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A Press Under Siege

If there is one constant to Donald Trump’s presidency, it’s his determination to weaken democratic norms and institutions. Trump and his supporters have attacked the judiciary, threatened to jail political opponents, made false claims about illegal voting, and attempted to redefine the rules regarding presidential accountability. At the core of this assault on democracy is Trump’s unwavering obsession with undermining the media outlets that attempt to hold him to account. Veteran journalist Dan Rather is not being extreme when he says that Trump’s attacks on the press are “straight out of Orwell.” The president is an “authoritarian,” Rather warns, whose “method is to convince people that the only truth is the truth that comes from [him], the ultimate power.”

The latest turn in this crusade came after A.G. Sulzberger, the publisher of The New York Times, met with the president on July 20. Sulzberger pressed Trump on his “deeply troubling anti-press rhetoric” and told him that “this inflammatory language is contributing to a rise in threats against journalists and will lead to violence.” Days after this off-the-record conversation, Trump mischaracterized it, tweeting that they’d had a “good and interesting meeting” in which he discussed “the vast amounts of Fake News being put out by the media.” Sulzberger was aghast and released a statement about how he had tried to warn the president about the dangers that extend from “undermining the democratic ideals of our nation.” Undeterred, Trump responded on Twitter by portraying journalists who report unsettling facts about his administration as “very unpatriotic” provocateurs who put “the lives of many, not just journalists, at risk.”

All of this is to plan; to dominate the discourse about his presidency, Trump knows that he must make the people reject journalism that speaks truth to his power. He is blunt about this. “Stick with us,” he told a veterans’ convention on July 24. “Don’t believe the crap you see from these people, the fake news.” Egging on the crowd’s hissing at reporters and camera crews, the president shouted: “What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening.”

What makes this crisis all the more acute is that for the past few decades, ransacked by corporate overlords and plagued by declining ad revenue, the nation’s newsrooms have been hemorrhaging journalists. Earlier this summer, Tronc, the sorry excuse for a media company that owns several large dailies, laid off half the editorial staff at the New York Daily News, which had already been whittled down to about 85 full-timers. The 99-year-old paper—which still does the best job of covering the five boroughs, while also maintaining a robust national voice that challenged Trump, the National Rifle Association, and the telecommunications giants—will now be working with a skeleton crew. They are hardly the exception; a recent Pew study found that “at least 36 percent of the largest newspapers across the United States—as well as at least 23 percent of the highest-traffic digital-native news outlets—experienced layoffs between January 2017 and April 2018.”

The vital institution of American journalism has never been in greater need of a forceful advocate in the White House. Instead, we have a demagogue and bully who is trying to tear it down. So journalists who are serious about defending the freedom of the press must become more outspoken about the threat this president poses. They must show solidarity with one another, especially when Trump attacks particular media outlets or when his aides seek to stifle questions from particular reporters. And they must remind the public of why they are so necessary to democracy itself by focusing on the real scandals, like the decimation of regulations designed to keep Americans safe and the assaults on civil rights and civil liberties. As George Mason put it more than two centuries ago, “freedom of the press is one of the greatest bulwarks of liberty, and can never be restrained but by despotic governments.”
Disrupter in Chief

Some of Trump’s targets are long overdue for reform.

President Trump recently upbraided the Federal Reserve for raising interest rates. “I don’t like all of this work that we’re putting into the economy and then I see rates going up,” he said.

The remarks elicited a furious response. “Attacking central bank is one more step in what seems like a Presidential strategy of turning the United States into a banana republic,” tweeted Larry Summers, the former treasury secretary (during the Clinton administration) and wannabe Fed chair (under Obama). In a lead editorial, The Washington Post scolded Trump for once more trampling on presidential norms: “Presidential respect for the independence of the Federal Reserve is an unwritten rule but vital to modern American governance.”

There’s no question that Trump has busted yet another norm. But tradition aside, why should the Federal Reserve, dominated by bankers and their servitors, be insulated from the democratic discourse?

The decisions that the Fed makes on interest rates—in this case, raising them to preempt an anticipated rise in inflation—are inherently political judgments about values and priorities. Is future inflation such a concern that it’s necessary to raise interest rates, slow the economy, and throw people out of work in order to get in front of it? Or, after years of wage stagnation, is it better for the Fed to give the economy its head, even put up with a little inflation, in the hope that as workers grow scarce, companies will be forced to raise wages?

