced that section by asking her staff to brainstorm their recollections of Katie-isms, and that "the ride is bumpy," but her aides know "we're in it together." She added: "I do have a sense of humor. And do I think humor always lands? Well, no. That's partly why it's humor, right?"

AFTER NARROWLY DEFEATING Walters in the blue wave election of 2018, Porter earned the distinction of a "frontline" Democrat, in the vernacular of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee: an endangered incumbent in a hotly contested seat. Porter, who has served as deputy chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, is also frequently cited as an unapologetic progressive who could nonetheless win in a swing district without compromising her ideals.

Orange County, Ronald Reagan once joked, is where "the good Republicans go before they die." But the political winds have changed in recent decades, and those good Republicans are now outnumbered by registered Democrats. Porter's district includes a large portion of the county, encompassing multiple demographic interests: wealthy beachfront conservatives in Newport Beach and Huntington Beach and wealthy academic progressives in Irvine, with a significant contingent of Asian American voters and a population of university students.

Democrats in the district say that, despite her brief career in the House, she has revitalized local party efforts. "It makes a world of a difference when you have a candidate like Katie at the top of the ticket," said Cassius Rutherford, the chair of the Costa Mesa Democratic Club, in a town in Porter's district. Volunteer enthusiasm around Porter's campaign benefited candidates for citywide office.

Ada Briceño, the Democratic Party of Orange County chair, also told me that Porter "helped us build a bench" by supporting and campaigning for local women candidates who won their elections in 2022. "It takes a lot of knocking on doors in order to get across that finish line. And that is something that is really understood by the congresswoman," Briceño said. "She has a very strong field and ground game."

That ground game was sorely tested in 2022, after Porter ran for a new, redistricted seat that now included the more conservative Newport Beach and Huntington Beach. Porter defeated Republican Scott Baugh by only 3 percentage points, and she spent roughly $28 million to ensure that hard-fought victory. Baugh received significant support from two Republican-aligned super PACs, the Congressional Leadership Fund and Club for Growth, which hammered Porter on inflation and crime. One ad by Club for Growth even employed Porter's signature prop, featuring women holding their own whiteboards challenging her economic record.

One potential benefit of launching her Senate campaign in January is having the extra time to recoup those spent funds; when she announced, Porter had roughly $7 million in her coffers, compared to $20 million in cash on hand for Schiff. Many of Porter's supporters in the district understand her rationale for seeking higher office: "It's not like Katie's going to go from representing us in Congress to the thin air. She's actually going to be able to represent us far more effectively in the Senate," Rutherford said.

Porter insisted to me that she will not abandon the base that she has so successfully galvanized. Moreover, those talents for fieldwork will be brought to task in races across the state, not just in Orange County: "By really running a robust campaign, I will help turn out people in the primary and the general, and that will help us win," Porter said.

"You hear people say, 'Oh, it'll be nice to run every six years,' and I may be on the ballot once every six years, but the ballots go out every two. And that is not something I will forget," Porter told me later in our conversation. "I intend to be on the ground every two years, making a big difference in California and around the country."

Porter has already used her progressive clout to support other candidates. Representative Robert Garcia, a freshman California lawmaker whose district borders Porter's, noted that she was the first member of Congress to endorse him. "Early on, we talked a lot about her trailblazing around not taking corporate PAC money," said Garcia, who did not take corporate PAC money in his own campaign. "She gave great advice, and I respect her greatly for that." Porter's own PAC, Truth to Power, supports candidates who she believes will stand up to special interests.

Porter has been considered a prospective Senate candidate for years; she was floated as a potential choice to fill Harris's vacated seat in 2021 when she became vice president. Porter declined to run against incumbent Senator Alex Padilla, the eventual choice, in 2022, but anyone paying attention to California politics could intuit that Porter would be interested in a Senate bid.

Her entry into the Senate race before Feinstein's official announcement rankled some who argued that the senator should get to retire on her own terms. (Feinstein released statements welcoming Porter's and Schiff's candidacies before she formally announced she would step down at the end of her term.) But Porter defended her timing, telling me that she needed to jump

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into the race as quickly as possible in order to reach potential supporters. "A shadow campaign, a whisper campaign, doesn't let you connect with voters," Porter told me. "I think the most respectful thing to do with regard to Senator Feinstein was to let her know that I was running."

The grassroots network that Porter has built nationally, seen in microcosm in the volunteer enthusiasm in her Orange County community, was quick to activate. The day after her announcement, Porter's campaign reported that she had raised roughly $1.3 million in small-dollar donations in the first 24 hours. A Quinnipiac poll released at the beginning of March showed that 39 percent of voters would be "enthusiastic" if Porter became the next senator for California, compared to 35 percent for Schiff and 34 percent for Lee. "This Senate primary will be good for California, will be good for democracy in California," Porter said, rapping her fist on her desk as she spoke. "I think we can have a primary that creates momentum to help our next senator accomplish those downstream and across-the-country political effects."

AS PORTER IS quick to note, she is one of only a handful of single moms of school-age kids serving in the House. Motherhood is intrinsic to Porter's behavior as a lawmaker and a candidate for Senate: It is both key to her appeal, lending authenticity to her public persona, and a daily reality.

Porter engenders a certain excitement from local Democrats, and especially from women, said Luette Forrest, a retired veterinarian who worked at UC Irvine and has been involved with Democratic politics in the area for decades. Part of that popularity stems from that appearance of authenticity; she fully embodies the persona of a mom with a minivan because she *is* a mom with a minivan. "She's a regular human being. She's as advertised, as far as I can tell," Forrest said. "She's not living a double life. People see her in the grocery store."

Although some Democratic members may privately feel as if Porter is patronizing in her admonitions to colleagues about the stresses of inflation or everyday costs, her perspective comes from experience. "When I say this or that about the price of groceries, I'm the only one there is. So we know who gets the groceries in my house; it's me. We know who figures out the childcare in my house; it's me," Porter said.

The House is hardly designed to accommodate parents of young children, and particularly not single parents. Porter expressed frustration with late vote times and inconsistent committee schedules, arguing in favor of block schedules for hearings. (Porter took particular advantage of the proxy voting that was in place from 2020 through January 2023.) "If we want a Congress that looks more like America, then we have to think about creating a workplace that accommodates different kinds of people and workers," Porter said.

Toward the end of her book, Porter recalls how her frankness with a reporter earned her a distinction in a 2020 profile in *Elle* magazine: "Being Everywoman was described as my superpower." With Everywoman superpower, however, comes Everywoman responsibility. Being a single parent is difficult, even with an annual salary of $174,000 and university-provided housing; Porter is currently on leave from UC Irvine, and her living situation has earned her criticism from right-wing outlets. Being a single mom and trying to supervise her children from almost 3,000 miles away, spending 14 to 18 hours per week on a plane when the House is in session, make full-time parenting incredibly difficult. Then there is the balance of emotional labor, attending to the needs of children and of hundreds of thousands of constituents.

"My kids are my toughest constituents. They're also my kids. So they feel free to chime in on everything from, 'You forgot to buy the Cinnamon Toast Crunch, and this is the third time I've reminded you,' to 'Mom, why would you ever vote for the NDAA?'" Porter told me, adding that she did not, in fact, vote in favor of the recent National Defense Authorization Act.

Porter has survived difficult primary and general elections before, but never on a statewide scale. The race between Porter, Schiff, and Lee, as well as any other candidate who hops in, will involve major political players and PACs, inviting new levels of scrutiny over more than a year of campaigning. (One of the groups that supported Porter's 2018 campaign is now assisting a pro-Schiff PAC.) California's jungle primary, in which the top two vote-getters advance—a free-for-all hellscape, if you will—isn't until June 2024.

Authenticity in politics can be a trap, particularly for women; the more one tries to come across as genuine, the less real it feels. The one-liners of an exhausted but effective mother can occasionally seem like a shield—and at worst a calculation—when that single mom with a minivan is also seeking an incredibly powerful position in the nation's most populous state. "Ambition in political life is a constant and a given. The question is, what kinds of public ambitions are your personal ambitions linked to?" said Raskin, who has not made an endorsement in the California Senate race. "In Katie's case, her personal ambitions are connected to a belief that the government has got to be in service of a cognizable public interest."

Like words scribbled on a whiteboard, Porter's identity has been clearly telegraphed. Voters now have more than a year to decide whether the mom in a minivan actually embodies the image she has cultivated—and, if she does, whether it is enough.

"Take or leave me," Porter writes in her book, "but know me." TNR

Grace Segers *is a staff writer at* The New Republic.

THE RIGHT'S WAR ON STUDENT DEBTORS MAY COST US ALL

Is the Supreme Court willing to unleash legal chaos to defeat Biden's loan cancellation program?

By Ryann Liebenthal

Illustration by Pete Ryan

"SCOTUS, can you hear us?" the woman at the lectern shouted, repeating herself for emphasis. "Debt relief is legal! Debt relief is just! And debt relief is necessary!" The nine berobed men and women in the building behind her could not, of course, hear her, nor were they there to listen to what she or anyone else out in the cold had to say. When a man with a bullhorn led a chant of "Whose court? Our court!" a short while later, he was engaging the crowd in what might most accurately be termed an exercise in magical thinking.

It was late February, and the Supreme Court was hearing oral arguments in two cases challenging President Joe Biden's student debt cancellation program, created in August, which promised to forgive up to $20,000 of the federal loan balances of tens of millions of student borrowers. Both challenges to Biden's program rested on improbable claims made by dubious plaintiffs whose efforts it would be easy to describe as frivolous, were the stakes not so terribly high. And both challenges involved their own convoluted debts: The slightly more substantive case, brought by the Republican attorneys general of six states, claimed that the forgiveness program would cause MOHELA, a Missouri loan servicing agency, to default on debts it owes to the state; the decidedly sillier, brought by two Texans with student loans not eligible for the full relief, argued that Biden had left them in the lurch by not allowing them to publicly comment on the program. They were asking the court to strike down this loan forgiveness program so that, should the administration decide to propose a new version, they could have the chance to formally ask that their debts be forgiven as well.

The scene at the court was a study in opposites. Outside, the borrowers' rally had assembled at the behest of about two dozen advocacy groups, including the obvious (the Student Borrower Protection Center, the Debt Collective, and the Student Debt Crisis Center) and the slightly less so (the American Federation of Teachers, the NAACP, and MoveOn). The crowd was raucous. They whooped and hollered. They had microphones and senators and an entire horn section. Some of them had been there all night, waiting in the rain.

Inside, the justices focused on what mattered: semantics. The president had claimed the authority to cancel the debt from a 20-year-old statute, the HEROES Act, that permits the secretary of education to "waive or modify" federal student loans to keep borrowers from becoming financially worse off in the event of a war or national emergency. So, the conservative justices asked, what is the meaning of the word "modify"? Can a waiver be a cancellation? They obsessed over the phrase "half-trillion dollars," the 30-year cost estimate the Congressional Budget Office had made for the program. Surely, they suggested, Congress didn't envision delegating such a big number to presidential whim.

The government's unflappable lawyer, Elizabeth Prelogar, reminded the bench that the payment pause, which began under Donald Trump, was in fact more expensive on an annual basis, having already cost more than $100 billion, according to the Government Accountability Office. And anyway, the statute was very clear, even if Congress couldn't have predicted that it would someday be used for a once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic.

Looking annoyed, Samuel Alito, who may vie with Clarence Thomas for the position of most conservative justice but is without a doubt the most irritable, rubbed his temple and jolted himself back in his chair, which apparently reclines to an almost supine position. At points it appeared to me, as I craned between the marble pillars, that he might be dozing. Justice Brett Kavanaugh, the court's avowed beer drinker, cracked a few jokes. Meanwhile, in an odd concordance, liberal Elena Kagan and conservative Amy Coney Barrett were not having what some of the plaintiffs' lawyers were dishing up, which boiled down, essentially, to one bad-faith argument: This program leaves some people out; therefore it shouldn't exist.

Advocates of the forgiveness plan argue that the legality of Biden's program is unimpeachable. Yet given the bench's sharp rightward tilt, it is entirely unclear whether it will survive the six conservative justices' scrutiny; the hearings revealed them, as a rule, to be incisively critical of its cost and broadness. In the wake of oral arguments, a host of major news outlets pounced (perhaps overzealously) on their critiques to suggest it was doomed. Headlines in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* all highlighted the justices' apparent skepticism, and another *Times* article said that the court "seemed poised to … kill the Biden administration's plan."

Nevertheless, if the conservative majority was uniformly against the program itself, it did not appear uniformly receptive to the plaintiffs' claims. And before the court can fully debate the merits of the cases, it must decide whether the plaintiffs have standing—in other words, whether the rather peculiar grievances they have lodged represent any tangible harm. Do the complaints have any real substance, or are they essentially invented? Thus the administration, upward of 40 million student debtors, and the nation at large wait in a state of exquisite uncertainty. For if the program falls, the consequences could reach well beyond the fate of student debt cancellation. A ruling against the administration would not only disappoint debtors; it could open the door to an endless flood of lawsuits by states, creditors, or really anyone over policies they don't like.

AT FIRST GLANCE, it's a bit hard to see what Myra Brown, one of two plaintiffs in the Texas case, could have against student debt cancellation. By all appearances, Brown's post-college life has been successful. After graduating from the University of Texas at El Paso in 1993, she made her way to Southern Methodist University for graduate school, where she got a master's degree in business in 2002. Although she took out thousands of dollars in federal student loans to get her degrees, her debts don't seem to have held her down. Today, she's the owner of a small business, High Value Signs. Her online portfolio displays photos of colorful menu boards at ice cream shops and juice bars, wraparound trade-show booth displays, a jaunty wall sign for a "lava grill and lounge" called Stonz. Her slightly cramped Irving, Texas, shop occupies one-half of a nondescript brown building in a sprawling office park just a hop, skip, and a freeway jump from the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

The argument the plaintiffs' lawyers were dishing up boiled down, essentially, to one bad-faith claim: This program leaves certain people out; therefore it shouldn't exist.

While it's to be expected that a business so reliant on a healthy retail economy would take a hit under the stay-at-home days of Covid, Brown was able to benefit from a huge pandemic relief program to keep things afloat. In 2020, she borrowed $48,000 from the federal government's temporary Paycheck Protection Program. For context, that's about $10,000 more than the debt of the average student loan borrower, and exceeds the more than $30,000 Brown still owes on her own federal student loans. But, as it happened, Myra Brown's PPP loan was more like a Pell Grant, which doesn't have to be paid back: In 2022, the federal government forgave all but $4 of her Covid debt, no questions asked.

Today, she seems to be hiring: Her website lists openings for several positions, including sign maker and sign installer. She describes High Value Signs as "a fun place to work" with a "can do," positive culture, and her website features praise from several satisfied customers.

One might anticipate that a small-business owner like Brown would express gratitude over the government's unprecedented generosity in keeping her company going in the early months of the pandemic. But, needless to say, Brown doesn't seem to be very appreciative. Instead, she complains: Because her student loans are held by private lenders, she isn't eligible to take advantage of Biden's plan.

Brown's case was filed with a co-plaintiff, Alexander Taylor, who also took out federal student loans and does stand to benefit from the program. Taylor is suing because he doesn't feel he's getting enough of his debt forgiven. Biden's program, limited to federal loan borrowers with incomes less than $125,000 (or couples making less than $250,000), promises to forgive $20,000 of debt for Pell Grant recipients; $10,000 for everyone else. Because Taylor wasn't eligible for a Pell Grant while in school, he can expect to get only $10,000 canceled.

On their face, Brown and Taylor's complaints should be easily dismissed. In general, citizens can't just sue the federal government because they don't like the policies it enacts—you can't sue to end Medicaid, for instance, because you make too much money to qualify for it. But Brown and Taylor claim that they have standing because the Biden administration violated the Administrative Procedure Act, or APA, when it created the cancellation program. The administration should have offered the opportunity to publicly comment on the program, they argue, an opportunity they allegedly would have used to request expanded forgiveness criteria. So, to recap: Because they were not allowed to officially ask for forgiveness, they are suing to make sure no one else can get it—an extremely wonky and far-reaching version of "If I can't have you, no one can."

In November, Mark Pittman, a Trump-appointed Texas district court judge, agreed with them, even though the Texas plaintiffs' argument relies on a central flaw: When Congress passed the HEROES Act, it explicitly exempted the education secretary from the traditional regulations, like public comment, required under the APA. In other words, Brown and Taylor don't have a leg to stand on. But Judge Pittman decided that didn't matter. In his opinion, Biden overstepped his authority in using the HEROES Act to begin with, in part because the national emergency he was seeking to alleviate—the pandemic—is now over.

Pittman's central argument was that the forgiveness program violated what's known as the "major questions doctrine." That's a relatively new and vague legal premise, only cemented in 2022, that says federal agencies cannot exceed their authority to push policies with extraordinarily wide-reaching economic or sociopolitical consequences. Initially, it was envisioned as an at least putatively reasoned rejection of agencies exceeding their remit. The doctrine can arguably be traced back to a 1994 case involving the Federal Communications Commission. More recently, however, it has become something of a smoke screen for conservatives to swat away executive branch policies they don't like. Justice Alito put a shockingly fine point on this during oral arguments in the challenges to Biden's student debt plan. "Let's say," the justice mused, that "you simply polled every member of Congress and asked … whether, in the ordinary sense of the term, they would regard what the government proposes to do with student loans as a major question."

That, to put it mildly, is not how the doctrine was originally construed.

"In this country," Pittman had written in his order halting the program, "we are not ruled by an all-powerful executive with a pen and a phone." But if the court chooses to intervene on this particular "major question," we will be one very long stride closer to an all-powerful judiciary, a role that even some of the Supreme Court justices found an overreach. "You started by indicating that this is one of today's most debated policy questions," Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, the newest member of the bench and among the liberal minority, said to James Campbell, Nebraska's solicitor general, who pleaded the states' case before the court. "And you ended by saying that we, the courts, should essentially answer it by invalidating this program."

ONE OF THE many unusual features of these cases is that they skipped several steps to get to the Supreme Court—a process known as certiorari before judgment. After Pittman filed his injunction blocking Biden's program, the case would normally have gone through an appeals process, which could have taken more than a year. But the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals refused to lift the injunction before hearing the case, and the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals had already ruled against the program. So the Biden

administration's best chance for a quick resolution was to push ahead to the next, and highest, level.

A curious and consternating result of this abridged process is that the original cases did not undergo the normal phase of discovery. In other words, the defense counsel wasn't given the chance to do any real fact-finding on the plaintiffs. In a November filing in the Texas case, the Department of Justice noted that the sum total of information on the plaintiffs there derived from "two affidavits, each totaling 260 words or fewer, asserting their beliefs that it is 'unfair to exclude [them] from the program.'"

So we know almost nothing about the plaintiffs, beyond what can be gleaned online. And they're not eager to add to the record. (A spokesperson representing them denied my requests for interviews with Brown and Taylor.) Among the problems that arise from this lacuna of information is that even the administration was unable to examine the plaintiffs' purported issues with the program. In that same November filing, the Department of Justice stated its hope that a discovery process would address "the tension between Plaintiffs' position that the forgiveness program should be expanded to include them and their position that the program is unlawfully overbroad." "Tension" here being, perhaps, a genteel synonym for bullshit. The Supreme Court justices pulled at this as well, pointing out to the Texas plaintiffs' attorney, J. Michael Connolly, that dismantling the program was unlikely to get the plaintiffs the debt relief they claimed to want. Connolly answered that they hoped the president would simply re-create the program under another regulatory process, an explanation that is on its face utterly ludicrous.

Up against the dearth of information in the filings and the plaintiffs' self-imposed firewall, I sought out information on them from alternate sources. I cold-emailed former and current employees of Myra Brown's business via LinkedIn, to no avail. I undertook a similar process for Alexander Taylor, contacting students and colleagues at his undergraduate alma mater, the University of Dallas, where Taylor is now a doctoral candidate in literature. Somewhat desperately, I even hired a Dallas-based private investigator to visit the High Value Signs storefront and ask after Myra Brown. He reported back that Brown was said to be present but unavailable. A sign on the door stated that she was not taking any interviews at this time.

THE PLAINTIFFS' RELUCTANCE to talk makes some sense given the onslaught of attention, much of it disapproving, that they've faced in the months since they filed their suit. And Taylor already has some experience with courting controversy. In 2020, he emerged as a leading opponent of a racial justice club on campus. (University of Dallas, notably, is a Roman Catholic institution that boasts its conservative bona fides.) Taylor, who was identified in an Inside Higher Ed article as Indian American, suggested that the club could lead to a "takeover of campus by … hostile student activists."