Nightmares about inflation galloping out of control are largely the fanciful inventions of creditors worried that debtors will gain an edge. Progressive economists have long argued that allowing the Fed to control these decisions rigs the rules against working people in favor of Wall Street. As the economist Dean Baker wrote in response to the furor over Trump’s remarks, “The outraged reporter gang might want to study up some on the meaning of democracy.”

The tempest over the Fed illustrates what has officially become a syndrome. In his chaos presidency, Trump clearly relishes disrupting established conventions and institutions, generally to malevolent ends. But in some areas—particularly those central to his populist posturing—he challenges entrenched institutions and policies that are long overdue for transformation. In many cases, his targets are similar to those that progressives have worked for years to reform.

For example, his criticisms of NATO and calls for greater burden-sharing in the organization mirror the critiques issued by the peace movement and progressive foreign-policy reformers. His call for rebuilding America’s decrepit infrastructure—though quickly shelved—echoed a central theme of progressives, including Senator Bernie Sanders.

Trump’s challenge to China and his insistence on renegotiating NAFTA and the Korean trade deal echo demands made by progressive Democrats and labor unions for years. Early reports suggest that NAFTA negotiators are considering the elimination of the noxious investor-state dispute-settlement system, which gives multinational corporations their own private legal venue, as well as imposing a $17 minimum wage for autoworkers across the region.

In these cases, reflexive “resistance” to Trump is used by establishment forces hoping to defend the old order: the corporate trading system, the “rules-based” international order, or a NATO alliance flailing about for a purpose after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Trump is in the White House in large part because these institutions have been failing most Americans.

Trump fares best when the choice on offer is between his disruptive chaos and business as usual. Progressives cannot fall for this trap. The folly of Trump’s trade wars—for example, isolating the United States by taking on China and our allies at the same time—is no reason to embrace the old corporate trading order. Trump’s churlish behavior at the NATO and G-7 summits doesn’t justify rising to the defense of institutions seemingly intent on reviving the Cold War.

That’s why the thrust provided by Sanders, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and the progressive wing of the Democratic Party is so important. The answer to Trump isn’t to defend what’s failed, but to lay out a bold agenda that challenges the rigged rules and offers real alternatives to address the pressing needs of working people.

Trump’s Achilles’ heel is that for all of his populist posturing, his actual agenda—mostly drawn from the right-wing shibboleths of the Republican Congress—offers no answers for working people in this country. He rails against offshoring, but the Republican tax bill he touts gives multinationals a permanent tax incentive to shift jobs abroad. With his own pen, Trump could use government procurement to penalize companies that move jobs elsewhere, but he has refused to act.

Likewise, despite his expressed doubts about our interventions across the Middle East, Trump has doubled down on them, adding troops and expanding the use of drones in conflicts that offer no victory and no end. He claims to be for working people, but his administration has systematically undermined workers’ power—attacking the minimum wage, sabotaging labor unions, rolling back worker-safety and environmental protections—and seeks to undermine Medicaid, Medicare, food stamps, and virtually the entire shared security system for working people.

The answer to Trump’s disruptions isn’t an embrace of the failed policies and institutions of the past. It is to be clear about what progressives stand for, while relentlessly exposing Trump’s false promises.

ROBERT L. BOROSAGE

6.7% / 6.8%
The national black unemployment rate in 1968 and 2018, respectively—both double the rate of white unemployment.

59% / 62%
Black median household income as a percentage of white median household income in 1968 and 2016.

41% / 41%
Black homeownership rate in 1968 and 2015—both roughly 60 percent of the white homeownership rate.

5.2% / 10.2%
Black median household wealth as a percentage of white median household wealth in 1963 and 2016.

1.9:1 / 2.3:1
Ratio of black infant mortality to white infant mortality in 1968 and 2015.

604 / 1,730
Incarcerated black Americans per 100,000 in 1968 and 2018—5.4 and 6.4 times, respectively, the white incarceration rate.

—Chris Gelardi
When Richard Brummett arrived in Southeast Asia in 1967, he was a true believer in the Vietnam War. But his commanding officer had a penchant for using the unit’s tanks to destroy homes and burn down villages. Then there were the beatings, rapes, and killings of noncombatants by other men in his unit. Brummett says he loaded the munitions that killed 13 people for nothing more than running. Maybe they were enemy snipers; maybe they were just farmers frightened for their lives. In the end, they were dead Vietnamese, so they were chalked up as enemy “kills.” All of this carnage took a toll. Brummett was changed by the war, poisoned by it, obsessed with it.