Joshua Nunn, a creator of the club, told me that, when his proposal had come before the student government, Taylor, who had been permitted to attend the meeting—though as a graduate student he was not technically governed by the student senate—raised objections over its language, with the aim of tabling the proposal. (He took particular issue with its use of the phrase "safe space.")

Eventually, the university president, along with the bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Dallas, intervened to pass the proposal over the authority of the student government. It quickly became among the most popular clubs on campus.

Nunn told me that the biggest disappointment in the process was that, even though he and Taylor had met once before, when Taylor graded one of Nunn's papers in the school's writing lab, Taylor and other vocal opponents never once approached him to talk about their concerns over the club. Of course, that presumes a genuine concern on their part. The more obvious analysis is that Taylor opposed the club on purely political grounds, and opportunistically grasped at any argument likely to undermine it. Joe Scholz, the student body president at the school during the racial justice club debacle, said Taylor's motivations in the student debt lawsuit were nothing if not suspect. "This may be the most important thing I want to communicate," Scholz told me: "There should absolutely be no presumption of good faith behind this effort."

Since joining the student debt lawsuit, Taylor has been the subject of a significantly wider pool of critics. Naysayers made their way to his RateMyProfessor page to lambaste both his teaching style and his stance on student debt forgiveness (and, in one case, to accuse him of eating a student's lunch). Myra Brown has faced perhaps even more vitriolic critiques. Judging by reviews left for her business, volunteering to be the face of the anti-cancellation movement has not been a boon to her public image. "There are no words to express what a disgusting and vile person you are, Myra Brown. I hope you get what's coming to you, and more," wrote one of the more than two dozen commenters who flooded to her company's Bizapedia page in the days after the court filing. Many saw hypocrisy in Brown's opposition to the student debt forgiveness program when she had benefited from Covid loan forgiveness under PPP.

So why and how did Brown and Taylor sign up for this abuse? That question brings us to the deeper aims of the pair's lawsuit—and to the Job Creators Network Foundation, the murky group backed by billionaires that is funding it. Somehow, both Brown and Taylor were in contact with the Job Creators, whose mission is to amplify "the benefits of free market policies … as well as the consequences of over taxation, overregulation, and government overreach." The JCNF, which supposedly exists to support small businesses and began seeking plaintiffs to challenge Biden's program almost immediately after it was announced, was founded by Bernie Marcus, the billionaire conservative co-founder of Home Depot, and also receives funding from the ultraconservative Mercer Family Foundation. The organization may also have tenuous ties to the court itself. In March, *The Washington Post* revealed that Justice Thomas's wife, Ginni Thomas, was leading a conservative organization that in 2019 hosted a presentation by a principal officer of the JCNF, Steven Hantler.

The Job Creators Network Foundation, like Brown and Taylor, is based in the Dallas area. Its headquarters is in an office suite in Addison, Texas, about 15 miles from Myra Brown's sign store, and just over 10 from the University of Dallas, where Taylor studies and teaches. JCNF's CEO, Alfredo Ortiz, is a former marketing consultant whose book, *The Real Race Revolutionaries*, was put out in January by a fringe conservative publisher. Its central thesis: "These days in America, racism is sporadic, not systemic."

It is not exactly clear how Brown and Taylor found their way to the JCNF, nor what motivated them to participate in such a consequential lawsuit. In September, the Job Creators Network

Myra Brown and Alexander Taylor, the two plaintiffs in one of the legal challenges to Biden's debt relief program, have met significant public blowback for their roles.

REDDIT

posted a form on its website seeking those who found debt forgiveness "unfair," presumably to recruit them as plaintiffs for its challenge to the program. But the form may not have been a very useful tool. Shortly after it went up, a computer science student at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Sean Wiggs, decided to make it his next project. Wiggs had made something of a name for himself on TikTok for sabotaging the website forms of various conservative campaigns, starting with an anti-abortion group in Texas in 2021. Not long after that, he began working as a digital strategist for the progressive activist group Gen-Z for Change. After the JCNF posted its form, another progressive group, Rise, came to him to request his particular brand of sabotage. He quickly created a bot to submit false information to the form. After two days, the JCNF took down the form, which had already solicited 120,000 fake respondents.

Ostensibly the JCNF is against debt cancellation because it is "unfair" to taxpayers, even though the group's backers have been revealed to benefit from offshore tax shelters that hurt everyday citizens. Moreover, the JCNF itself was the beneficiary of a canceled PPP loan in the amount of $135,000. In court, the plaintiffs' lawyer argued a different fairness point: that the existence of cancellation is unfair to those who don't receive it. Justice Jackson was having none of it. "As a result of Covid, we had massive infusions of money given to various companies, organizations, clearly authorized because Congress said do it," she countered. "To the extent that the government is providing much-needed assistance to people in an emergency, it's going to be unfair to those who don't get the same benefit." Justice Sonia Sotomayor made the point more succinctly, in a formulation familiar to anyone who has ever been a child: "There's inherent unfairness in society."

In the wake of oral arguments, the JCNF's president, Elaine Parker, pivoted, issuing a statement claiming that the JCNF's real aim was to "hold colleges accountable for their price gouging of American students"—a goal rather at odds with Brown and Taylor's supposed desire for Biden to expand the forgiveness program. More plausibly, the JCNF opposes student loan cancellation because it threatens the workforce upon which companies like Home Depot rely. The premise of Biden's plan is that it will help Black and low-earning Americans who are most harmed by student debt, and scholarly research backs this up. Pell Grant recipients are more likely to fall behind on their loans, and Black borrowers are twice as likely as white borrowers to have received Pell Grants and have more debt and lower incomes on average. But the elimination of crippling monthly debt payments may also give its most vulnerable beneficiaries the breathing room to be more choosy about their employment and less eager to accept work in exploitative low-wage environments.

Where Brown and Taylor stand for the (billionaire-backed) borrower, the plaintiffs in the second case marshal the cynicism of the upstanding red state, just trying to balance its budget on the backs of its citizens. That challenge is arguably the more consequential for student debt. In September, officials in six Republican-governed states filed suit against the forgiveness program, initially claiming standing under a fairly cynical rationale. Federal borrowers in an income-based repayment program typically face a 20-year repayment term, with the remaining amount subsequently forgiven. The IRS usually considers forgiven debt as income, subject to both state and federal taxes. But the debt forgiven under Biden's program will not be subject to taxation. And so, the states argued, they would be harmed because they'd miss out on the taxes they would have been able to levy when the debts were eventually forgiven several years from now. When a federal judge summarily dismissed that argument (after Biden's lawyer pointed out that, while the forgiven debts will be exempt from federal taxes, the states remain free to levy their own), the states doubled down on an even more convoluted part of their argument. They next claimed that even if five of the six of them did not reasonably have standing, one among them—Missouri—did, because the forgiveness program would render a Missouri company unable to repay its debts to the state.

The Higher Education Loan Authority of the State of Missouri, or MOHELA, was created by the Missouri government in 1981 to make low-cost loans to state residents. At the time, most federal student loans were made by private lenders. Borrowers would repay the loans to their bank, and if they stopped paying, the government would make the banks whole. In some cases, the government delegated that role to state agencies, like MOHELA. In 2010, the Obama administration did away with this bank-based system, bringing most federal student loans in-house. But it kept a role for agencies like MOHELA to continue servicing federal loans—collecting money and performing admin duties. MOHELA receives billions of dollars a year for the loans it services for the federal government. And this, the Republican state officials argue, is what is at risk if the forgiveness program goes through.

The officials claim that, under the forgiveness program, MOHELA will lose money because its loan portfolio will shrink as loans are canceled. As a result, the company will be unable to pay into a state fund, the Lewis and Clark Discovery Fund, or LCD Fund, to which it owes more than $100 million.

There are just two problems with this argument: One, the state officials have no basis for claiming that MOHELA will lose revenue due to the forgiveness program. They merely state it as fact, and there are reasons to believe this might not be the case. And even

if MOHELA did lose revenue, it might choose to cut costs or reduce overhead before defaulting on its debts. Moreover, MOHELA itself is not a party to the lawsuit and has publicly distanced itself from the state officials. In October, Missouri Representative Cori Bush pushed the agency to clarify its position, railing in a letter to MOHELA's CEO, Scott Giles, that it would be "unconscionable that your company—as one of the largest student loan companies in the world—would be involved in overtly political efforts to rob millions of their right to student loan debt relief." The agency replied that its executives were not involved in the decision to file suit, and that the only communication the two parties had shared over debt relief was when MOHELA released documents to the Missouri attorney general's office in response to a public records request.

But even if the forgiveness program does reduce MOHELA's willingness to pay back Missouri, it shouldn't really be a big deal, as Louise Seamster, a sociologist at the University of Iowa who studies student debt, discovered one morning while bored and in a mood to unravel dubious state records. As it turns out, she found, MOHELA hasn't paid a penny into the LCD Fund in 15 years.

The state officials seem unfazed by these demerits. "No statute permits President Biden to unilaterally relieve millions of individuals from their obligation to pay loans they voluntarily assumed," their complaint states. In court, they've gone even further. "The federal government is engaged in a so-far hidden, ever-changing and increasingly crumbling escapade of lawlessness," argued a lawyer from the Nebraska attorney general's office in a lower court hearing.

BEFORE THE Supreme Court hearing, the flimsiness of the plaintiffs' complaints meant that most borrower advocates were bullish on the strength of the Justice Department's case. In support of the government's defense, more than 70 organizations signed amicus briefs filed by a coalition that includes the Student Borrower Protection Center, the National Consumer Law Center, and the American Federation of Teachers. Mike Pierce, executive director of the SBPC, told me that, in leaning so hard on the question of standing, the government was giving a kind of "out" to conservative justices to rule in the administration's favor. Because if the justices were to rule that these plaintiffs—and particularly the state officials—have standing to sue, they could open the door for anyone to sue over a contested federal policy if they could argue that someone, anyone, might be financially harmed by it.

For the judiciary, that could be—or should be—a nightmare.

Imagine, for example, a scenario in which a controversial climate policy harmed an oil company in a state; alleging that the policy broke some law or was the result of executive overreach, the state could then sue, arguing that harm to the company would reduce its tax revenue. This, legal advocates told me, is not a particularly outlandish thought experiment. If "we find that even the most minor state interest, a dormant fund that hasn't been funded or used by the state in 15 years," Justice Jackson warned, "if that can be the basis for standing … I'm concerned that we're going to have a problem in terms of the federal government's ability to operate."

For now, that's a concern that seems only to contort observers on the left. But there will most certainly be cases in the future in which the conservatives on the court will not want to grant such a capacious reading of standing. (In fact, the legal scholar Steve Vladeck has noted that since the 1970s it has been court conservatives, not liberals, who have sought to restrict standing claims, rejecting them, for instance, in citizens' challenges to state surveillance programs.) This eventuality presents—or, again, should present—a quandary. Will the justices simply selectively ignore their previous ruling whenever they come across a case they don't want to hear? That, said Jeffrey Dubner, the deputy legal director of the advocacy group Democracy Forward, which submitted an amicus brief in this case, would be a deeply troubling reshaping of the judiciary's role as nonpartisan arbiter. "Standing is supposed to be a neutral procedural rule," Dubner explained. "If judges exempt ideological plaintiffs from neutral procedural rules when they agree with their ideology, then, in a very significant way, we no longer have rule of law. We have courts that apply one set of rules for people they agree with and one set of rules for people they don't."

One way around such a consequential outcome would be to thread so narrow a needle toward standing in this case that the justices don't have to completely reimagine standing doctrine and thereby upend our whole understanding of judicial neutrality. Perhaps the most obvious way for them to do so would be to rule that MOHELA is indeed an arm of the state of Missouri, and therefore any injury to it represents an injury to the state. "Factually," Dubner told me, that would be incorrect, "for all the reasons that the government explained both at the argument and in its brief"—among other things, it would go against previous cases in which the court has held that such loan servicers are legally independent; and even so, because there has been no fact-finding in this case, the plaintiffs have not even shown that MOHELA is in fact likely to suffer financial harm from Biden's program. "But it would be incorrect on very specific facts rather than a striking new change to standing doctrine more generally."

In other words, it wouldn't wholly undo our basic understanding of what the third branch of government was created to do.

A NUMBER OF the borrower advocates and legal experts I spoke to worried that, with a majority of the justices essentially in the pocket of the Republican Party, they would jump at the chance to deal the administration a blow on debt cancellation regardless of the weakness of the plaintiffs' complaints or the possibly nightmarish consequences of recognizing that the cases have standing. And many spectators of the court's oral arguments suggested that the focus by the conservative justices (particularly Thomas, Roberts, and Alito) on the cost of the program and the meaning of specific words in the HEROES Act indicates they are indeed looking for any possible entry point to strike a blow to the administration. If they do, many more questions will remain unresolved after their ruling. The strange tangle of issues at odds in these cases unsettles our usual certainties about the very nature of debt. Who owes on debts and who gets forgiven—and for which debts?

And in a way, the cases demonstrate the convolution of the student loan program itself—built over decades with layers upon layers of invested parties, their interests intersecting, overlapping, and canceling one another out. The very fact that more than $400 billion is at stake in this targeted cancellation policy is an indictment of the loan program writ large, which has metastasized far beyond its original intent.

Ironically, Myra Brown's case actually highlights a very good point: The holders of loans under the older, bank-based program

If the justices rule that these plaintiffs have standing, they could open the door for all kinds of people, companies, and institutions to sue over federal policies if they could argue that someone, anyone, was financially harmed by them.

really have been screwed. Through no fault of their own, many have been left out of a variety of protections offered under direct federal loans since 2010, including generous repayment programs and cancellation statutes, public service loan forgiveness, and now Biden's forgiveness program. (Biden's Education Department, it should be noted, has recently made a series of changes to the loan program to expand services and protections to these borrowers.) And the only reason Brown's loans were excluded from Biden's program in the first place was to avoid giving standing to yet another entity. Forgiving Brown's loans would, after all, create a harmed party—the lenders who hold them.

And borrower advocates like the organizers in the Debt Collective would argue that even Alexander Taylor has a point—they would say he should have his entire debt canceled, that the debt itself is illegitimate, since the government should provide higher education as a right to all citizens, regardless of income status.

The state of Missouri owes services to its citizens as well—services like the educational facilities it was supposed to provide via the moneys in the Lewis and Clark Discovery Fund. A January news report on the fund showed that several of its major projects remain unfunded and incomplete. If the state does not consider itself beholden to its own citizens, how can it expect a higher level of respect from the citizens of the country?

One thing Persis Yu, counsel for the Student Borrower Protection Center, told me was that the states' various claims of potential harm present a particularly twisted vision of governance. On one side of the scale sit the private corporations these six states harbor, and whose business they court; on the other are their own citizens—thousands if not millions of the very people the lawmakers were elected to represent. Research shows, Yu reminded me, that if these people receive debt cancellation, they will have money freed up to invest in their communities and will be more willing to seek out better jobs or to start their own businesses. That benefits their states both abstractly and monetarily. And these benefits would redound to the states immediately, unlike the supposed tax penalties they may or may not receive when their citizens' debts are theoretically forgiven in 15 or 20 years, to say nothing of the income from loan servicers who have not paid on their own debts in more than a decade.

If the program falls, the administration could theoretically extend the payment pause, but it has said it will resume payments, come what may, no later than this summer. In any event, less than a week after oral arguments, the financial services company SoFi, apparently anticipating that the court would strike down the forgiveness program, filed its own suit against the government, arguing that the pause itself was illegal on the same grounds. SoFi's claim for standing? The pause, it argued, which has suspended regular payments and interest accrual, has taken away potential customers to entice into its private-loan refinancing programs.

Most advocates and a number of legal scholars believe that Biden has the authority to cancel student debt independent of the HEROES Act. The Higher Education Act of 1965 includes a clause that says the secretary of education has the right to compromise on, waive, or modify any student loan debt. Point-blank. So if the Supreme Court strikes down Biden's program, will he let himself be cowed by the judiciary? Or will he openly flout the court and reissue his order under the broader authority of the HEA, almost certainly provoking even more lawsuits? That avenue, unlike the HEROES Act, would require a series of regulatory procedures (such as a mandatory public notice and comment period) that would stretch on for months. And even though the HEA gives "extraordinarily broad ability to cancel debts," Dubner told me, with this court, that just may not matter.

Even if the court does uphold the program, Congress may find a way to strike it down. In March, Mitt Romney and other Senate Republicans introduced a resolution to apply an infrequently used piece of legislation called the Congressional Review Act, which allows Congress to overturn regulatory policy, to undo Biden's plan. If the resolution were to pass, it would still require a two-thirds majority in both houses—unlikely, given the current makeup of the two chambers. But the move shows that Republicans opposed to debt relief are leaving no stone unturned in their quest to crush the program.

In the meantime, it's the borrowers who will suffer. The Student Borrower Protection Center noted in its amicus brief to the court that the government has enacted payment pauses for student loan borrowers affected by other kinds of emergencies—such as natural disasters like Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. As Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar noted, default rates typically spike twentyfold when payments resume. Because the scale in this instance is so vast—affecting all borrowers—the organization predicts that "absent relief comparable to the kinds that the government provided to other entities" (ahem, Myra Brown), "these borrowers will likely default on a scale unmatched in the history of the student loan system." Meanwhile, the Biden cancellation program would eliminate the debt of between 45 and 69 percent of those already struggling to repay their loans. "The real concrete tragedy here," Dubner told me, "is that millions of borrowers will be at a severe risk of default if this gets wiped away—and that because six attorneys general and two individuals didn't want it, millions upon millions of people will lose that relief." TNR

Ryann Liebenthal's *first book*, Overdue: The Shameful Story of America's Student Debt Crisis, *is forthcoming in 2024.*

In 2018, Ferat Koçak's car was set on fire in Berlin's diverse Neukölln neighborhood. A self-described member of NSU 2.0, a revived version of the neo-Nazi group the National Socialist Underground, took credit for the attack.

Photographs by Jacobia Dahm

“No-go zones.”

Extremist rallies at the Reichstag.

Asylum seekers facing harassment.

Inside the rising threat posed by the German far right.

SURVIVING GERMANY’S NEO-NAZI RESURGENCE

By Ali Breland

Ferat Koçak barely made it out alive.

At 3 a.m. one February night in 2018, while at his parents' house in Berlin with his family, he woke up by chance. It was too bright for that time of night, he noticed. When he looked out the window, he saw that his car was engulfed in flames. He called the fire department and rushed his family out as the blaze from the car spread toward the building. Even before he received information from the police, Koçak, a German of Kurdish descent with a long beard dyed in the anti-fascist colors of black and red, was certain what had happened: He was being targeted by the far right for his anti-racist, anti-fascist activism.

"If we got out five minutes later, we would have died," Koçak told me, stone-faced and wearing all black. A Google Images search of him later revealed that this ensemble—paired with Adidas Sambas and occasionally a cap and scarf—is his typical look. He had told the story of that night to German media countless times, but, understandably, he wasn't over it. In German fashion, he spoke calmly and deliberately. We were sitting in the office common room of Die Linke, or the Left Party, just off a leafy cobblestone street in Neukölln, the neighborhood where Koçak lives and where, five years ago, he was attacked. It's a neighborhood that's important to him. His Twitter handle is "der_neukoellner"; until recently, he also went by this name on the encrypted messaging app Signal.

A year after the attack, in March, Berlin's Criminal Investigation Department received an anonymous email that seemed to confirm Koçak's suspicions. The emailer, who took credit for the arson, claimed to be a member of NSU 2.0—a revived version of the National Socialist Underground, a neo-Nazi group responsible for at least 10 murders between 2000 and 2007. Koçak was the perfect choice for a neo-Nazi: He is an ethnic minority who is also a vocal anti-racist activist; he is a left-wing politician, and, thanks to his red and black beard, he is a solo, walking anti-fascist demonstration. He took the fire as a warning to get him to stop his political work and activism, and, after his mother had a heart attack in the days following the fire, he almost did. "My mom told me, 'No, you can't,'" Koçak recalled. "'They want this, so you should do the opposite.'"

The broad sweep of Western history usually gets recounted something like this: In the economic turmoil that followed World War I, fascism rose in Weimar Germany, Hitler surged to power, and Churchill and Roosevelt swooped in to save the day. The victorious Allies quickly de-Nazified the country, and while it suffered during the Cold War split between East and West, its fascist past was truly the past. But in actuality, after World War II, neo-Nazi attacks and organizing never fully abated. Indeed, it became much more visible after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of East and West Germany in 1990. Since the '90s, Germany's neo-Nazi resurgence has gone through ebbs and flows. Most recently, it gathered momentum in 2015 and 2016, following an uptick in immigrants fleeing a civil war in Syria.

And while the national government in Germany is run by a center-left coalition, in recent years there's been a groundswell of support for the far right. Alternative für Deutschland, or AfD—which might best be described as a far-, *far*-right party—now holds more than 10 percent of seats in the national Parliament, and even greater sway in local municipalities in the old Soviet, eastern parts of the country, where support for the far right is strongest. The trend is a warning sign for the rest of Europe, and an immediate concern for Germans. Not only has the right's rise triggered collective apprehension about the same threats to democratic norms that have plagued countries across the West in recent years, it's also translated into increased threats of violence.

Clockwise from upper left: In May 2018, supporters of the far-right party AfD demonstrated in Berlin under the slogan FUTURE GERMANY. Nazi graffiti is scrawled in Hoyerswerda, a rural town in Saxony where in 1991 neo-Nazis attacked buildings in which Vietnamese and Mozambican workers were living. In May 2018, anti-fascist protesters in Berlin lit flares and waved flags. Demonstrators displayed a banner reading, "It was with the approval of 'concerned citizens' that Auschwitz took place. Never again fascism!"

GETTY (X3); T SEELIGER/SHUTTERSTOCK

The rise of the right and the uptick in violence cannot be detached from the relatively generous stance toward immigration that Germany has taken compared to other European countries. In absolute numbers, it has accepted more refugees than any country in Europe besides Turkey: 2.2 million as of 2022. Between 2012 and 2021, in terms of refugees as a proportion of total population, Germany ranked fifth, behind Turkey, Sweden, Greece, and Malta. As a matter of national policy, Germany has, with the best intentions, dispersed asylum seekers and other immigrants throughout the country. But these seemingly well-intentioned policies have created dangerous situations where people of color are forced to reside in regions that may be hostile to their presence, and where they face greater threats from neo-Nazis and fascists.

Many of the attacks have occurred in smaller rural towns, and occasionally in eastern cities such as Chemnitz and Dresden. But they've also crept into Germany's largest, most cosmopolitan city, which puts forward an image of international multiculturalism. And for roughly the past decade, a small but persistent stream of attacks has hit Berlin's trendiest neighborhood, Neukölln. Estimates vary, but since 2016, police have investigated more than 70 attacks in Neukölln linked to the far right, ranging from arson to bricks thrown through windows to graffitied death threats. The German newspaper *taz* noted in 2019 that all of the attacks have been directed at activists, like Koçak, who organize against the far right.

In some ways, the Neukölln attacks are a contradiction. The neighborhood is among the most diverse in the city. Middle Eastern and Vietnamese restaurants line the streets between pockets of cafés and bars frequented by the city's creative class of artists, DJs, and young people who want to associate with that milieu. For comparison, neo-Nazis roaming Neukölln might be akin to a right-wing paramilitary cell maintaining an organized presence in demographically diverse artist havens like Bushwick, Brooklyn, or Echo Park, Los Angeles.

That said, if the neighborhood is diverse by German standards, it is nevertheless predominately and historically white. Koçak believes that the violence is a racist reaction to recent demographic shifts. Rising rents in Berlin's bohemian former punk hub,

Kreuzberg, have pushed younger, white German creatives into North Neukölln, displacing that neighborhood's immigrant population further south. "South Neukölln is not like North Neukölln. It's more white, more German," Koçak said. "The gentrification in the north changed the population in the south. This was one reason they started the attacks."

Investigative reporting by *Berliner Morgenpost* and the public broadcaster RBB eventually alerted Koçak that NSU 2.0 had made a second threat against him, but he was never notified by the police. It's unclear why, and the failure underscores a problem he and many others describe: It is difficult to trust the police, because some of them are dismissive of far-right violence, and some even belong to the far right.

The arson attack Koçak endured was not just a microcosm of something happening in Neukölln or Berlin at large. It represents a phenomenon occurring across the entire country. In 2021, far-right crimes reached a record high of 24,000; attacks on refugee shelters increased by 73 percent between 2021 and 2022. And even asylum seekers who avoid violence in Germany must still face difficult living conditions and years of isolation trapped in inhospitable small towns, stuck in asylum limbo. As the far right and the neo-Nazi movement it harbors burgeon in Germany, refugees, asylum seekers, and people of color are paying the price.

"**NO-GO ZONE**" is a politically charged term. If you're familiar with it, you probably first heard about it sometime between 2015 and 2018, when conservatives in the United States and Europe used it to refer to neighborhoods in European cities "where Sharia courts are set up, where Muslim density is very intense, where police don't go in," as one Fox News guest said in a 2015 segment for which the network later issued an apology and correction.

That use of the term—to describe enclaves where immigrants have established some kind of hegemony—is in fact the exact opposite of how it was originally defined by right-wing extremists, who envisioned "national liberated zones" where "the only figures of rule or the enforcement of order" were the extremists themselves, usually neo-Nazis, wrote Lukáš Novotný, a professor at Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in the Czech Republic, in a 2009 paper. "They are zones to which foreigners have limited (or no) access."

Novotný traces the history of far-right extremists' no-go zone aspirations in Germany back to the '90s, decades before conservatives popularized their own version of the term. In the neo-Nazis' fantasy of such an area, the local government, law enforcement, and the population either have enough neo-Nazis in their ranks to enforce the boundaries of the no-go zone or contain a critical mass of sympathetic locals who turn a blind eye to the violence used.

This conception is a grim neo-Nazi pipe dream. But evidence suggests that something resembling the no-go zone has existed in parts of Germany. A 2007 report conducted by the Office for the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the German state of Brandenburg counted 17 of what it called "fear zones." According to Novotný, the report describes the areas as "zones where extremists have managed to cut out all other groups from participating in social life," and where the far right has "excluded other (non-neo-Nazi) groups from participating in or attending any cultural or other activities."

Among Germans I spoke to, the term sparked a complicated reaction. They didn't want to lend credence to the idea that neo-Nazis had gained enough power to determine who gets to travel in and out of some areas; in a certain way, to do so would be to shore up neo-Nazis' story of their own success. But they were also reluctant to totally deny the existence of such regions. The fact that people of color often live in or near areas that could be considered no-go zones makes discerning the boundaries of these areas even more challenging.

Johannes Kiess, a professor of sociology at the University of Siegen in Germany who studies right-wing extremism and its impacts, summed up this tension. Take the town of Bautzen, known as a rural right-wing stronghold in eastern Germany. "I don't reinforce the right-wing narrative that there's a no-go area in a town like Bautzen," Kiess said, because "that's exactly what they want." What's more, although there is a strong far-right presence, neo-Nazis "are not everywhere." At the same time, he explained, "I would never say to a Black person, 'Why are you afraid? Just go and stand your ground.'"

Different people also experience different Germanys. "They know me, and they see my beard," Koçak explained. Whereas I and other people of color take trains freely around the country, for Koçak, many nonurban areas feel off-limits. "A friend of mine wanted to go to Leipzig, but I told them I don't want to, because there are a lot of areas between Leipzig and Berlin where Nazis live."

YOU MIGHT THINK that a vocal anti-racist fearing to set foot in an area would mean that people of color generally don't live there. This isn't the case. Across the country live a small but noticeable number of asylum seekers, even in rural locales in the east that—both historically and still to this day—have been hostile to outsiders and minorities. Indeed, the German government mandates this distribution, sending asylum seekers to different regions according to quotas calculated by tax receipts and population numbers.

Though support for the far right and related violence can be found around the entire country, it is most severe in eastern states, especially Saxony. In 2018, the Saxon city Chemnitz hosted a far-right mass demonstration that turned violent. In 2015, a similar situation played out in nearby Leipzig. Voters in the east, more than in other regions, tend to support the AfD, which was founded in 2013 by economists and professors as a right-wing, populist response to German-backed bailouts for economically ailing Southern European countries. The AfD has scored its biggest electoral successes in Saxony, where it holds 36 of the 119 seats in the state Parliament, second only to the center-right Christian Democratic Union, or CDU. It is also the second-most-represented party in the eastern German states of Brandenburg, Saxony-Anhalt, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and Thuringia.

While it was founded as a conservative party, by 2016 AfD had made a hard-right turn, taken over by an insurgent internal wing that established a firmly antisemitic, anti-immigrant tone.

Nevertheless, the AfD has aggressively disputed claims that it is fascist or neo-Nazi. And if some of its base is not, many of its members are routinely revealed as neo-Nazis. The party's ascendance almost perfectly coincides with a decline in support for Germany's overtly neo-Nazi party, the National Democratic Party of Germany, or NPD. In 2018, the German publication *Die*

At a youth center in Hoyerswerda in March, asylum seekers shared breakfast and coffee and socialized at a weekly women's group.

Zeit found that at least 27 staffers working for AfD politicians had links to the NPD and other neo-Nazi groups. Last year, AfD lost a legal challenge against the country's intelligence agency, which had decided to monitor communications among AfD members. "We know from German history that far-right extremism didn't just destroy human lives, it destroyed democracy," the head of German intelligence said in 2020. "Far-right extremism and far-right terrorism are currently the biggest danger for democracy in Germany."

The German reunification process was a flash point for the ascent of German neo-Nazis. One of the highest-profile attacks happened in 1991 in Hoyerswerda, a rural town in Saxony, where neo-Nazis invaded buildings where Vietnamese and Mozambican workers were living, an onslaught that eventually escalated into a full riot. In the middle of the night, 230 foreigners had to be bused to a nearby army base for their safety. Violence to that degree hasn't recurred in Hoyerswerda since 1991, but in 2006 the youth wing of the NPD held a commemorative demonstration.

Neo-Nazis carried out other attacks across the country at around the same time as the Hoyerswerda riots, and the German government's reaction was troubling. It "wasn't to protect these refugees," said Dave Schmidtke, the spokesperson for Sächsischer Flüchtlingsrat e.V., or Saxon Refugee Council, an NGO that advocates for refugees and asylum seekers in Saxony. The government's primary concern during that era, in Schmidtke's view, was that refugees were endangering "the social peace." So, it decided, "we have to get rid of these refugees." Following World War II, West Germany's stated policy was to grant asylum widely and, by contemporary standards, to welcome immigrants. After reunification, the same policy was applied in the East, which did not take kindly to the change. In 1993, asylum restrictions became significantly stricter, the result of an amendment to Germany's Basic Law that limited who is eligible.

After 2015, when refugees fleeing Syria arrived en masse in Europe, a new wave of attacks rippled across Germany. In 2016, a mob went after refugees in Bautzen. In 2019, a politician who

The largest of three refugee shelters in Hoyerswerda houses more than 300 people, who share showers, toilets, and kitchens on each floor.

spoke out against the anti-immigrant far right was assassinated by a right-wing extremist. And in 2020, a far-right extremist went on a shooting spree that killed 11 people in the western German town of Hanau.

I **WANTED TO SEE** one of the far-right enclaves in the east for myself, to get a better sense of the difficulty immigrants face there. Two people had killed themselves in recent months because they had no prospect of staying in Germany, Schmidtke told me from the driver's seat of a hatchback rental car. They were going to be sent back to war zones. We were on our way to Hoyerswerda, where the infamous 1991 attack on Vietnamese and Mozambican workers occurred, and which today is home to a small refugee camp. The verdant trees and rolling grassy hills we passed looked identical to the interior of the mid-Atlantic near Appalachia, where Virginia bleeds into West Virginia. Symmetrically, this German state, one ocean and several countries over, is facing economic and deindustrialization problems similar to those that have ravaged Appalachia. Unlike Appalachia, the area has become a hub for neo-Nazis.

When Hoyerswerda officials announced plans to open refugee housing in 2014, a local preacher told *Der Spiegel* that the camp would be a chance to "show Hoyerswerda's better face," and attributed the violence decades before to the "considerable turmoil after the Berlin Wall fell." Yet poor treatment of foreigners in the town hasn't gone away. It's just taken a different form. Asylum seekers still face abuse from racists in the general population. But, perhaps more insidiously, they also suffer abuse from the government.

Schmidtke was on his way to a weekly meeting for female asylum seekers who had been placed in Hoyerswerda. Many, Schmidtke told me, had been stuck in asylum purgatory, where they lived in what he referred to as a "camp"—crowded, dorm-style living quarters in which multiple families are packed on each floor, all sharing limited bathrooms, kitchen, and general living space. The recurring meeting was set up by a local civil organization as a space for the women to gather with one another, and sometimes to speak with local volunteers and social workers such as Schmidtke. But it was as much a refuge for the women away from their cramped living quarters, a place to commiserate over coffee and pastries.

Hoyerswerda is not particularly picturesque—there is little charming Bavarian architecture and few of the quaint old churches we usually associate with small German towns. True to East German Soviet form, the buildings tend to be simple, without ornate facades. They are designed for efficiency. After driving through the edge of town, we arrived at an old, run-down Soviet-era youth center.

Headed into that day, I'd worried that the refugees might be apprehensive about talking to a journalist, out of fear of jeopardizing their asylum status. To a degree, they were—the names by which I refer to them here are pseudonyms—but most were eager, and in some cases desperate, for the chance to speak, in the hopes that someone out there might be able to do something to make their lives less harsh.

Among the two dozen or so women at the meeting, two felt comfortable enough with their English to speak to me: Isha from Pakistan and Samina from India. Both had lived in the camp for years, and their asylum status had been stuck in indefinite limbo for more than half a decade. Isha recalled the hostility she faced in Hoyerswerda before she even made it inside the camp. She wasn't sure where to get off the bus and asked the driver if he could help. He told her to "speak Deutsch" and get her kids off his bus.

Things didn't improve much inside the camp. "My kids say to me, 'Mama, our life is like a punishment,'" Isha told me. "We live like prisoners." She and her children share a single room, which she and the other asylum seekers refer to as the "*Heim*," German for home. The camp is a former school that was converted into refugee housing in 2014, the first "refugee hostel" (as *Der Spiegel* termed it) in Hoyerswerda since the attacks in 1991.

Though Isha and Samina said that they felt on edge around Germans in Hoyerswerda—people are often cold, and sometimes outright antagonistic—the bulk of their tribulations has come from Saxony's government. Indeed, aspects of the asylum process

In 2021, far-right crimes in Germany reached a record high of 24,000; attacks on refugee shelters increased by 73 percent between 2021 and 2022.

that Schmidtke, Isha, and Samina recounted sounded more like a sadist's fantasy vision of a Kafkaesque bureaucracy than rational immigration policy. While most people in the camp are stuck in asylum limbo—not deported but also not granted residency status or sometimes even the ability to leave—a few occasionally choose another option: the hardship commission. But this path is like making a double-or-nothing bet with your immigration status. The hardship commission is widely considered a last hope for appeal. The Ministry of the Interior and Sports of Lower Saxony found that, in its state, the rejection rate for hardship cases averaged 43 percent between 2016 and 2020. It's possible this number is higher in states, such as Saxony, that are more hostile to immigrants.

For those who opt out of the hardship commission route, their passport becomes effectively meaningless. Asylum seekers whose applications are denied, but for whom deportation is not feasible, receive a state-issued document commonly known as a *Duldung*, or tolerated stay.

The ID has a large red line across it signifying "a temporary suspension of deportation," which means, Samina explained, that while its holders get to stay in Germany, they can't leave Saxony. Isha pulled hers out to show me.

A psychologist had told Isha that one of her kids was experiencing psychological problems, exacerbated by the cramped quarters and complete lack of privacy. Samina said that she believes almost half of the population in the camp is dealing with such problems. While I couldn't verify this number, a 2005 study on Iraqi asylum seekers in the Netherlands suggests that migrants in a "long asylum procedure," like those in the Hoyerswerda campus, experience significant negative mental health outcomes.

A 2017 paper—straightforwardly titled "'It's Like Fighting for Survival': How Rejected Black African Asylum Seekers Experience Living Conditions in an Eastern German State"—found that eastern Germany consistently forces refugees to endure abysmal accommodations. Twelve Black Africans living in refugee accommodations in an unspecified eastern state described similar situations to the Hoyerswerda camp: stuck in their camps for years at a time, in cramped, unsanitary living quarters, sharing a single room with as many as six others and sharing a stove and a single bathroom with many more.

Isha's husband was not granted the same asylum-seeking status she was and was barred from entering the country. He told her and the kids to go without him. "They always talk about father. 'Mama, when will Papa come here?'" For most of our conversation, Isha had been frustrated but resolute. But an hour into talking, she started to cry. "My husband has applied to come here so many times, but they always reject, reject, reject. My kids are big now. So much time has passed," she said, stopping to sniffle and catch her breath. "I only have hope."

Isha was only one of multiple women who broke down in front of me as they recounted their time at the camp. After I spoke with her and Samina, a Somali asylum seeker approached me. She didn't speak English but was undeterred. Schmidtke was busy, so I pulled up Google Translate on my phone, translated "What do you want to talk about?" into Somalian, and handed it to her.

"I am a single mother. I have a little boy here who is sick," the translation of Somalian read when she handed it back. "I have diabetes and high blood pressure." Typing messages in Google Translate was a strained way to hold a conversation, but we continued for almost an hour. She was facing the same problems as Samina and Isha: cramped quarters and declining health. At times, the conversation was difficult to follow, and I told her that, as a foreign journalist, I could basically do nothing to help her, as much as I wanted to in that moment. But she kept typing messages to me, desperately and persistently, tearing up as she clicked at my phone.

As Schmidtke and I got up to leave, she pleaded with him for help in German. Later, in the car on the way back, he told me that she had said she might kill herself if things didn't get better soon. One of the two suicides Schmidtke had told me about was a 53-year-old Pakistani man who was denied both asylum and the ability to return to Pakistan as his health deteriorated. He jumped from a window in the building.

"You have a hard job," I said to Schmidtke as we walked out of the center.

"I don't allow myself to think that, because a lot of people actually have to live it," he said. "When I go to the camp, and it smells and is loud, I know that I'm just there for a couple of hours. I don't have to live like they do." Schmidtke paused for a second to consider what he'd said. It was hard, he went on, not to be able to help people more. "That's why a lot of people quit this job after a couple of years."

THE CONDITIONS IN Saxony aren't just the result of bureaucracy. Schmidtke and other activists and experts believe that they're linked to the ascent of the far right and the racism that's endemic in eastern Germany. Since the Berlin Wall fell, far-right attacks and the rise of far-right parties that court neo-Nazis have coincided with increasingly hostile immigration policy. With the exception of Berlin, eastern states have a considerably lower population of Germans with a migrant background than the rest of the country.

Ferat Koçak showed a photo he'd taken on his phone of an AfD rally in Berlin in October 2022.

Migrants who do end up in eastern Germany often suffer under harsher conditions than those in the west. This is the result of policy decisions that far-right local governments make, but can also be chalked up to centrist parties trying to stave off right-wing insurgent challenges—as well as bureaucrats who may harbor far-right-wing sympathies. As Penny Bochum observed in her 2020 book on the rise of the AfD, *We Are the People*, when Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer became leader of the centrist party the Christian Democratic Union after barely beating a far-right opponent in 2018, she purposefully made overtures to the right, calling for "increased security on EU borders—as well as measures to 'make Islam compatible with the European way of life.'" In 2021, Kramp-Karrenbauer stepped down as leader of the CDU, in protest of the party voting with the AfD in Thuringia. But other centrist party leaders have tried to make even more aggressive anti-immigration, Islamophobic overtures.

Schmidtke said that he and his peers at other NGOs believe immigration officers in Saxony are intentionally looking for mistakes in order to reject asylum cases. Officials "have space for individual decisions," he explained, which they can use to make life harder for refugees if they're so inclined. And if a refugee or asylum seeker is led astray, there's little opportunity for recourse. Schmidtke recalled speaking with a Nigerian immigrant who was told by an immigration officer—inaccurately—that he had no shot at asylum, and "should get back to Nigeria as fast as possible." Data suggests Schmidtke's story isn't just a one-off anecdote. In eastern German cities and towns, including Dresden and Chemnitz, approval of asylum requests is significantly lower than the nation's average.

In some cases, the discrimination is even more explicit. Robert Kusche, the managing director of RAA Sachsen e.V., a nonprofit group focused on tracking the rise of right-wing extremism in Saxony, explained that he's frequently observed immigration officials singling out minorities. Dresden, where his nonprofit is based, sits on a major railroad route for refugees coming out of Ukraine. On the trains, Kusche said, police usually check only the documentation of Black people, "despite the fact that there are a lot of other refugees on the train," not least Ukrainians fleeing the war.

Since the Berlin Wall fell, far-right attacks and the rise of far-right parties that court neo-Nazis have coincided with increasingly hostile immigration policy.

Asylum seekers who do stay in Germany are met with increasingly difficult conditions. In response to a 2019 amendment that extended the period (from 15 to 18 months) during which asylum seekers were prevented from accessing health care except in instances of "acute diseases or pain," several states enacted policies to reduce barriers to asylum seekers' access to health care. The eastern states of Saxony and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, however, do not provide this kind of carve-out.

In a way, the asylum seekers I met had won an immigration lottery by being allowed into Germany in the first place. But even though this might have been true on paper, those I spoke to didn't feel lucky. "It was not a good decision to come here," Isha told me, crying. Still, she felt she had no choice. "I have nothing in Pakistan. How can I go back?"

IN 2018, WHEN THE AfD held a rally in Berlin, the party's 5,000 supporters were drowned out by 25,000 counterprotesters. People with whom I spoke in Germany expected an AfD rally scheduled for the first weekend in October last year to go similarly.

But something a little different came to pass. For the first time since the AfD's rise over the last 10 years, supporters in Berlin outnumbered counterprotesters. Koçak and I were both at the rally but didn't see each other. He was delivering speeches at counterprotests; I observed near the Reichstag, Germany's Parliament building, where AfD supporters gathered before marching through the city. Berlin police had set up barriers to keep counterprotesters from entering the AfD protest area, a strategy that seemed to bank on Germans' willingness to be compliant—I was let in with only the scrutiny of a small glance and no check of my journalist credentials.

At the rally, thousands of AfD supporters looked on at a small stage just in front of the Reichstag. German flags stuck up above the crowd. A smaller number of people waved flags for the AfD stronghold states of Thuringia and Saxony. A noticeable number also held up Russian flags. Less fashionable and more conventional than typical Berliners, the people in the crowd looked something like those I was used to seeing in suburban Texas.

I wandered around trying to speak to rallygoers, but was met with a dour and suspicious "*Nein*" every time I asked if they spoke English and were willing to answer questions—unusual for Berlin, where more than half the population speaks English, often fluently. I was the only person of color I could see as I walked from group to group, though Koçak later told me he was surprised to see a few people of color in the part of the rally where he was.

Although everyone I tried to speak with was nice enough besides their terseness, after 20 minutes, my self-preservation instinct kicked in. I stuck out like a sore thumb. I headed to a back corner of the rally, where some other journalists I knew had stationed themselves.

"The speaker just told the crowd to not attack journalists," said Kate Brady, a Berlin-based reporter who now works for *The Washington Post*, after I found my way to her and a mutual friend. As I learned later, a German journalist tweeted that a camera team had been attacked at the rally and some of their equipment damaged. Unaware of that violence at the moment, Brady, fluent in German, translated the broad strokes of the speeches, in which AfD party leaders riffed about how immigrants were responsible for many of Germany's problems and demanded that Germany lift sanctions on Russia to bring the surging price of energy down. Members of Young Alternative—the youth wing of the AfD—were in attendance.

During the miles-long march afterward, police, some of whom had been brought in from other states to support Berlin's force, helped make sure that every possible entry point was blocked off by a security checkpoint. As we walked, the scene grew surreal. Unter den Linden, an enormous, tree-lined boulevard that leads to the Brandenburg Gate—the eighteenth-century monument that abutted the Berlin Wall during the Cold War and became a symbol of unity and a tourist destination after—was completely closed off. For more than a quarter-mile, both sides of the multilane street were AfD territory. AfD propaganda littered the ground. AfD supporters sat on café patios wearing small AfD hearts emblazoned with one of the party's slogans, UNSER LAND ZUERST!: Our country first.

A week later, when Koçak and I talked about the rally, he sounded tired. They had been fighting for years, and the momentum that had brought 25,000 counterprotesters to the AfD's last Berlin rally, in 2018, was flagging. "The problem was not 10,000 people on the streets for the AfD," he explained. "The problem was that ... there were only 2,000 anti-fascists. That is not enough." Koçak was concerned that the numbers suggested that AfD was on its way to being accepted as normal—not supported by the vast majority of Berliners, but nevertheless understood as an inevitable political reality. "If the left does not find answers and will not mobilize protests on the streets, then the AfD will get stronger," Koçak said. "We are in a moment of change. It's an economically hard time, like it was in the 1930s. And in Germany we have this saying, *'Geschichte wiederholt sich'*": History repeats itself. TNR

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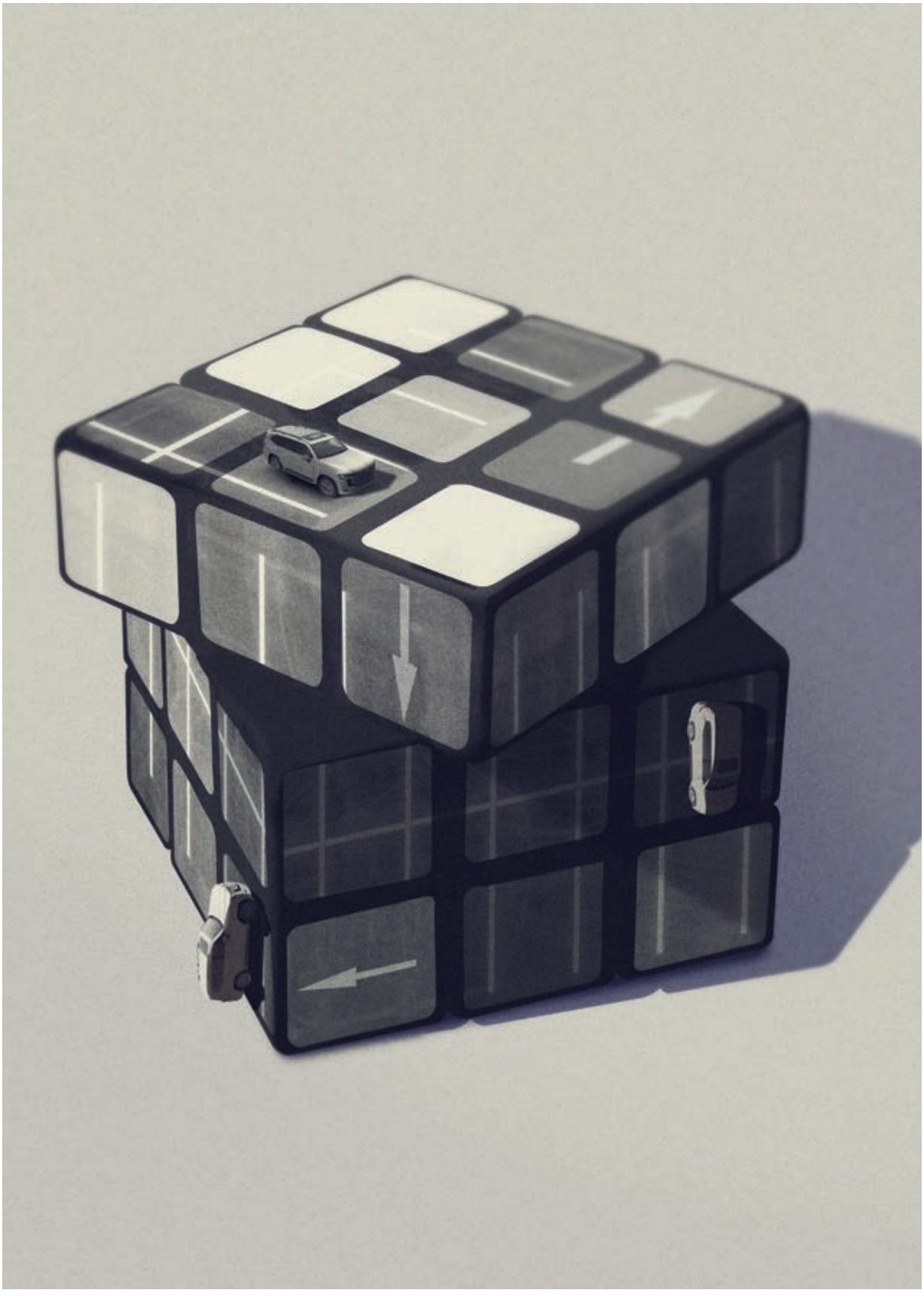

ILLUSTRATION BY NICOLÁS ORTEGA

The Waste Land

America's addiction to parking and the polluted, monotonous world it made

By Max Holleran

ON FEBRUARY 20, 1994, two men got into a dispute while driving on I-95 in Massachusetts. When they both pulled over, one of them—a 54-year-old church deacon, 101st Airborne veteran, and high school valedictorian—retrieved a crossbow from his trunk and shot the other man dead with a metal-tipped arrow. The incident is trotted out in high school civics classes and driver's education courses as a notorious example of road rage, but it is far from unique. Driving makes people livid, and they often attack each other in the process of getting where they need to go. Particularly in the United States, where frustrated motorists sick of traffic and breathing other people's exhaust often have a pistol tucked under their seat or stashed away in their glove box, driving can be a perilous activity.

But road rage is far from the main danger: Our big, heavy vehicles go too fast, for too many miles. Drivers routinely smash into shop windows, other cars, and pedestrians. Globally, 1,350,000 are killed each year in cars, but we insist on calling these events accidents: the unavoidable cost of modern mobility. While Americans admonish drunk driving, texting behind the wheel, and carelessness, they and their lawmakers have little to say about why the entire landscape is made for cars and not people. The massive militaristic boxes we drive are both a danger in crashes as well as a major source of climate change. But convincing people to get out of them—even just for a stroll to the corner store—is viewed as dangerous, foolhardy, and maybe even un-American.

Nothing is accidental about our car-dominated streetscapes or the places we store cars. Two new books explore how we got to this point, particularly in the United States, where the space used up by roads and parking is the size of West Virginia, and the average driver is behind the wheel for 39 miles per day. In *Carmageddon: How Cars Make Life Worse and What to Do About It*, Daniel Knowles explores fundamental questions about sprawl, car culture, and pedestrian deaths, showing that "we have gotten so used to the domination of cars that we have forgotten how unpleasant the consequences are." Henry Grabar analyzes parking in *Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World*, taking a topic so quotidian that, when explored with his masterful knowledge of urban history, it becomes almost metaphysical. Unlike previous books that look to solutions such as traffic calming, smart garages, and congestion pricing, Knowles's and Grabar's are more radical: The authors are millennials who did not grow up in the previous two generations enamored with car culture, and their solutions veer toward private vehicle abolitionism.

Both authors stress that Americans—and to some extent everyone else in the world—have allowed cars to dominate their lives. We drive them incessantly, and hardly ever in the mountain roads of BMW commercials, but rather in the chocka-block midday traffic of endless overpasses and interchanges that have made our landscapes into a wasteland of nonporous asphalt. Our addiction to quick and free parking has turned our cities into vast expanses of garages and tarmac that are unsightly and dangerous to walk across. The popularity of SUVs has completely canceled out new gas efficiency standards, making the spew of exhaust coming from cities just as copious as it was a decade ago. Most worryingly, we have become a society of people used to single-passenger vehicles. We regulate the space around us completely, not compromising with others. When we do interact with other people, it is to lean on the horn and shout expletives in their direction. Covid isolation made this worse: Even with fewer people driving, 2021 saw the biggest jump in traffic deaths ever recorded. On the road, we are our worst selves, and, given the state of the country, it seems this behavior is frequently spilling over into public life writ large.

THE AMERICAN LOVE affair with cars began when they were still a luxury item in the early twentieth century, and traffic laws were patchy at best. But car culture came into its own after World War II. Cars were an essential aspect of the military-industrial complex, with automakers producing one-fifth of all combat material during the war. They have puttered along on Cold War path dependency since then. The mass adaptation to cars came with the shift back to peacetime civilian production in the 1950s. The creation of federal highways with the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956 was the most expensive federal infrastructure project in U.S. history: The argument for them was that large roads could move troops in the event of a Soviet attack, but, given their convenient stopping points in prime suburban locations, the highways looked a lot like federal subsidies for private residential developers.

The highways were essential to the white flight of the postwar decades. As Knowles observes, "the fact that white people could afford cars, and most Black people could not, made it possible for the car to be used to enforce segregation indirectly, at a time when the Civil Rights Act was making it harder for it to be enforced directly." Through

massive investment in highways, the federal government encouraged suburbanization that occurred exactly when Americans were meant to be integrating schools, housing, and the workforce. Inner-city neighborhoods that were harder to access by cars were consistently devalued, with less investment in parks and recreation and a shrinking tax base to support public schools.

By the time gentrification began in earnest in the 1990s, transit systems in densely populated urban neighborhoods largely remained underfunded. Cars park in the bus lane, while subway construction takes decades to complete and is subject to capricious voter bond referendums. Even pop songs chastise nondrivers. ("Hangin' out the passenger side / Of his best friend's ride.") The popular sentiment is that those without a car have failed in life. People cycling to their jobs on the side of highways, or waiting for the train in the cold, or pedestrians walking on streets without sidewalks are punished for being poor. If they worked harder, they would have a car; until then, this reasoning holds, the danger and discomfort they endure is their comeuppance for fecklessness.

The material effects of all these cars are shocking: Drivers in Texas alone account for 0.5% of all global CO_2 emissions—which is more than all of Nigeria. Metropolitan Houston has 30 parking spaces for each of its over six million residents, using a land area nearly 10 times the size of Paris. All that parking has not made Houston a thriving city: It has exacerbated the city's low-lying geography and stymied rain drainage, creating a giant paved basin that floods regularly, costing billions of dollars.

Knowles, a British reporter based in Chicago, is pretty frank about his distaste for American car culture. In a chapter he spends at a monster truck rally, he remarks that a Chevy Suburban "looks like something your eight-year-old son might design on Roblox: no curves at all, just a giant metal box." He is frequently shocked by the harms that people have accepted for the sake of their cherished cars. Were driving not so wrapped up in the national dream of freedom and independence, Knowles suggests, Americans would have declared it an epidemiological emergency and set up a commission dedicated to its demise.

Since the early 2000s, defensive driving increasingly means trading up to larger vehicles to dominate the road. This shift was partly the result of bad policy: SUVs were not taxed as luxury cars despite their high prices, because they are for both "sport" and "utility." Never mind the fact that one would be hard-pressed to find anyone hauling things with their $120,000 Lexus LX 600. Now, we create enormous roads because average suburbanites drive luxury tanks. Ford has nearly stopped producing cars in North America to focus on SUVs and trucks. This popularity touches on two trends. First, there is the self-delusion of the suburban white-collar workers who imagine they need a big car for all the "big jobs" they never quite get around to. And then there is the bandwagon effect: No one wants to be cruising a highway in a Fiat 500, feeling vulnerable as everyone else lords above them in Tahoes, Expeditions, and Escalades.

Knowles draws on current research to show that SUVs are far more deadly than sedans because local governments allow them to travel too fast on city streets, and because they are heavier and higher off the ground. This means that when they hit a pedestrian, they smash into that person's vital organs rather than their legs, often killing them instantly. SUVs are particularly dangerous in cases of "rat running": when people speed down local streets in order to avoid backed-up highways, turning the local laneway into a scene from *Mad Max*.

The mainstream political solution to this plethora of dangers is, of course, more cars: in this case, electric vehicles and self-driving technology. Deploying a Britishism, Knowles calls these predictions of a brighter future "bionic duckweed," shorthand for technology that overpromises and is premised on faulty science. In fact, electric vehicles are only as clean as their power source, which in many places means coal-burning plants that are dirtier than gasoline or even diesel. While more energy may come from renewable sources, it is hard to see that on the horizon. Likewise, autonomous vehicles are also an environmental threat: They could encourage people to live outside cities and nap during a two-hour commute, or send out their car to do errands while they watch TV on the couch. Sure, the communication between multiple vehicles' self-driving systems may—or may not—reduce reckless driving and fatalities, but it could also carpet cities with a constant traffic jam.

Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World
by Henry Grabar
Penguin Press,
368 pp., $30.00

Carmageddon: How Cars Make Life Worse and What to Do About It
by Daniel Knowles
Abrams Press,
256 pp., $28.00

THERE HAVE BEEN many well-popularized recent books on cars and their environmental impact. Their proposed solution—less driving—will be engineered through taxes, more mass transit, and higher-density neighborhoods. But what if the solution is not to attack cars but to make it very hard to store them? Writing a book about parking, particularly parking as a major explanatory factor for all of urbanization, is a brave move. As Henry Grabar, a noted urbanist and writer for Slate, acknowledges: "if driving is freedom," then "parking is its cramped, contested partner, driving's ill-tempered brother, the thing you never see on television because it is simultaneously too boring and too irritating."

In taking on this subject, Grabar makes a powerful statement about cities: For all our idealization of architects and cautionary tales about all-powerful planners like Robert Moses, most things get built with little thought and by nonprofessionals. The results are cities dominated by surface-level parking that is an eyesore, economically unproductive, and demoralizing to constantly traverse.

Grabar's broadside against parking is inspired by another book: *The High Cost of Free Parking*, a treatise on urban economics written in 2005 by the UCLA professor Donald Shoup. This book is so popular among transit activists that Grabar calls them *Shoupistas* for their veneration of the now-retired planning professor. Adherents to Shoup's philosophy make two simple points: that the economic costs of parking are huge, and that parking minimums for residential and commercial buildings

encourage people to drive more because they know they will always have a space.

Channeling these ideas, Grabar explores a number of incidents where local parking regulations stymied important projects, particularly the creation of affordable housing in places with dire shortages. Ginger Hitzke, an affordable housing developer in Solana Beach, California, attempted to rehouse people displaced by the demolition of a slumlord's apartments in the 1990s. But the town was ambivalent about her project location, because it was to be built on a municipal parking lot—even though she planned to construct a 53-space underground garage at great expense. Parking was the main obstacle to planning approval, used as a NIMBYistic cudgel first by the city, then by local homeowners who claimed in a private lawsuit that the land should remain surface-level parking forever. After over seven years and winning planning permission and the lawsuit, Hitzke ran out of funds and gave up on the project. Despite the fact that the "intended inhabitants … were one-time neighbors, real people with faces and names" who had waited for the project for 30 years, the barriers proved too great. Grabar shows how parking inhibits the production of new homes, creating the sad situation in which by "square footage, there is more housing for each car in the United States than there is housing for each person," and more three-car garages are built than one-bedroom apartments each year.

Parking is, in fact, often downright sinister. Until the advent of automated ticket machines, many garages were controlled by the mafia. Grabar takes us on a tour of parking's underbelly, including the Philadelphia airport where attendants collected between $3 million and $7 million in cash a year in the 1990s by underreporting long-stay parking. Owning parking was a good way to launder money and cheaply get a piece of downtown real estate to develop later. Parking was a tough business, and it has been routinely made macho in popular culture. Garages are unloved parts of the urban landscape, and they produce an unsettling feeling when inside. Deep Throat set up his meeting with Bob Woodward in one, and Lee Harvey Oswald was murdered in the subterranean garage of the Dallas Police Headquarters. Yet, despite the suspicion that garages are where bad things happen, most cities want to build more of them rather than phase them out.

In contrast, parking enforcement is feminized. In New York City, where Grabar grew up, he observes that the original meter enforcers were all women and were briefly fetishized (à la "Lovely Rita" in the U.K.) before being despised. In 1987, an attendant named Ana Russi was decorated with the Woman of the Year Award by Mayor Ed Koch even after she told the mayor's limo driver to leave an illegal spot. For Puerto Rican New Yorkers like Russi, being a "meter maid" was a foothold into stable, well-paid public service despite constant harassment and even physical assaults. Today, many New York City parking enforcers are Bangladeshi immigrants. Despite new laws that carry special penalties for attacking meter readers, they are routinely harassed. The hatred of parking enforcement is socially accepted and even joked about with more than a whiff of casual misogyny. In the film *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, the characters all want to kill one another, but they unite in repeatedly knocking out a traffic warden because, apparently, no matter what their differences, Londoners want to hit parking enforcers.

The story of parking is largely a story of unintended consequences and subsequent regrets. One of the better known and vividly told stories in Grabar's book is of the shopping mall designer Victor Gruen, a Viennese Jew and socialist, who fled Austria after the Nazi occupation in 1938. Gruen envisioned the mall not as a triumph of consumerism, but as a twentieth-century agora where people could become pedestrians again, enjoying the company of others in public space. Yet malls were not built within walking distance from most people's homes; they had to drive to visit them, and driving meant parking. Gruen was appalled by his own creation—particularly the seas of parking around malls that emphasize how contrived a vision of pedestrianism and public space they are. While malls are losing popularity in the United States, their replacement may be no lovelier. Advocates of walkable "New Urbanism" hope for neighborhoods where cars are optional, but the reality in most cities is that malls are giving way to all-in-one box stores, online shopping, and grab-and-go dollar shops. The future of consumerism is not the food court by the indoor fountain but Uber Eats consumed in solitude while opening Amazon packages.

As Grabar surveys the proliferation of shopping malls, strip malls, garages, and valuable real estate demolished for surface-level parking, he asks the very sensible question about American cities: "Dude, where's my town?" A Buffalo, New York, Chamber of Commerce member, surveying the damages of urban renewal, remarked that "so many buildings had been demolished it looked like the city was paving the way not for cars to park but for airplanes to land." Indeed, parking is a powerful lens through which to understand architectural modernism: The old city was destroyed not for the human but for their car. People were left exposed by the side of massive highways, vulnerable to high-velocity steel objects, and, all along the way, we were told this was the dream of the good life, and all the sacrifices were worth it in order to drive down the parkway with the wind in our hair.

BOOKS ABOUT DRIVING tend to serve two policy and public opinion purposes: They try to show that the American landscape—dominated by roads, cars, and parking—did not have to be this way, and they serve as a cautionary tale to decision-makers in the developing world. The suburban home and the big SUV that goes with it are quintessential signs of the good life in many countries of the global south. North American urbanists are in the difficult position of lecturing developers, government officials, and planners in India, China, Nigeria, Egypt, and many other countries, in effect saying: "This may look nice, but you will regret it, not to mention it's bad for all of us in terms of carbon emissions."

At this point, the dream of mobility without cars is elusive. Europeans have created a viable model in cities like Amsterdam and Copenhagen, where protected bike lanes and trams create safer streets that are more pleasant for strolling, but these places are minuscule on a global scale. *Carmageddon* and *Paved Paradise* make one thing clear: The "carrots" of nice bike lanes and sparkling new tram lines are not enough. Governments will need to deploy the "sticks" of gasoline taxes, private vehicle bans in urban areas, and dynamically priced parking in order to decrease car use. If they do not, Americans, and increasingly the rest of the world, will keep spending 250 hours a year commuting through traffic while telling themselves they are living the dream of the open road. TNR

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ILLUSTRATION BY DAN PAGE

One Pirate, One Vote

Did outlaws develop radical forms of democracy on the high seas?

FENCING BOOTY IS the most underappreciated problem of historical pirate logistics. Myths and stories about "going on the account" (as high-seas piracy was known during its late–seventeenth- and early–eighteenth-century golden age) have always played up the dramas of plunder and pursuit, the terror struck into the hearts of merchant sailors upon sighting black flags on the horizon, the unwashed roughneck crews and their ruthless captains. They are tales of swashbuckling, not bookkeeping. But what was a pirate boss to do, upon seizing a Spanish galleon and filling his ship's hold to the brim with jewels and silks and gold doubloons? Liquidity was a challenge for pirates, too, since massive hauls of precious goods were not so easily converted into cash. Unless they were fortunate enough to know a corrupt colonial official willing to look the other way, they relied on buccaneer outposts beyond the reach of imperial states where ships could be resupplied, crew members could come and go, and rare treasures could be laundered—no questions asked.

By Ian Beacock

Madagascar was such a place. Around the year 1700, it became an essential waypoint for pirates leaving the Caribbean to prey on the booming shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean. In the secluded harbors of its northeastern coast, pirates founded towns like Ambonavola and Sainte-Marie. With as many as a thousand temporary residents at any given moment, and no permanent government, these settlements were part of an informal archipelago of pirate infrastructure that stretched from the West Indies to East Asia. According to David Graeber's puckish, posthumous book, *Pirate Enlightenment*, they were also hothouses of political imagination and freedom. Encounters among pirates and local Malagasy people were good for business, but they also led to radical forms of democratic rule and "the first stirrings of Enlightenment political thought," so many leagues from Paris or Königsberg. These claims are vintage Graeber: exciting if true, probably right in spirit even if they run further than the evidence allows, deliberately irritating to specialists, and characterized by an anarchist's delight in the world-making power of ordinary people.

Graeber, who died in 2020 at the age of 59, was an anthropologist and social theorist of the highest caliber. He was also a fierce anti-globalization activist who found in the Occupy movement a cause that suited his distaste for inequality and authority. *Pirate Enlightenment* is fired by the same rebellious temper. With arresting certainty, it claims that a bold democratic experiment flowered in eighteenth-century Madagascar, thus unraveling tales many times told about how Europeans reinvented democracy and built the modern world first, best, and by themselves.

But this exact provocation—and whether one is convinced by it—is not the main attraction of the book, and has little to do with the reasons we're likely to revisit *Pirate Enlightenment* in years to come, or the nature of its lasting treasure. It will linger because it shines so splendidly with what mattered most to Graeber, and why he mattered to us: an uncommon intellectual style that was mischievous and generous and wildly ambitious yet always so inviting, a spirit he applied to many-thousand–year historical anthropologies of debt and inequality, the rise of "bullshit jobs," and the shadow allure of bureaucracy. (His last great instigation was the modestly titled *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*.) Even more, the book clarifies Graeber's historical vision, his view of why the past matters and how people should write about it. *Pirate Enlightenment* is his best effort to show us how we might use history not for knowledge or even justice, but for freedom.

BARNABY SLUSH WAS a Royal Navy cook who served aboard HMS *Lyme* around the turn of the eighteenth century. He explained in 1709, no doubt thrilling and disturbing English readers, that "Pyrates and Buccaneers" were "Princes" to other sailors—because they treated one another as democratic equals. "Great robbers as they are to all besides," Slush said, pirates "are precisely just among themselves." Even a heartless captain, "bold as he is in all other Attempts … dares not offer to infringe the common laws of Equity" upheld by his crew.

At least since the infamous dread pirate Captain Flint haunted the pages of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, pirate vessels have been treated in the popular imagination as floating dictatorships. But this is more propaganda than truth. It was on board imperial navy ships, in fact, that discipline was arbitrarily brutal and officers behaved like tyrants with their working-class subordinates. Many pirates were ex-sailors. Having risked their lives and souls by mutinying against this kind of despotism, they were loath to re-create it. Their death warrants written, freedom was the highest prize in the time that remained.

Pirates were deliberately "masterless men," the historian Marcus Rediker has argued, and ruled themselves accordingly. Captains could issue orders in the heat of battle or during a chase, but otherwise their power was limited. Elected by majority vote, they could also be removed. Captains participated in crew assemblies and ship councils on the same footing as everyone else. And they shared power with a quartermaster who distributed resources, resolved disputes, and represented the crew. For one eighteenth-century observer, this role was an "Imitation of the Roman Tribune of the People." Another saw the quartermaster as the ship's prime minister. Beyond captain and quartermaster, pirates were rankless. The 1724 classic *A General History of the Pyrates*, possibly written by Daniel Defoe, detailed that pirates permit a man "to be Captain, on Condition, that they may be Captain over him." This was democratic sovereignty distilled, like sugarcane into rum.

It was in the 1690s, Graeber suggests, that this "rough-and-ready egalitarianism" made its way ashore in Madagascar. Pirates established semipermanent outposts and brought with them the same collectivistic ethos they practiced at sea. The founding fathers were just as underworldly as one expects. Adam Baldridge, an ex-pirate wanted for murder in Jamaica, established Sainte-Marie: a buccaneer village that appears to have flourished anarchically until Baldridge (in hock to a sleazy New York merchant) sought to enslave his Malagasy allies, and local chiefs destroyed the settlement in retaliation. Afterward, it was the town of Ambonavola, resurrected on pirate foundations by the Bermudan ex–Royal Navy sailor Nathaniel North, that became Madagascar's top raider outpost. In Graeber's account, the pirates prospered for three reasons: They had the world's most luxurious goods to trade, they weren't interested in territorial conquest or colonization, and they happily integrated their lives with those of local women and men, having cut themselves entirely loose from their homelands by going on the account.

Word of these Madagascar pirate realms traveled, their existence transmuted into myths. In the early 1700s, rumors began circulating in Europe that the world's most abominable pirate, Henry Avery, was building a full-blown pirate kingdom in the Indian Ocean with his wife, the kidnapped daughter of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Mysterious envoys even began arriving at European courts, allegedly representing this powerful nonexistent state and its tens of thousands of pirates. (Sweden signed treaties and readied an embassy before realizing that it was a scam.) Even more resonant was the legend of Libertalia, an egalitarian paradise where working pirates lived free lives without slavery or coercion or even property. There's no evidence either of these political entities ever literally existed. But something at least as interesting did.

ENTER THE BETSIMISARAKA Confederation, a sprawling, amorphous Malagasy political entity that controlled about 700 kilometers of coastline and was brought into being in the 1710s. Its founding king was Ratsimilaho, thought at the time to have been the son of an English pirate and a Malagasy mother. Western historians of the region have apparently long seen the confederation as a weak state and failed kingdom, while archaeologists have come up empty in their search for

physical evidence of centralized authority. Graeber suggests that this is a deep misreading of what was actually an alternate kind of state, one that relied on a figurehead monarch to mask a radically decentralized and even democratic social order. Although the evidentiary record is sparse and contradictory, Graeber wants readers to see the confederation as an imaginative "proto-Enlightenment political experiment" that was able to combine pirate democracy with local traditions of egalitarianism and debate.

At the heart of Malagasy decision-making in the age of the Betsimisaraka Confederation were *kabary*, deliberative assemblies in which men and women sought consensus around issues that affected entire communities. *Kabary* appear to have been held within villages, among clans, and even regionally. Considered alongside more informal local preferences for vigorous discussion, the *kabary* suggest to Graeber that Malagasy society was marked by the same kind of freewheeling horizontal sociability so often claimed by Europeans as the fuel of their own Enlightenment. When these Malagasy traditions collided with pirate egalitarianism, shared through conversation and commercial exchange, the confederation was born. In Graeber's telling, it was nothing less than a radical experiment in making "a decentralized grassroots democracy without any developed system of social rank," a great accomplishment that outstripped anything achieved by European rulers or philosophes.

NARRATING DEMOCRACY'S MODERN history through the contributions of regular people around the world, rather than the writing of Western intellectual elites, was an intellectual project that Graeber pursued throughout his career. "Rather than seeing Indian, or Malagasy, or Tswana, or Maya claims to being part of an inherently democratic tradition as an attempt to ape the West," he argued in 2007, "it seems to me we are looking at different aspects of the same planetary process." What had really occurred in the modern period, Graeber thought, was not a game of colonial catch-up to Western progress but "a crystallization of longstanding democratic practices in the formation of a global system," with democratic ideas "flying back and forth in all directions." The same intuition motivated Graeber not to reject the Enlightenment as intrinsically flawed and violent and anti-human (a critique leveled by many of his compatriots on the left), but instead to redeem it: to show that its most liberatory ideas were actually invented not by male European elites trying to secure power and cover their tracks, but by the people shoved to the margins.

Pirate Enlightenment, or the Real Libertalia
by David Graeber
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 208 pp., $27.00

One can be sympathetic to Graeber's overarching agenda, even agree that the voices and actions of Malagasy chiefs and working-class pirates in particular should be more central to the stories we tell about democracy's ascent, and still find *Pirate Enlightenment*, alas, unconvincing as a work of history. It's extremely plausible that the Malagasy practiced a kind of deliberative democracy, and that they discussed ways of ruling themselves freely with sojourning pirates. But Graeber is unable to say much about how the *kabary* system actually worked in practice within the Betsimisaraka Confederation, how decisions were made and how power functioned, whether conversations with pirates ever really occurred, and, if so, what they were about. The evidentiary record is just too weak, which Graeber himself acknowledges. The most essential source was written decades after the events in question by a French spy, whose primary goal was generating more intrepid fake exploits for a fraudulent Hungarian count.

The result is a set of credible conjectures, smelted into facts and forced to bear the weight of a rather bold argument, which they simply cannot. We are told that it "would hardly be surprising" if the young Malagasy men building the confederation took the pirates as role models, as "some degree of political synthesis" is precisely "what one would expect." He concedes that "one has to imagine" how *kabary* were used in this political experiment, as sources offer scant detail. And the conversations said to have conjured an Enlightenment-style sociability among pirates and Malagasy locals "have, of course, been almost entirely lost.... We can only know they must have taken place." This is a captivating story, if true. Yet, as Graeber notes, "there is absolutely no way" to "establish a definitive narrative" of what occurred. "All we have ... are a series of tiny windows on extraordinary events." By the end of *Pirate Enlightenment*, it's hard not to feel that Graeber has painted himself into an unnecessary corner, trying to defend his account of the confederation's radical politics with silent sources, expending too much effort to nail down irrelevant details like whether Ratsimilaho needed permission to live in his father's house.

It's surprising, because Graeber knows that historical inquiry isn't synonymous with this kind of cramped empiricism. Throughout the book, Graeber teases a revealing critique of historians' literal-mindedness. He is irritated by scholars who focus on the "rather trivial" question of whether Libertalia actually existed as the myths had it. What's far more interesting and valuable, he says, echoing a generation of cultural historians, is how these appealing fantasies rippled through the world, altering people's feelings of what might be politically possible. He is right to argue that narratives and rumors can be forces that alter the course of history. The status of the underlying facts can, in some cases, be immaterial. There may be much we don't know about pirate democracy and Malagasy enlightenment, Graeber concedes, but our "ignorance is only of the specifics."

For all the thunder and lightning of *Pirate Enlightenment*'s many historical provocations, it's this line, delivered casually and without further comment, that might be most radical. What does it mean, Graeber appears to be challenging us, to write a kind of history that's built upon general truths and trends and likelihoods, but indifferent to the specific details of what happened? Less generous readers might protest that this describes social theory, or even poetry or philosophy, not history, and that Graeber has committed the error here of confusing one for the other. Or that pronouncing "the specifics" irrelevant is merely a convenient way for him to make claims he would like to be true, despite a lack of proof. But Graeber deserves more credit than this. What courses through *Pirate Enlightenment*, tragically unfulfilled, is an idiosyncratic yet compelling vision of historical style and the value of worlds past.

HISTORY CAN BE written in multiple keys and for different purposes, often overlapping, all of them valuable. At a time when the historical profession faces an existential decline, the dominant public registers include the genealogical explanation of contemporary ills (from violent white supremacy to unbound international capitalism), historical analogy, and the pursuit of justice through the rescue and amplification of marginalized voices and groups. Anarchist to his bones, Graeber felt that historical inquiry should first and foremost serve freedom, deepening our capacity to imagine and pursue it. This shift in emphasis is subtle but powerful. It reflects a scholarly intention with which we've grown unfamiliar.

Throughout *Pirate Enlightenment*, Graeber makes a point of explaining what has gone so parlously wrong with historical writing, and how it might be done better. He laments that "existing history is not just deeply flawed and Eurocentric" but also "unnecessarily tedious and boring." This aesthetic argument echoes what he and David Wengrow claimed in *The Dawn of Everything*, that much writing about the past tends to "dry everything up, reduce people to cardboard stereotypes," or "simplify the issues" in ways that often "undermine, possibly even destroy, our sense of human possibility." Graeber had also tired of moralistic histories that aimed to prove "how much one is not letting the Great Men of history off the hook." This kind of theatrical judgment was a "surreptitious pleasure," he believed, "tawdry" and fleeting.

In place of all this, Graeber wanted to see more historical writing that approached the past primarily as a mind-expanding "encyclopedia of social possibilities," a vast reservoir of alternate worlds and radical experiments in freedom. This would have to be a project that focused not on the "dead zones" and constraining forces of modern life (Graeber's turf in previous books) but rather on the vibrant "margins of the emerging world-system," where people were able to live differently. Like the great leftist social and cultural historians of the 1960s and 1970s—scholars of workers and artisans and peasants like E.P. Thompson and Natalie Zemon Davis, who believed in writing "history from below"—Graeber knew that human freedom and creativity have always flourished most among the nooks and the crannies of established systems, thriving in power's indifference and neglect.

"We are projects of collective self-creation," he observes with Wengrow in *The Dawn of Everything*. "What if we approached human history that way?" What if we treated people who lived many years ago "as imaginative, intelligent, playful creatures who deserve to be understood as such?" The result might look like *Pirate Enlightenment*, a book sewn together by Graeber's determination to share with readers the delight and excitement and awe he feels when paying attention to the lives and imaginations of ordinary people. "Let us tell, then, a story," Graeber begins, gleefully setting the stage, "about magic, lies, sea battles, purloined princesses, slave revolts, manhunts, make-believe kingdoms and fraudulent ambassadors, spies, jewel thieves, poisoners, devil worship, and sexual obsession that lies at the origins of modern freedom."

Graeber wrote about pirates and Malagasy chiefs not simply to rescue them, or to right a wrong, or to be accurate—but to take heart in what they may well have accomplished, to revel in their creative antics and vital spirits, and to help us all be a little bit freer. This is the real treasure of *Pirate Enlightenment*, its intellectual bequest. Graeber found strength and world-changing power in a historical mode that reflected the human lives at its vital center: disordered and astonishing and messy and feral and always, always, fun. TNR

Ian Beacock *is a frequent contributor to* The New Republic. *He last wrote for the magazine on accidental gods.*

Lesson Plan

by Billy Collins

Overcast morning, cool and grey.
The white cat bends low
to drink from the swimming pool.
I bend to snip off
a few dead twigs
from a miniature orange tree
with its miniature oranges.
In an hour I will talk
to some students about a poem
I wrote over 30 years ago.
I think I will start off
by telling them about
the miniature orange tree
with its miniature oranges
in a terracotta pot by the pool
and just go from there.

Billy Collins *served two terms as U.S. poet laureate. His latest collection is* Musical Tables.

Lost in the Securityplex

With vast stores of data, the surveillance state can turn whistleblowers into public enemies.

By Jacob Silverman

IN DECEMBER 2007, ABC News aired an interview between reporter Brian Ross and former CIA officer John Kiriakou. At the time, the United States officially denied running anything like a formal torture program. Kiriakou was the first agent to acknowledge it—but only to defend it.

During their fireside chat, he described the 2002 raid in Pakistan that ended in the arrest of Abu Zubaydah, who was believed to be a high-ranking Al Qaeda official. Zubaydah was shot multiple times but survived. In Kiriakou's telling, Zubaydah was a "financier" of the 9/11 attacks, a "logistics chief" with a close relationship to Osama bin Laden. In U.S. custody, Zubaydah was waterboarded, which Kiriakou thought was distasteful but necessary at the time. Afraid of impending attacks, the United States had indeed tortured its enemies. It was effective, he claimed. Zubaydah cracked after one waterboarding session and then provided a stream of useful intelligence, disrupting "maybe dozens of attacks."

Much of what Kiriakou said wasn't true. It would later emerge that Zubaydah was waterboarded at least 83 times. ("I think honestly that the Agency has gotten a bum rap on waterboarding," Kiriakou later told MSNBC.) Zubaydah was subjected to a number of other torture techniques, and at some point he lost an eye, though exactly how has never been explained. He never provided useful information to his interrogators. His lawyers have claimed he wasn't a member of Al Qaeda or much of a militant at all. He remains imprisoned in Guantánamo Bay, where he suffers extensive physical and psychological trauma. The first victim of the CIA's post-9/11 torture program, Zubaydah is a forever prisoner, living evidence of war crimes that can never be officially made public.

Kiriakou's interview is "not just propaganda; it is torture fan fiction," writes Kerry Howley in her new book, *Bottoms Up and the Devil Laughs: A Journey Through the Deep State*. Describing torture as necessary and heroic, Kiriakou offered a fairy tale, she says, indulging in some of the darkest fantasies of the terror years. He described Zubaydah as a master terrorist, of the kind who seemed to lurk in every dark corner during the Bush administration, when he was nothing of the sort. In Howley's telling, some of the foundational myths of the war on terrorism years—the classified fictions that helped the security state grow into an all-seeing monstrosity—were just that: myths.

Bottoms Up and the Devil Laughs: A Journey Through the Deep State
by Kerry Howley
Knopf,
256 pp, $28.00

As Howley shows throughout her book, the vast stores of data collected on practically everyone alive now make this kind of mythmaking easier than ever. "Collect it all" is a semiofficial intelligence community motto; and from the resulting heaps of information, details can always be carefully adapted to fit a narrative. *Bottoms Up* is a sophisticated, artful tour through the dark recesses of this machine and a sympathetic reconsideration of the figures who have fallen afoul of it. Howley's subjects range from leakers—including Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange, and Reality Winner—to wayward militants in foreign lands. As public figures, all are misunderstood—certainly by the U.S. government.

Calling the book "a polemic against memory," Howley argues that the surveillance state is not so much a record of objective reality—stored in some of the world's largest, most secure data centers—but an effort to shape and manipulate it. Surveillance may seem omniscient, but it's selected, interpreted, and deployed to tell specific stories—or specific lies. It's this ability to shape narratives, both in court and in the media, that has turned civic-minded leakers like Reality Winner into public enemies who betrayed their patriotic oaths.

CHIEF AMONG THE misunderstood might be John Walker Lindh, the so-called American Taliban who emerged as a villainous symbol early after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. In many ways, he went through the same propagandistic mill that turned the stories of Jessica Lynch, a soldier taken prisoner in Iraq, and Pat Tillman, who was killed by "friendly fire" in Afghanistan, into emblems of U.S. derring-do and patriotic sacrifice, respectively. And as with Lynch and Tillman, Howley shows, the truth was almost nothing like what was widely reported at the time.

Howley positions Lindh as a hapless figure whom the security machine fixated on and recast as a serious threat. An alienated kid from suburban California, Lindh converted to Sunni Islam at 16, and when he was 17, he set out to find his place in the world, traveling to Yemen to study Arabic.

ILLUSTRATION BY DEENA SO'OTEH

Lindh became a religious zealot, traversing the Middle East, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, looking for communities that lived up to his idealized vision of an austere Islam. He ended up in Afghanistan, where he joined the Taliban, was given a gun, and was sent to a remote mountain outpost.

Lindh had no involvement in the 9/11 attacks. Osama bin Laden once visited a camp where Lindh was staying with many other Talibs, but Lindh had no relationship with the Al Qaeda leader. Until the U.S. decided to invade Afghanistan for hosting Al Qaeda, Lindh was barely a foot soldier in a conflict that was entirely regional. (The Taliban's main enemy was a mostly Afghan group called the Northern Alliance, whose leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud, was assassinated on September 9, 2001.)

CIA paramilitaries and their Northern Alliance allies captured Lindh as part of a large group of Taliban detainees. They were imprisoned at Qala-i-Jangi, a nineteenth-century fortress, in fetid conditions. When the prisoners revolted, Johnny Michael Spann, a CIA officer, was killed, becoming the first American casualty of the war. Hundreds of prisoners died—shot, burned, or left to drown in a flooded portion of the prison. Lindh survived, and, when his story was reported on CNN, he became an instant media sensation, a diabolical traitor who had gone to the other side and, in the words of Attorney General John Ashcroft, "chose to be led by Osama bin Laden." On December 17, 2001, *Newsweek* published a cover story featuring a photo of a dirt-covered Lindh. It was titled "American Taliban: The Saga of John Walker."

Lindh should have been considered politically irrelevant. Instead, the Bush administration tried to turn him into a terrorist caricature. Donald Rumsfeld told interrogators to "take the gloves off," and Lindh was stripped naked and bound as part of a set of tactics that foreshadowed future acts of U.S. torture at Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, Bagram, and black sites around the world. The government charged him with a raft of crimes that could have sent him to prison for life. (Jesselyn Radack, a Justice Department lawyer, became a whistleblower when she revealed that important information was withheld from Lindh's defense team.) Lindh eventually agreed to plead guilty to reduced charges, receiving a 20-year sentence.

Pick at the stories and legends built up over the long years of the global war on terrorism, and their utter falsity eventually comes to the fore. We are not just subjected to propaganda, Howley seems to say; we are fed fictions, continually. "Surveillance finds truths, and surveillance serves the creation of elaborate untruths," Howley writes. The former are cultivated in service of the latter—that is, in the service of state power, which relies on fresh narratives about frightening national security threats that require extraordinary countermeasures. That's what 9/11 gave the U.S. security establishment. In the process,

whistleblowers became traitors and torture-practicing intelligence officers became experts on the rough necessity of stress positions and waterboarding.

IN THIS WORLD, the illusion of accountability is one of the more powerful fictions wielded by the state. The august formalities of legal memos, official investigations, criminal prosecutions, oversight panels, and the reports of inspectors general only serve to support the maintenance of the status quo. It was in this kabuki theater of responsible governance where John Kiriakou—where everyone in this book, really—found how easy it was to cross the line between useful functionary and criminal defendant.

In 2012, Kiriakou, the former CIA officer who told Brian Ross—and America—about the U.S. torture program, was arrested for disclosing classified information without authorization. But it wasn't for anything he said in the 2007 ABC interview. His crime was that he revealed the name of a covert CIA officer to another journalist, Matthew Cole, in violation of the Intelligence Identities Protection Act. Kiriakou presented himself as a whistleblower, who acted out of concern about government behavior in the war on terrorism, but it didn't get him far. Facing the dismal odds of beating a federal indictment, he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

In the years since, Kiriakou has written and lectured widely, blasting U.S. behavior in the war on terrorism. For critics of U.S. foreign policy, he has become a symbol of darkly ironic, misplaced accountability: The only person jailed for their part in CIA torture was someone who revealed details of it. What many of them don't say, or don't know, is that Kiriakou wasn't opposed to Zubaydah's torture at the time, that he thought it was effective, and that he misrepresented it in his famous ABC interview. He didn't fully earn the mantle of whistleblower until he went to jail for something else. (Kiriakou has written that his eventual prosecution was blowback for that original ABC interview.)

Whistleblowers and security-state dissidents are a rare breed, forming their own small community. It's a complex world, justifiably tinged with paranoia, where trust is difficult to earn and harder to maintain. America's whistleblowers often consult one another, work with the same lawyers and NGOs, and sometimes find their stories told by the same journalists. Matthew Cole, the reporter to whom Kiriakou disclosed the name of a covert officer, went on to work for The Intercept, the outlet funded by billionaire Pierre Omidyar to report on the Snowden revelations. Cole was joined by his colleague Richard Esposito, who helped produce Brian Ross's 2007 interview with Kiriakou. In June 2017, Cole, Esposito, and two other reporters co-bylined an article that revealed Russian attempts to hack U.S. election infrastructure before the 2016 presidential election. Based on a leaked National Security Agency document that someone had printed and anonymously mailed to The Intercept, the article depicted a Russian effort to gain access to election-software providers. The top-secret report, which had only been drafted a month earlier, was described in the article as "the most detailed U.S. government account of Russian interference in the election that has yet come to light."

The Intercept article was a bombshell but a muted one, because its source, Reality Winner, an Air Force veteran then working as a contract linguist at an NSA facility in Georgia, was already in jail.

THE WINNER CASE was potentially straightforward, concerned with a single classified document mailed to a journalistic outlet. Someone had illegally shared the document, and the evidence seemed to point clearly to Winner. But Winner hadn't done a major document dump or declared a crusade against government secrecy or even revealed her identity. Her alleged crime was motivated by patriotism, her mother said, and, in its public-spirited simplicity, it was possible that swaths of the public might agree with her. It was important, then, for the government to find a new story to tell about Winner. It was one that bore little resemblance to the truth, to who she was, but it was the kind of narrative that the U.S. government had become expert at crafting at least since December 2001, when an obscure militant in a far-away conflict was presented to the public as a major American traitor, a dangerous avatar of the new age of terror.

Beginning with her name, Reality Winner was a touch eccentric, with an eclectic sense of idealism. She was a fitness-loving yogi who lived in a ramshackle rental house in a rough part of town, ate healthy, took in stray animals, and owned a pink AR-15. Although trained in basic operational security, she didn't put a password on her smartphone. Self-confident, even commanding—she mandated a reading regimen for one boyfriend—she was curious about the world and angry about perceived injustices. She said she wanted to burn down the White House, but she joined the Air Force, learned Dari and Pashto, and worked as a linguist on drone missions. A certificate of commendation credited her with assisting in 600 enemies killed in action.

Eager to travel and use her languages in the field, Winner left the Air Force partly because she thought she would never be deployed to Afghanistan. Her lack of a college degree limited her prospects, so, at 25, she found herself working for an intelligence contractor, detailed to an NSA facility near Augusta, Georgia. She was part of the vast archipelago of "Top Secret America," as *The Washington Post* termed it. Howley calls it "zero America," the civilian world's shadow, a no-place that's secret and "unfathomably well funded."

"It did not matter to Reality that working for the drone program while teaching yoga and loudly moralizing about climate change would strike many people as bizarre," Howley writes. She was independent, an "intellectual orphan" cobbling together her own worldview.

Bored by her contractor job translating documents about the Iranian aerospace industry, Winner listened to podcasts from The Intercept, watched neurology lectures, and occasionally browsed classified reports outside her purview. One day, she landed on a report about Russian attempts at election hacking, printed it out, smuggled it out of work under her clothes, and mailed it anonymously to The Intercept. A few weeks later, her life fell apart.

In putting together its story, The Intercept had sent an image of the original printout to the NSA. Hidden watermarks in the printout allowed the government to identify where it was printed and by whom. It was a colossal error by The Intercept, which for some reason had bypassed usual procedures and not involved its security team. (The Intercept's head of operational security was unaware of the article until it was published.)

The government's prosecution of Winner reflected all the baroque contortions and absurdities of the post-9/11 legal system. Her lawyers had to receive security clearances, but that only enmeshed them in the authoritarian world of official secrecy. "Having clearance meant that Reality's lawyers were far more restricted than the average person," Howley writes. "We can

"Collect it all" is a semiofficial intelligence community motto; and from the resulting heaps of information, details can always be carefully adapted to fit a narrative.

access the document Reality leaked, now available on The Intercept's website. The lawyers could not access it, because they had security clearance, and to access improperly shared material would be a violation of clearance." Her lawyers weren't allowed to read the document she allegedly leaked—the whole basis of the case. It was a kind of cosmic joke, and it was one of many bureaucratic protocols that made it even more difficult to defend Winner.

When Winner sought to be released on bail, the government portrayed her as a flight risk and a danger to the country. A prosecutor told the court that Winner had been to Mexico several times—as if to indicate that she was comfortable traveling abroad—but she didn't mention that Winner had been a child at the time. As Howley notes, "she had been there to get cheap braces."

Everything the U.S. government had taught Winner was used as evidence of guilt or danger. The things that had made her a good intelligence worker—her mental acuity, her worldly interests, her knack for absorbing information—were suddenly red flags. Her knowledge of Afghan languages, her interest in someday living in the Middle East or Central Asia, notes she wrote about how to change a SIM card, her ability to compartmentalize and keep her work secret from her family—all of these things were recast as threatening signs of deviance. Winner had a "fractured personality," according to the government, and she could not be trusted to be free until trial. In truth, her "fractured personality" was legally required of her, just as it was for millions of security clearance holders who couldn't tell their loved ones, or even some of their coworkers, what they did all day. Winner had signed up for that life, where all knowledge was guarded, sacralized under the official regime of secrecy. And she had made herself a heretic.

When Winner was denied bail, her prospects looked grim. "You can't fight these cases," one of Winner's lawyers tells Howley, "because the government has made it so you can't fight." National security cases, especially around the leaking of classified material, inevitably become farragoes of complex procedural rulings and limitations on defendants' ability to launch a coherent defense. Whistleblower protections exist, but it can be almost impossible to claim them. If you file a complaint about even one individual or program in a vast apparatus over which you have no control, you are making yourself a target, signaling that you can't do your job as a quiet professional. In June 2018, Winner, like 90 percent of federal defendants before her, including John Kiriakou, decided to plead guilty. She was sentenced to 63 months in prison, the longest-ever penalty for a case of her kind. She was released in June 2021 and continues to seek a pardon.

LIVING AS PUBLIC figures in the long aftermath of their most courageous and moral acts, dissidents are condemned to rehash past crusades, to see their limited reforms undone, or simply to be silenced by the legal strictures of the national security state. Some things stay classified forever, even if they've been published on the internet (and even if someone has served a prison sentence for leaking them). For some dissidents, like Chelsea Manning, who spent additional time in jail for refusing to cooperate with a grand jury investigation into Julian Assange, their political persecution may not stop with their initial trial.

These stories have been told in many other accounts, of course, but *Bottoms Up and the Devil Laughs* is more aware of the Borgesian labyrinths undergirding the American empire and more emotionally attuned to its central figures. "Dissidents," Howley writes of her subjects, "are moral narcissists—unable to compartmentalize, to ride the wave of whatever mundane evil shapes the lives of their agreeable colleagues. They are difficult and rude and they interrupt and to interview them is to be borne back ceaselessly against the flow of the single narrative on which they have seized." We know their names precisely because they are stubborn and annoying and principled.

Howley does not aim to portray her subjects as heroes, so much as she reckons with the system that has sacrificed them to preserve its mythic image. In her stories, cell phone metadata can be just as revealing as personal journals or jailhouse conversations. But, crucially, one is not a substitute for the other. A store of data, however vast, can't replace the human.

The battle she is fighting may be a rearguard action, because we live in an era when faith in data and surveillance is ascendant. It seems that no matter how many disturbing revelations emerge from the securityplex, and no matter that this surveillance state has helped underwrite decades of disastrous warfare, there is nothing to be done politically. The American public, and its leaders, just don't care very much. Our ever-churning surveillance machine, with its associated secret military and intelligence operations overseas, has become entrenched as a powerful status quo.

In the face of widespread public apathy, Howley's book asks for something more: a philosophical and political renewal. *Bottoms Up* deepens our understanding of the whistleblowers, exiles, turncoats, and other outcasts whose lives were transformed into crude ideological narratives by self-interested politicians and spies and then promulgated by stenographers in the mainstream press. It tells us that, though we might be ruled by liars who wield personal data and official secrecy as weapons, there are some potent armaments in the rebel's arsenal. Like the truth. TNR

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They Did It for The Clicks

How digital media pursued viral traffic at all costs and unleashed chaos

By Aaron Timms

ILLUSTRATION BY AARON MARIN

"WHAT CHEESE ARE YOU?" was a quiz that appeared online in February 2014. BuzzFeed, the digital media company that published the quiz, returned to the same theme in December 2016 ("What Delicious Cheese Are You Based on Your Zodiac Sign?"), February 2018 ("Everyone Has a Cheese That Matches Their Personality—Here's Yours"), August 2019 ("This Personality Quiz Will Reveal What Kind of Cheese You Are"), January 2020 ("What Kind of Cheese Are You?"), and October 2022 ("Only *I* Know What Type of Cheese You Are in Your Soul"). BuzzFeed's latest variation on the form launched in December 2022 with the declaration, "As Strange as It Sounds, There's a Cheese That Describes You to a T—Take This Quick Quiz to Find Out What It Is." (After nearly a decade of cheese quizzes, it did not sound strange at all.)

Like, I suspect, many others, I've wasted a small portion of my life answering these quizzes. But they've provided no certainty. Just the opposite, in fact: They've shown my identity to be oozingly mutable. At times, I've been a Camembert; at others, a cheddar, a Parmesan, a mozzarella, a Monterey Jack. "As I write this letter, the world is witnessing a grave humanitarian crisis in Russia's attack on Ukraine," BuzzFeed founder and CEO Jonah Peretti wrote in his introduction to the company's annual report in March 2022. "During these times, our mission to spread truth, joy and creativity on the internet has never been more important." But if BuzzFeed exists to spread truth, what are the truths it deals in? What cheese am I, really?

In reality, of course, I am as unsimilar to a block of cheese as BuzzFeed is alien to the mission of propagating truth. Informational chaos, not narrative clarity, is the internet's guiding epistemological mode. The digital era has staged a corporate contest not for truth but for attention—a malleable asset that can be put to countless uses, whether it be to convince readers the 2020 election was stolen or to show them how their preference for Netflix over Hulu means they're totally a Gorgonzola. All content now is designed to be shareable, to get us to click—but shareable for what? Once you have caught the public's attention, what do you do with it? What social, political, or cultural purpose does a page impression, a retweet, a video view serve?

The degree to which digital media has—or more often, has not—grappled with these questions animates former BuzzFeed News editor Ben Smith's new book,

PEXELS (X2); GETTY

Traffic. Through the stories of BuzzFeed and Gawker, Smith aims to show how the media, high on the early internet's spirit of creative adventure and freedom, got hooked on traffic, unleashing volatile social and cultural forces it could no longer control. This was, Smith claims, the "false promise of traffic"—the book's grand theme. But if his book portrays an executive class mostly unbothered by the potential consequences of the digital era's popularity contest, it also suggests that journalists—in particular those named Ben Smith—remain confused about their own role in this shrill and data-saturated new world.

JONAH PERETTI HELPED create The Huffington Post in 2005, then launched BuzzFeed a year later. But, as Smith tells it, Peretti has been thinking deeply about online attention's basic purpose since the earliest days of the internet. In 1996, shortly after graduating from the University of California, Santa Cruz, Peretti published a long paper in the online journal Negations with the title "CAPITALISM AND SCHIZOPHRENIA." Drawing on Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and sounding very much like one of his own future critics, Peretti argued that "late capitalism" both "accelerates the flow of capital" and "accelerates the rate at which subjects assume identities." Brands, he continued, had exploited the "visual cacophony" of popular culture—including traditional print publications, cable TV, and the nascent internet—to sell stuff: The acceleration of visual culture enabled the acceleration of consumerism. The paper was not simply diagnostic but prescriptive: Might it not be possible, Peretti wondered, to reorient visual culture in a different direction, toward the formation of identities that "oppose those offered by the capitalist media"? There was, he concluded, "no reason" that "radical groups" could not use "similar methods" to those advancing hyper-consumerism to "challenge capitalism and develop alternative collective identities." Indeed, the mediated anti-capitalist resistance was already underway: Peretti identified queer activists, slackers, and postmodern artists as among the groups who had begun to turn capitalism's methods on itself.

The young Peretti saw media, including the new world of online media, as a way to advance a political agenda, and it's clear that his own ideological sympathies lay on the left. Peretti's dalliance with activism continued into his late twenties, but eventually he drifted away from politics. Today, Peretti is perhaps best known for his company's cynical mining of the internet's "visual cacophony" for profit: BuzzFeed's stock has underperformed since the company went public in late 2021 but spiked in January of this year, after Peretti announced that the company will use ChatGPT to help create content, a move that felt like the final myoclonic jerk of a body corporate nearing its end. Just as he, as an undergraduate, had thought possible, Peretti did indeed succeed in carving out a space in visual culture for alternative identities, but he did it for clicks, not anti-capitalism. On BuzzFeed today, you can find quizzes that ask, "How Gay Are You?," "What % Lazy Girl Are You?," and "Which Up-and-Coming Artist Are You?" The queer activists, slackers, and artists who offered the young Peretti hope for a "more inclusive" society are now simply meat for the maw of capital, data points to feed the machine that converts attention into cash.

Smith glosses this transition as a natural shedding of youthful enthusiasms. Peretti, he claims, "cared too much about the medium to fully embrace the message" of activism and diverted his energies instead to the study and eventual commercialization of traffic, the new coin of the online realm. But a close reading of that early, critical academic paper shows that Peretti understood what Smith, despite two decades working in online media, appears to miss: that in a hyperkinetic media culture like ours, the medium becomes the message, and form shapes content. If the angriest, loudest, most narcissistic, and most aggressive voices are today the ones that get heard, that's in part because online speech's value is measured by its popularity, by its traffic—and traffic rewards conflict.

At first, the pursuit of traffic served Peretti's venture well, but as the internet matured, form tightened its grip over content, and online discourse metastasized, BuzzFeed's cutesy listicles and feel-good quizzes lost their once-irresistible luster. Peretti understood the power of traffic to reshape the structure of culture but ultimately misjudged the direction of its effect on society. Valued in 2016 at a peak of $1.7 billion, BuzzFeed now has a market capitalization of $205.9 million; recent years have seen its once-vaunted news division gutted and several overseas offices shuttered. The company's decline offers a signal lesson in the perils of pursuing traffic for its own sake.

IN AN AESTHETIC sense, today's internet seems less the spawn of BuzzFeed than of another media venture that vied with Peretti's project for online supremacy through the late 2000s and early 2010s: Gawker. The rivalry between Peretti—goofy, numerate, American, straight—and Gawker founder Nick Denton—brash, anti-elitist, English, gay—lies at the heart of *Traffic*. To call this a rivalry involves some exaggeration. Smith works hard to convince us that animosity grew between Peretti and Denton as the competition for traffic between their two companies intensified, but the evidence for this atavistic feud amounts to little more than a handful of tame tweets: In March 2010, for example, Denton called Peretti "a bit of a dick," and Peretti replied, "I'm a dick to u bc of social mirroring." Napoleon calling Talleyrand shit in silk stockings this was not.

Still, there is an interesting contrast to be drawn between the two properties, and it's one that remains pertinent today. Peretti felt that traffic was simply "a resource to be exploited," Smith writes. BuzzFeed's growth model—to "quantify human emotion on social media and feed it back to an audience with a combination of art and science, then capture the nearly infinite scale and perpetual motion the new media offered"—was correspondingly vacuous, failing to account for the fact that in a scandalously unequal society with suddenly ubiquitous tools for instantaneous mass communication, the strongest human emotion online was always likely to be rage. Denton, on the other hand, saw traffic as a "sign of quality" and believed the "underlying mechanics of the internet would point toward a raw new truth." Nominally, this credo gave Gawker Media a straightforwardly old-fashioned journalistic mission: to expose hypocrisy and hold the powerful to account.

But the manner in which Denton's writers prosecuted that mission helped forge a new grammar—built on doxing, shitposting, dogpiling, and dunking—that remains dominant in online discourse today. *Traffic* deftly charts this transition, showing how Gawker went from aggressively reporting on Silicon Valley, say, or fashion media to posting dick and cleavage pics, of the famous and non-famous alike, simply because it could. In the company's most infamous episode, Owen Thomas, a reporter from Gawker blog Valleywag, publicly outed tech billionaire Peter Thiel, triggering the chain of events that would eventually lead to Gawker's demise. That the company's fatal blow was self-inflicted feels

oddly fitting. Lust for traffic drove Gawker's success, but it also made Denton and his staff voyeuristic and cynical, inducing a kind of collective delirium: A relentless cycle of exploitation and self-exposure caused several Gawker writers to flame out in spectacular public fashion, anticipating the "spiraling" and "meltdowns" that remain a canonical spectacle of online life today.

In Smith's account, both Peretti and Denton were randomly pressing buttons and waiting to see what would happen, but only Denton had some notion of online attention's ultimate purpose. Denton felt that it was "the internet's most radical ideology" that "information wants to be free, and that the truth shall set us free." He was partially right about the first claim—most of what's ghoulishly known as "user-generated content" remains free online today, though media companies eventually recognized the power of the paywall—but dead wrong about the second: Ubiquitous information led not to truth but truths, a profusion of conflicting accounts of reality in which the very notion of "the facts" was delegitimized and converted into a cultural battleground. Informational overload has not freed society but taken it hostage—a dystopia far from either Peretti's or Denton's early imaginings, though tonally much closer to peak Gawker than BuzzFeed.

All history is selective, but the focus on Gawker and BuzzFeed means that Smith's account of the societywide race to go viral necessarily omits and underemphasizes important players. Big tech platforms like Google and Twitter score drive-by mentions, and while Facebook, Disney, and *The New York Times* are given considerably more space, they decorate, rather than drive, the narrative. Other influential new media companies of the century's first two decades, like Vox and Vice, are mostly absent; the rise of the individual platform-hosted "creator" is hardly mentioned at all. These omissions and elisions leave the book feeling incomplete, and they elevate media to a central place in a story to which it appears increasingly peripheral, as a mere pawn of the techlords. Belatedly, many journalists have accepted that "the news" is not theirs alone to direct—a troubling realization, given their profession's Olympian sense of its own importance, but one from which Smith appears to have exempted himself. A broader focus to *Traffic* might have offered a clearer sense of the real shift of the past two decades, toward an informational culture in which journalists have lost their prestige as cultural gatekeepers and the freedom to post is without limit—in which we are all users, and all get used.

High on the early internet's spirit of adventure, the media got hooked on traffic, unleashing forces it could not control.

Given Gawker Media's eventual demise—Denton sold his company to Univision in 2016 after Hulk Hogan, with funding assistance from Thiel, successfully sued over Gawker's 2012 publication of a video showing the wrestling icon having sex with his best friend's wife—and the recent evisceration of BuzzFeed News, *Traffic* feels in some way like history written by the losers.

IN PLACE OF analysis, Smith gives us a whirlwind nostalgia trip. The rise and fall of *Traffic*'s two protagonists provide the vehicle for a mini-history of the internet. Gamergate, the dick pics of Brett Favre and Anthony Weiner, The Dress, the Steele dossier, snark versus smarm, the top-down food video as a hegemonic cultural form: Smith gives them each their moment to shine, like a jazz band leader calling on his soloists.

And what, ultimately, of Smith himself? BuzzFeed, we know, needed traffic to grow. But when traffic was no longer enough, it needed the one thing better: It needed Ben Smith. Plucked from *Politico* to launch BuzzFeed's news division in 2011, Smith not only witnessed much of *Traffic*'s action unfold online; he also participated in it behind the scenes. But it's not until around halfway through the book that Ben Smith, Journalist, appears. He makes his entrance on the same page as Anthony Weiner's penis, a coincidence that feels deliberate: down one path, dick pics, infidelity, and social perdition; down the other, journalism, transparency, trust, the promise of a society with its pants pulled up.

Smith joins the story in 2011, after Peretti and BuzzFeed chairman Kenny Lerer invite him to lunch to discuss the idea of helping BuzzFeed get into the news game; the invitation arrives thanks to a recommendation from an older journalist who remembers Smith as "a kid who had impressed him," though the referee is unsure whether the kid is "still any good." The aw-shucks sentimentality with which Smith paints his own role in the story—just a kid with dreams of working hard!—is one of the book's many recurring stylistic tics. Eventually, these tics accumulate in such a way that they can be represented in the signature form of BuzzFeed itself:

10 SIGNS YOU'RE SO THE BOOK *TRAFFIC* BY BEN SMITH

1. When you're stuck for a narrative transition, you reach for banalities like "Meanwhile the traffic climbed" or "Facebook grew and grew."
2. You love ending sentences with a colon and the word: traffic.
3. You devote an unusual amount of effort, in a book that's mostly light on character description, to pointing out that right-wing media guru Andrew Breitbart was overweight (or, to use your own words, a "frenetic, overweight fleabag of a man," a "hyperactive pigpen of a right-wing lunatic, whose belly hung out from underneath his ratty T-shirt").
4. You never miss an opportunity to remind us that you, Ben Smith, are a devoted father to young children. ("I was reading a fairy tale to my young son when I realized what was happening.")
5. You love to describe business meetings you were invited to, especially if they involved a fancy lunch or—cool dad alert—getting high afterward.
6. You often gesture melodramatically toward a dark future via the little-did-they-know parenthetical ("It was one of the earliest flares of what would, a decade later, become social media").
7. You know how to talk like the cool kids. (Barack Obama's mid-2000s popularity online "was, in its way, the sideboob of politics.")
8. Often this does not ... work out so well. ("Jonah had created the site with his little sister Chelsea, who had moved to New York to make it in stand-up comedy. Cringe!")

9. You are strangely apolitical, despite politics forming the backdrop to much of your narrative.
10. You have never seen a corporate cliché that didn't deserve a home in narrative nonfiction. (Denton "backed into politics through Jezebel"; *New York Times* executive David Perpich "got in on the ground floor" of an early 2000s music startup.)

Traffic is less interesting as a history of digital media—much of the book's raw material comes from other historical accounts, a debt acknowledged in an endnote on sourcing—than as a record of its author's evolving thinking on the role of journalism online. Smith left BuzzFeed in 2020 to become the media columnist for *The New York Times*; last year, he left the *Times* and launched the media venture Semafor, designed, in Smith's own words, to cater to the world's "200 million people who are college educated, who read in English, but who no one is really treating like an audience, but who talk to each other and talk to us."

Reflecting in *Traffic* on his own mistakes and flirtations with online notoriety during eight years at the helm of BuzzFeed News—such as the controversial 2017 decision to publish the Steele dossier, which included claims of collusion between the Russian government and Donald Trump, or his decision to hire future plagiarist and far-right media star Benny Johnson—Smith seems eager to demonstrate growth, to advertise his learning. "Perhaps I should have thought a little more" about people sharing the Steele dossier online without BuzzFeed News' copious disclaimers, he muses at one point. But the limp introspection of these postmortems jars with the excitability of the passages where he recounts BuzzFeed's explosive growth ("The traffic was back"; "I went to stand in the middle of the newsroom and watch the traffic flow"; "I loved the traffic"), suggesting a basic conflict that the book leaves unresolved.

In the internet age, should journalism aim to expose the truth or attract attention through any means? Smith does not say. A "deep confusion" across BuzzFeed "about what BuzzFeed News was for" represented, in his view, the seed of the news venture's eventual failure. But a similar confusion appears to infect his own perspective on the media's basic mission. At times, he appears to endorse the view that journalism is a form of entertainment, that it's all part of the internet's great game. At others, he aligns himself with Denton's version of journalistic "transparency," which he thinks mostly means "leaks and aggressive reporting." In the book's wimpy finale, Smith positions the next stage of his career as a kind of professional apology tour, heroically devoting himself to the task of rebuilding media and making it "resistant to the forces we helped unleash." But in an increasingly dizzying informational universe, with the pressure to stand out and make a scene only growing, how exactly will trust in the media be rebuilt? Smith's contention in *Traffic* that, by the early 2020s, the internet "had become, merely, society itself"—which misses, once again, the critical interactions between technology and society, the power of each to influence and shape the other—leaves little to suggest he has an answer.

AS BOTH WITNESS and participant, Smith occupies an unusual role in the story of the digital media revolution. If he feels any doubt about the objectivity of his account—if he feels that his ability to reliably chronicle the rivalry between BuzzFeed and Gawker is in any way compromised by his longtime employment by the former—he does not show it in the pages of *Traffic*. Instead, Smith flutters through the book apparently untroubled by this obvious conflict of interest, his portrait of Peretti verging at times on hagiographic, and his attention to financial disclosure airily casual. He waits until almost the final page to inform us of the stake he held in BuzzFeed (he made "what seemed like a small fortune" from slowly selling his shares after the company went public), and twice he describes his former boss, in the evacuant lingo of Silicon Valley, as a visionary who had "seen around a corner." But Peretti's eyesight was not so special that he noticed the financial cliff BuzzFeed was about to walk off as it prepared to go public. His failings—his opposition, beginning in 2015, to BuzzFeed employees forming a union, for instance, or the numerous rounds of layoffs in the late 2010s that stemmed from his company's irrationally rapid growth—are uncritically excused as a reflection of his utopianism, "a kind of magical thinking."

These might seem like small criticisms, but they go to the heart of what it takes to tell a story that people can trust, to be a credible reporter—the essence of journalism, and the mission to which Smith's new venture is supposedly directed. In truth, what Smith does these days is less journalism than journapreneurialism, a hybrid activity that involves reporting on power while aspiring to wield it.

Semafor launched last year with the promise that it would bring readers "an unparalleled level of journalistic transparency through innovative new forms." The fruit of this promise is subheadings: Each Semafor story (or "Semaform") usually includes a label for the discrete sections devoted to news, the reporter's viewpoint, and contrasting perspectives. Within the 16 or so months of its life to date, the new media company has accepted $25 million in funding, struck several big advertising deals, and reported live from the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland. Having witnessed—and chronicled—how venture capital, social media, and digital advertising have distorted and cannibalized journalism over the past two decades, Smith now hopes that angel investors and ad sales will help his social media–savvy online news service restore trust in the very institution these forces have deformed. The media can rehabilitate its image in the eyes of a suspicious public by deepening its ties to the elites. (One can already picture the swing voters of suburban Phoenix racing to their devices to check the next Semaform from Davos.)

Whether this reflects hubris or delusion is unclear, but, like so much of what passes for media innovation today, the project feels strangely rote—like another turn of the ignition in an old car that won't start. While Smith is off partnering with the one percent to save journalism, the internet will roll on, a permanent frenzy of addictive ephemera. And when it eventually comes to be written, the story of the media's future will probably read much like the story of its recent past: They fucked around, and we found out. TNR

Traffic: Genius, Rivalry, and Delusion in the Billion-Dollar Race to Go Viral
by Ben Smith
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Beyond Grit

Charles Portis was a master of the intimate and absurd.

By Scott Bradfield

"PEOPLE DO NOT give it credence," Mattie Ross recounts in the marvelous opening paragraphs of Charles Portis's *True Grit*, "that a fourteen-year-old girl could leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father's blood but it did not seem so strange then, although I will say it did not happen every day." It's a voice that could define almost every Portis protagonist—a self-taught, partly untamed individual of weather-roughened accomplishments striving to articulate the story of their life while battering along the roads that carry them (briefly) away from home and (inevitably) back home again.

After the "coward" Tom Chaney senselessly murders Mattie's generous father and absconds with his wallet and two gold pieces, she determines to bring him back to face trial, and recover both gold pieces while she's at it. To that end, she enlists Rooster Cogburn, former bank robber-turned-deputy marshal, a "one-eyed jasper that was built along the lines of Grover Cleveland," first encountering him outside the courthouse where Cogburn has been testifying to his latest murders in the name of the law. As the prosecutor points out, Cogburn is responsible for "twenty-three dead men in four years. That comes to about six men a year." To which Cogburn replies: "It is dangerous work."

True Grit is a wild ride for readers, and the brisk, bright scenes of dialogue seemed effortlessly translated into two successful films—one in 1969 starring John Wayne and directed by Henry Hathaway, and a second in 2010 by the Coen Brothers. Both contributed to the image of Portis as a bard of the Old West, a sort of hybrid of Louis L'Amour and Mark Twain who staged wide-angle gunfights between near-mythic cowboys and dastardly villains. When he died, at 86 in 2020, major obits remembered the author of a "Western classic," while summarily noting his debut, *Norwood* (also filmed), and his three subsequent, unfilmed novels. But *True Grit*, written in 1968 when Portis was 35, was a deeply uncustomary novel for Portis, who had never taken the tall tales of his Southern youth quite so seriously before, and never would again.

Over a quarter-century, from *Norwood* in 1966 to 1991's *Gringos*, Portis wrote a handful of shortish, densely hilarious novels that explored the deep peculiarity of middle-American life. His characters are self-absorbed, lazy, lonely, unkempt, self-indulgent, and so deeply complacent that they rarely seek anything outside the boundary of the lives they already know. They spend their days reading and drinking with a sort of happy indolence—there's the expatriate Jimmy Burns in *Gringos* who has dropped out of regular employment to dig up artifacts in the Mexican jungle, or Lamar Jimmerson in *Masters of Atlantis*, who cares more about promoting universal truths than about the world's wars and general mayhem. They are difficult for their women to live with. And so their women often leave them.

Yet while these later novels were often his most comically unusual and inventive, they failed to sell very well, and, though widely reviewed, they often suffered unfavorable comparisons to the earlier work. None achieved the cinematic clarity of *True Grit*; they don't translate into other media, and can't be explained in terms of familiar commercial genres (such as science

Above: Charles Portis on the set of *True Grit*, with John Wayne in the background

PARAMOUNT PICTURES/PHOTOFEST

fiction, or "the Western," or even "serious literature"). Like their central characters, they remain uniquely, supremely, and self-indulgently themselves. As a result, Portis's life's work has never been properly appreciated, despite a legion of prominent admirers, from Ed Park and Donna Tartt to Wells Tower. (Jonathan Lethem has called Portis "everyone's favorite least-known great novelist.") For while *True Grit* was an almost perfect combination of imaginative storytelling and commercial success, it set the stage for one of the most remarkable disappearances-in-plain sight of contemporary literature.

THE GRAVITY-BOUND HOMEBODIES of Portis's books sound a lot like their creator, whose known biography is about the sparsest of any major twentieth-century novelist. In fact, most of the corroborated information about him can be found in a slim chronology at the back of the new Library of America volume of his *Collected Works*, assembled by editor Jay Jennings.

Portis was born in El Dorado, Arkansas, on December 28, 1933, his mother a poet and newspaper columnist, his father a school superintendent. He joined the Marines after high school, then got a journalism degree from the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and became a reporter. For four years, he worked for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and in 1963 became bureau chief in London. His friends and colleagues at the time included Lewis Lapham, Jimmy Breslin, Nora Ephron, and Tom Wolfe, who recalled Portis's sudden departure from the profession in 1964:

> Portis quit cold one day; just like that, without a warning. He returned to the United States and moved into a fishing shack in Arkansas. In six months he wrote a beautiful little novel called *Norwood*. Then he wrote *True Grit*, which was a best seller. The reviews were terrific.... A *fishing* shack! In *Arkansas*! It was too goddamned perfect to be true.

Portis, like one of his own characters, entered the world of employment only long enough to find a way out of it. His first, perhaps least-known novel, *Norwood*, was a slim, hilarious tale of a young man venturing forth from his hometown of Ralph, Texas, just long enough to collect $70 owed him by an old military buddy. Norwood's "big adventure" develops as little more than a series of accidental routes taken and encounters with mundanely unconventional comic characters, culminating with a late-night conversation on a bus that leads to Norwood proposing marriage to a girl he has just met. At which point Norwood does what so many of Portis's characters end up doing—he goes home, bringing his new fiancée with him.

It wasn't until after his second novel, however, that Portis no longer had to work at all. *True Grit* seems to have grown from the mightiest fictional materials of Portis's life: the stories of cataclysmic Civil War and Western rowdyism that he listened to when his father and uncles and grandparents got together.

There are two types of people in Portis: those who walk their roads with a modicum of decency, like Mattie, and those who travel with gangs, cheating and lying (often to one another) for money, such as Chaney and his outlaw honcho, Lucky Ned Pepper. This often means some unlikely characters end up on the side of the good. Rooster, for instance, is a crude man who drinks and kills too much, but what makes him noble in Mattie's eyes is that he finishes each job he sets out to do. He is also not a liar or a cheat, and possesses a sense of self-irony. When Mattie finds him drunk in his back room at a Chinese grocery store, playing with her father's too large gun and pointing out a "big long barn rat" raiding a sack of meal, he understands the absurdity of his role:

> He leaned forward and spoke at the rat in a low voice, saying, "I have a writ here that says for you to stop eating Chen Lee's corn meal forthwith. It is a rat writ. It is a writ for a rat and this is lawful service of said writ."

Charles Portis: Collected Works
by Charles Portis, edited by Jay Jennings
Library of America, 1,105 pp., $45.00

He fires at the rat, and the store's owner sits up in his bunk and admonishes him: "Outside is place for shooting." "I was serving some papers," Rooster replies. It's not what Portis's characters do or accomplish that makes the novels come alive from the first sentence right through to the last—it's how they speak about what they do, often while doing it, always striving to sound more lucid, rational, and articulate than their crude educations permit, a combination of factors that, in Portis's hands, flashes with eloquence.

Like Mark Twain, William Saroyan, or even Damon Runyon, Portis was a poet of American vernacular; the oddly rhythmic ways his characters spoke reflected more than the regions that formed them—they marked the deep twists and contradictions of their inner nature. But despite frequent comparisons to Huckleberry Finn, Portis's Mattie and the eponymous Norwood are not the sort who, on a whim, will "light out for the territory ahead of the rest," but rather are always looking to return home and settle down to their normally humdrum, routine lives. (There is more of L. Frank Baum's Dorothy Gale about them than Huck Finn.) If anything, Mattie only wants to bring the wild West back to Arkansas in the embodiment of Cogburn's casket, which, at *True Grit*'s conclusion, she buries in the family plot and memorializes with a $65 tombstone.

AFTER THE SUCCESS of *True Grit*, *The Dog of the South*—arriving 11 years later in 1979—was a return to form, but a form unrecognizable to anybody who only knew Portis through *True Grit*. The typical Portis character is not, like Rooster Cogburn, larger than life in a John Wayne–ish sense; they are rather memorable for their idiosyncratic smallness, being no more than average men with modest, useful skills for plotting courses on road maps, or rigging their battered old trucks and cars just well enough to get them another few miles down the road. (There is no novelist who knows more ways to cheaply fix broken cars than Portis, who spent time in his youth as a car mechanic.)

When *Dog* opens, its protagonist, Ray Midge, has just been abandoned by his wife, Norma, for her previous husband, Guy Dupree, a copy editor at the newspaper where Midge works. Perhaps even more unforgivably, Dupree has taken Ray's Ford Torino, his "good raincoat and a shotgun." Until the loss of his wife, Ray lacked any

Despite frequent comparisons to Huckleberry Finn, Portis's characters are not the sort who, on a whim, will "light out for the territory ahead of the rest."

sense of adventure. He daydreamed about earning a teaching degree, and established petty rules around the house. ("Two of my rules did cause a certain amount of friction—my rule against smoking at the table and my rule against record-playing after 9 p.m., by which time I had settled in for a night of reading.") Unlike his errant wife, Norma, Ray is not an adventurous personality; he regrets showing no support for her enthusiasms:

> She wanted to dye her hair. She wanted to change her name to Staci or Pam or April. She wanted to open a shop selling Indian jewelry. It wouldn't have hurt me to discuss this shop idea with her—big profits are made every day in that silver and turquoise stuff—but I couldn't be bothered. I had to get on with my reading!

The dastardly Dupree, on the other hand, is too exciting for his own good. He faces trial for making written threats to the president, which he signs with made-up names such as "Night Rider" and "Jo Jo the Dog-Faced Boy." ("This time it's curtains for you and your rat family. I know your movements and I have access to your pets too.") He worries that his incompetent court-appointed lawyer will "stipulate my ass right into a federal pen" and runs off to Mexico. His only mistake is in using Midge's Texaco card to pay his way. Once the bills start arriving, Midge sets off to bring home what's his.

It's another "there and back again" novel, but one in which the "there" turns into an endless journey down bad roads in Dupree's crappy car, during which Midge encounters all sorts of mesmerizingly wild, verbose characters and even crappier lodgings. Midge qualifies as a good man under Portis's not very stringent qualifications. He is generous to those in need; and he listens politely to the men and women who come banging through his life. Chief among them is Dr. Reo Symes, a con man seeking a ride to his mother's missionary outpost in Belize (where she plays the same Heckle and Jeckle cartoons repeatedly and then, once the audience is settled inside her church, bolts all the doors). Symes has spent much of his life running fraudulent mail-order schemes and selling dodgy hearing aids to the elderly, and just summarizing his exploits requires at least one long road trip of listening. As Ray recounts:

> I learned that he had been dwelling in the shadows for several years. He had sold hi-lo shag carpet remnants and velvet paintings from the back of a truck in California. He had sold wide shoes by mail, shoes that must have been almost round, at widths up to EEEEEE. He had sold gladiola bulbs and vitamins for men and fat-melting pills and all-purpose hooks and hail-damaged pears. He had picked up small fees counseling veterans on how to fake chest pains so as to gain immediate admission to V.A. hospitals and a free week in bed. He had sold ranchettes in Colorado and unregistered securities in Arkansas.

But throughout this steadily unrolling catalog of iniquity, Ray—like most of Portis's protagonists—never judges; he only relates. "I once looked into medicine myself," Ray confesses to the endlessly chatting Symes, who doesn't pay attention to anybody but himself. "I sent off for some university catalogues." Portis's characters know that they can't be too judgmental—if they were, they wouldn't have any friends.

IF *DOG* IS Portis's comic tour de force, his next novel, *Masters of Atlantis*, written with what seems to be painstaking, sentence by sculpted sentence joy over the next six years, is his *Magic Mountain*. Tracking the progress of the fictional Gnomon Society—whose contentious fellow travelers include French Rosicrucians, Madame Blavatsky, the Druids, and "Aleister Crowley's grisly gang"—*Masters* encompasses such a wide vision of benign theosophical idiocy that it feels like a secret kingdom all its own. For while there are virtually no fantasy or supernatural events in any of Portis's books, his weirdest and most likable characters often enjoy imagining vast metaphysical possibilities. While making their home in the world they know, they often try to imagine a better one.

Masters begins in France in 1917, when Lamar Jimmerson acquires the *Codex Pappus* from a "dark bowlegged man" looking for a meal. The *Codex*, the man claims, has been copied from an original book that "had been sealed in an ivory casket in Atlantis many thousands of years ago, and committed to the waves on that terrible day when the rumbling began." Filled with a perplexing number of triangles, the *Codex* reportedly established a secret brotherhood that once included Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras, and Cagliostro—but ever since those characters disappeared into the transcelestial wonderment, the twentieth century has to accept Jimmerson for any further illuminations. He imperfectly translates the Greek *Codex* with the help of some tourists at a hotel in Malta, meets other young men seeking wisdom, and embarks on a lifetime of service to hermetical transhistorical forces.

Masters is the most unusual of Portis's five unusual novels, covering many decades, many lives, and many epiphanies in the life of a religion narrated from the inside out. As Jimmerson ages, the acolytes come and go; and the most inescapable of them, Austin Popper, eventually returns to their temple in Burnette, Indiana, to convince Lamar to make a gubernatorial run. To this end, Popper advises they prepare a campaign biography of the great man, enlisting the help of a hack writer from Indiana named Dub Polton, whose pen names include Jack Fargo (*'Neath Pecos Skies*), Vince Beaudine (*Too Many Gats*), Dr. Klaus

Ehrhart (*Slimming Secrets of the Stars*), and the popular juvenile writer, Ethel Decatur Cathcart (*Billy and His Magic Socks*).

Masters, like Jimmerson's *Codex*, is sui generis, even by comparison with Portis's always unusual work. The Gnomons devote themselves equally to metaphysics and to the pointless disputes and exacerbations of day-to-day operations. (At one point, they enjoy a successful membership drive by reducing the number of triangles in their translation of the *Codex*.) They thrive, fail, develop, and scupper alliances, and drift apart and together again throughout their intensely private musings about the "meaning" of Atlantis. It's a book about finding beauty in a world after World War I that must not have seemed very beautiful at all.

IT IS HARD to imagine a greater or more valuable pleasure-per-ounce package than the collected works of Charles Portis, a writer who made the most out of being barely well-known. For once the movie people stopped seeing his cinematic possibilities, Portis could get back to producing his unassuming, always surprising and entertaining books; and once the critics stopped finding easy ways to compare him to the wide horizons of America, he could continue exploring the intimate, absurd spaces he preferred. In one of his rare interviews, he made the self-deprecating remark: "Anything I set out to do degenerates pretty quickly into farce." But of course nothing about Portis's fiction ever "degenerates" as it goes along, so much as it gathers a sort of gleeful enthusiasm for the smallest pleasures of human life—good meals; sometimes-dependable friends and partners; neat, warm beds; and unusual conversations.

In one of his last published pieces, "Motel Life, Lower Reaches," Portis went searching for "that ideal in my head of the cheap and shipshape roadside dormitory," where he could recuperate at night from his drives between Little Rock and Mexico and back again. (Portis joked that one of the most alluring of the motels should have offered signs out front flashing: NOT QUITE A DUMP ... AT DUMP PRICES.) After various adventures in itinerant living, he thinks he finds it at the Desert View in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico (the sort of name that, if it hadn't existed, Portis would have to invent), which he describes as "a bit small but clean, new, modern, all those things, with a gleaming white bathroom."

> The bed was flat and firm. Over the headboard there were two good reading lamps mounted on pivots. I had air conditioning, cable television. A refrigerator, and a microwave oven. It was a quiet place with few guests, none of sly or rat-like appearance. I could park directly in front of my door.

Clean, simple, and with ample light for reading—the perfect space for a man like Portis, never a total stranger to the people he met, and always ready to take another quick jaunt down the road. TNR

Scott Bradfield*'s most recent book is* Reading Great Books in the Bathtub: Essays & Reviews 2005–2021.

Island

by Ellen Bass

in memory of Florence Howe
1929–2020

That island and the little hotel. Only a few
steps to the beach and she took my arm.
We lounged in the shade of a straw umbrella.
The breeze was like a lover, breathing
over my skin. I read *War and Peace* again:
one must believe in the possibility
of happiness in order to be happy.
What did she read? I don't remember
and will never know.
How she loved water! Weightless,
her hips, her knees. We spilled into that other realm.
Rainbow wrasse, salpa lit with gold,
schools of silver seabream.
Every day. Nothing to do.
We ate fruit. We drank wine. There was a candle
on our table. I took her photo
in a green sun dress and woven hat. Today
I read a story in which a man asks his lover's mother
to tell him something about her son.
Those stories are heirlooms, she says, refusing.
So maybe I shouldn't write this. Maybe I should save it
for myself. I did that once—an embroidered cloth
I bought at a flea market. I planned to give it
to a friend, but then kept it.
Draped it over a table, lit a candle.
An ember burned a hole in the pretty cloth.

Ellen Bass*'s most recent book is* Indigo.

A Town Divided

Cristian Mungiu's close-up on the resentments and anxieties roiling Europe

By Lidija Haas

TOWARD THE END of writer-director Cristian Mungiu's *R.M.N.* comes a virtuosic 15-minute crowd scene worthy of a Bruegel painting. Throughout, the camera holds still, while alternating surges of outrage, alarm, approval, and sneering laughter roil its wide, tightly packed human landscape. The crowd often seems to have its own animating logic, but it's of course made up of individuals, mumbling and shouting across one another in their various languages (Romanian, Hungarian, French) and participating in their own small, vivid scenes within the scene, which we can follow if we choose to filter out the rest of the action. You could watch it many times over and still find new details, textures. This sequence clearly aspires to contain a microcosm of the movie, and of the society it depicts—a village, a nation, a continent, a world—in all its ugly volatility.

In one sense, this is the R.M.N.—Romanian for MRI—of the title, a diagnostic scan of the current dire state of things. What we're watching is a small-town meeting that takes place at Christmastime, called by the local mayor to discuss a crisis: 411 people have signed a petition to banish some workers from Sri Lanka who have recently been hired at the local bakery. The bakery needs a certain number of employees to qualify for EU funding and has struggled to attract local workers—both Romanians and the large Hungarian minority in that region—who are mostly seeking better pay abroad. Many different opinions and feelings are represented at the meeting (all, it seems, save those of the offending foreigners themselves, absent thanks to death threats and violent attacks).

A roving microphone transmits these views: "We got rid of the Gypsies, now we fight over foreigners?" "Let us mind our words; the West is watching." "Spare us your West—my son-in-law's bosses in Germany called him nothing but a Gypsy, and he's more German than migrants who pick up trash for the dainty natives!" "EU membership entails obligations." "Like being their retail market?" "This is about hygiene—pardon me, but Muslims don't wipe their butts like the rest of us, and in a bakery …"

When a brave or foolhardy visiting Frenchman from an environmental NGO attempts to speak up, jeers overwhelm him: "We're jobless, the mine got shut down—by ecologists! Animals attack our livestock, and he gets paid to count our bears? He can count them in his own country! They don't have any more bears; they killed them all to build freeways … so they got all developed, and now they tell us to be Europe's zoo, like they did in Africa, only we're not savages!… In Paris, there are more Blacks and Arabs than French; it makes you afraid to use the Metro.… You wanted colonies, now handle them! But why do we have to pay for it?… Listen, Mister Fraternité-Égalité …"

This is a familiar set of social problems, nested like Russian dolls, of fragile identities further undermined by economic insecurity. The film refracts the anxieties and resentments of the struggling rural regions of a southeastern European country—exploited, neglected, and condescended to by more prosperous neighbors, on whose largesse it thus all the more depends—into those of individual villagers, showing how they soothe and aggrandize themselves by finding still more vulnerable people to bully and scapegoat. By exploring these widespread tensions over immigration and poverty at a smaller scale, fitting them back into the narratives of everyday life, Mungiu makes them vivid and personal again, conveys more viscerally than a news story can how intractable they are.

The film is a kind of social parable, like *Animal Farm*, or Shirley Jackson's story "The Lottery," but it doesn't want to sacrifice realist detail—geographic and historical specificity, and the development of characters who demand some emotional engagement—in the service of political force. Mungiu wants to tell a story about people in trouble, to offer a universal moral lesson, and to analyze a particular political conjuncture—and for the most part these elements tend to strengthen and deepen one another, even if his ambition at times puts them under too much strain.

IN THE MEETING-ROOM scene, as the economic grievances, pseudoscientific racism, and injured national pride form their familiar patchwork, we can observe a strange little tableau in the right-hand foreground: Sitting just behind the beleaguered bakery owner and her manager, Csilla (Judith State), is Csilla's on-off lover, Matthias (Marin Grigore), the film's hapless anti-hero. He tries to sweet-talk his way back into her affections and keeps grabbing her hand, even as his name is read out on the list of petitioners, and his estranged wife looks daggers at them from a couple of rows back.

The relationship between Csilla and Matthias is finely drawn, though as the film progresses it has to bear what can feel like too much symbolic weight. Matthias is a study in impoverished, humiliated, needy masculinity. He has returned from his job in a German slaughterhouse and must now address his own various crises. His father, Papa Otto, a sheep farmer, is in poor health and increasingly unable to manage alone; his son, Rudi, has stopped speaking and regressed after seeing something disturbing in the woods; and Rudi's mother is visibly sick of Matthias's intermittent tantrums, his attempts to reclaim his lost status as man of the house through intimidation and force.

We see him watching Csilla at night from outside the large, pretty house she's inherited from her parents—he seems threatening at times, at others small and excluded, aspiring to another kind of life. She sips wine and listens to classical music, stopping the

COURTESY OF MOBRA FILMS/IFC FILMS RELEASE

recording at intervals to try the phrases on her cello. This often seems a portrait of civilization juxtaposed with encroaching barbarism, but it's one emphatically dependent on creature comforts unavailable to most of the community. Their resentment of her is occasionally expressed through slut-shaming misogyny, which dovetails neatly with their racialized disgust at the idea of the newcomers putting their hands in the bread, culminating in a boycott of the bakery.

As discontent grows louder in the village, the silent boy seems to hold all its unresolvable tensions. Where the local church and its priest—who sputters to explain to his flock how he, like the bakery owner, affords a Mercedes while they scrape by—offer no relief and no wisdom, instead choosing to shore up their authority by supporting and magnifying the worst instincts of the mob, Rudi serves as a Christ-like figure, showing up the wretchedness around him, and manifesting the sadness, fear, vulnerability, and unmet need the adults are concealing or transmuting into violence. He speaks only once during the film—words of love, while everyone else for a brief moment stops arguing, stands quiet.

MUNGIU'S FILMS ARE social thrillers or tragedies, often focusing on the emotional consequences for individuals of large, crushing institutional and political forces, which he sets up to play out under time pressure. His second feature, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), a period piece set in the 1980s under Ceaușescu's dictatorship, follows two friends in the attempt to secure one of them an illegal abortion. In *Beyond the Hills* (2012), a young woman named Alina tries to persuade the woman she loves, with whom she grew up in an orphanage, to leave the religious community she has joined and emigrate with her. Alina grows increasingly distressed and, after receiving inadequate care in an overstretched hospital and finding that her former foster family has given away her room, becomes the subject of a misguided and brutal exorcism.

That film, like *R.M.N.*, is based on a real event, but its portrayal of the relationship between the two young women, more profoundly affecting than that between Matthias and Csilla, forms its heart and creates its wrenching sense of contingency. *R.M.N.*, though consistently absorbing and striking, at times risks being overpowered by its own source material. That masterful scene in the town hall is a variation on a real video of a similar meeting, recorded in a Romanian village in February 2020, and it is the film's signature accomplishment, somewhat overshadowing the more intimate dramas Mungiu constructs and imagines around it. The set of political conflicts and problems so painstakingly laid out in that scene is a fascinating cat's cradle that seems to require and deserve still more unraveling, and the love and family stories that unfold through the rest of the film don't always feel adequate to the task—they express the immediate effects of these difficulties, rather than fully exploring how they work. The troubles among Matthias, his ex, and Csilla feel fairly universal—they don't tell us a great deal about this particular historical moment.

It's almost as if the film begins to shrink from the essential darkness of its own social logic, from the frighteningly pessimistic view it has set up. Matthias and his ex make quite different choices within similar economic constraints, and Csilla shows more integrity than her boss, who, seeing her business under threat, offers concessions as ugly and pusillanimous as they are futile: They'll have the foreigners wear gloves, she says, or move them to accommodations outside the village. But still there is the sense that material conditions largely constrain moral choice and feeling and are quite inexorable in determining the course of events.

The analytical portrait of the community provided at the meeting is what stays with you. Mungiu's more fanciful flights can't always compete. Throughout, there are gestures at atavistic and metaphysical forces at play. The movie begins with little Rudi on his walk to school, alone in the woods, confronting head-on a danger we the viewer don't see—it could be a fearful projection, or a metaphor, or perhaps it's us. The film's closing frames, on the other hand, show his father faced with something that likewise seems symbolic—representing a threat that may come from outside or from within him. These flourishes are perhaps the answer to a question that inevitably arises in making art from the headlines, reconstructing real events that seem to pulse with dramatic promise, irresolvable needs and conflicts—what is it possible to add? TNR

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Res Publica
by Alex Shephard

There They Go Again

The midterms did not finish off extremist Republicans.

After Republicans did significantly worse in the midterm elections than expected, the party's Brahmins took stock of the situation and decided that things weren't all bad. "Republicans: Trump is your problem. Wake up," summed up *National Review*, and much of what was left of the party's anti-Trump faction agreed. Mitt Romney, who also pushed his colleagues to embrace fiscal responsibility, identified a paradox that had doomed his party: "If you get endorsed by him in the primary, you're likely to win. If you get endorsed by him in the general, you're likely to lose," Romney told a reporter. "So for someone who actually wants to win an election, getting endorsed by him is the kiss of death."


Kari Lake

Mitch McConnell, who was left doing another stint as Senate minority leader after the hoped-for "red wave" fizzled, came to a similar conclusion. "We ended up having a candidate quality test," McConnell told reporters. "Our ability to control the primary outcome was quite limited in '22 because the support of the former president proved to be very decisive in these primaries. So my view was do the best you can with the cards you're dealt. Now, hopefully, in the next cycle we'll have quality candidates everywhere and a better outcome."

This was the consensus among much of the pundit class: Republicans had a candidate quality problem. If they had just run reasonable candidates instead of insane ones in races in Arizona, Georgia, and Pennsylvania, among others, they would be sitting in the catbird seat today. Recognizing you have a problem is always a good first step. Surely, with this knowledge in tow, the GOP won't make the same mistake again.

Or will they? Months after their disastrous midterm showing, many extremists are once again poised to run in primary elections. Doug Mastriano, the election denier who got clobbered in Pennsylvania's gubernatorial race, is pushing for a comeback in the form of a Senate run. And it's not just Pennsylvania—far-right candidates are mulling runs and gaining traction amid clear signs they will fail miserably in the general election, putting GOP hopes of reclaiming the chamber at risk, per *Politico*. There's onetime Fox News mainstay and former Sheriff David Clarke pondering a run against Senator Tammy Baldwin in Wisconsin; Montanan Matt Rosendale is having a break from being photographed with Nazis to mull taking on Democratic Senator Jon Tester; meanwhile, Blake Masters and Kari Lake, both deemed too extreme for Arizonans in 2022, are considering running against newly independent Senator Kyrsten Sinema.

In fairness, the GOP has made some effort to course-correct. Steve Daines is the new chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, having taken the reins from Rick Scott. Daines insists that he is all about electability. "Chairman Daines has been clear he's willing to do whatever it takes to nominate candidates who can win both a primary and a general election," NRSC spokesperson Mike Berg told *Politico*, in a comment that could be interpreted as a shot at both Scott and Trump.

But Daines and his NRSC colleagues may not have enough thumbs to put on the scale to tip things back toward "electable." Donald Trump's endorsement isn't the only factor. Republican voters, given the choice between extremists and staid alternatives, are sticking with the weirdos. For many in the party, the fact that the 2020 election was "stolen" is holy writ, and they want candidates willing to make that part of their message. Republican voters, moreover, aren't thinking about electability—looking toward the presidential election cycle, a recent poll found that Republicans prefer a candidate with whom they agree over one who can beat Biden. Trump himself is soaring in the polls, leading his main rival, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, by 15 or 20 points or more in most polls. The GOP base is as issue-oriented as ever, but those issues are now more often the kind that generate attention only in hermetically sealed environments, such as right-wing cable news. Concerns about "election integrity" and "wokeness" have yet to be translated into election-winning ideas, however.

In 2022, Trump's endorsement certainly put some candidates over the top in their primaries—that is particularly true of Dr. Mehmet Oz in Pennsylvania and J.D. Vance in Ohio. But these were candidates who needed to win over voters who were skeptical of their far-right bona fides: Oz had previously been a TV doctor; Vance had, only a few years earlier, been one of the country's most prominent Trump critics. Some candidates who straddle the far-right/establishment line—particularly Governors Ron DeSantis and Glenn Youngkin—have found success in the party. But it's not evident that their message would work nationally or, for that matter, if there are candidates who fit their mold who are ready and willing to run in competitive states like Arizona and Pennsylvania.

The involvement of the NRSC and other GOP organs could even backfire—candidates such as Mastriano and Lake would love to run ads about how the Republican establishment is out to get them. It's easy to see a situation that's the inverse of what happened in 2022, with the endorsement of the NRSC acting as a kiss of death in the primary.

Naturally, all the effort to find and install more "electable" candidates to run in the most important primaries may succeed in the end. But as with all of the latter-day hand-wringing about how the power of Trump's endorsement was the cause of the party's chronic underperformance in the 2022 midterms, there's a larger point being missed. Extreme candidates succeed in Republican primaries because Republican voters prefer extreme candidates to the alternative, and they've been pushed to those preferences by the very same party elites who now want to change course. TNR

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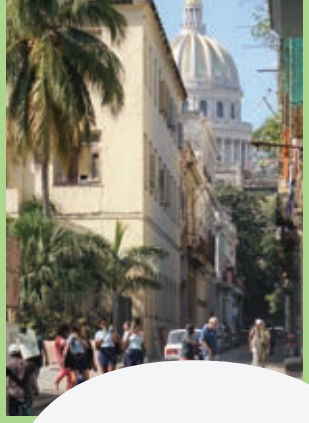

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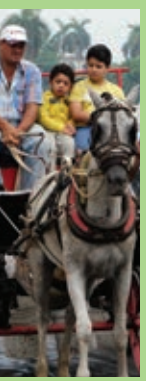

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