By the time he returned from Vietnam, Brummett was a true believer of a very different sort. In 1970, he wrote a letter to Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, calling on the former Wisconsin congressman to take action against those responsible for the wanton violence he had witnessed. I asked Brummett to reflect on Vietnam—the war and the country—and tell me about the year that transformed his life. —Nick Turse

**NT:** What did you expect out of service in Vietnam?

**RB:** The attitude I had, which I assumed everyone had, was, “Oh, there might be some big battle and just about everyone on both sides would be dead after, but I’d be alive.” That’s how, as a 20-year-old, I viewed the possibility of combat in Vietnam. It didn’t quite work out that way—although for me personally, it worked out very well.

I was bracketed by death: When I arrived in the Fourth Cavalry in July ’67, the first sergeant and troop clerk looked at me really strange. It took a while before someone finally told me that I strongly resembled some guy who just got killed—and I was his replacement.

**NT:** That’s eerie.

**RB:** Yes, it was very strange. They used to scold me for things that he did: “You don’t eat apricots out of a C-ration can—they cause land mines, you moron!” I heard this from them because that’s how my predecessor died.

**NT:** How’s that?

**RB:** My predecessor had jumped down into [an armored personnel carrier] to get some apricots, opened it up, and boom—they hit a land mine, and he was killed.

**NT:** Did you have a vision in your head about what military service in Vietnam would be like? And did it bear any resemblance to reality?

**RB:** I thought it would be glorious. But I found that we were mostly committing war crimes in civilian villages.

**NT:** What were the reverberations of 1968 in your life?

**RB:** It definitely was the most significant year of my life. Not a day goes by that I don’t think about Vietnam. I came out of it, but for years I was a lost, wandering hippie living in a Volkswagen bus, alone and miserable. But life has gotten better. Eventually, I started going back to Vietnam. From 2006 to 2017, I took 10 monthlong trips to the Da Nang area of Vietnam. I saw a whole different Vietnam, and met people in a different way than at the point of my gun.

**NT:** You grew up in the shadow of World War II and served in Vietnam. And you lived through maybe the closest thing this country has had—even if only for a few short years—of being at peace. Looking back over your life now, what does it feel like to be almost 20 years into an era of perpetual war?

**RB:** I feel intense sadness that we’ve gotten the country into this. All these naive 20-year-olds, 18-year-olds, are getting chewed up by these wars—and then there’s what we’re doing to the people of all these countries.

The list gets longer all the time: Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Syria. Who is benefiting from all this agony? I had the naive hope, in the years after Vietnam, that when I died—as a really old guy—the obituary would read: “America’s last combat veteran of any war died today.”

**NT:** And do you think that Vietnam still holds lessons for us today?

**RB:** Vietnam definitely holds lessons for us today, and they’re the same lessons my parents angrily refused to hear from me in late 1968: It is rather easy to kill. Some men will take greater pleasure in the act than others, but nearly everyone will kill. Another lesson is that, if given license by authority, some men will go far beyond simple killing. Others will not.
Trump’s War on Children

White House policies represent an assault on kids—but not the white ones.

As political maxims go, this one seems beyond reproach: Don’t go after kids. Yet, once again, the Trump administration is proving itself the innovator. In five distinct areas, the administration has doubled down on policies that impose disproportionate, sometimes fatal burdens on children—especially black and brown ones.

To be sure, Trump doesn’t justify these policies by citing their anti-kid effects. Children’s suffering is either foreseeable collateral damage or a tool to be used in a larger cultural and political conflict. But that just makes the administration’s war on kids even more baffling, because it courts controversy and undermines the White House’s own rhetoric of righteous victimhood. So the question is worth asking: Why choose policies that so visibly harm children?

Let’s start with the most well-publicized front in the war on kids: the separation and detention of families at the US-Mexican border. Since October 2017, the government has removed about 2,000 children from their migrant parents. Rather than mitigating the resulting harms, the administration first sought to exploit them. The White House tendered these separated families as a “bargaining chip” in congressional negotiations over the Dreamers. Separately, immigration officials described the practice of taking children away from their parents as a “deterrent” to others thinking of claiming asylum.

A second, underappreciated example of Trump’s cruelty toward children is the travel ban. Despite White House claims about security concerns, the ban disproportionately affects children, as well as women and the elderly. Before the ban, a traveler from Syria, Libya, Iran, or another affected country had to obtain a visa from a US consulate. But to do so, they had to prove their eligibility “to the satisfaction of the Attorney General.” Meeting this burden of proof was always easier in the case of children; adults might have a criminal record, for example, or connections to proscribed groups. Thus, when the travel ban came into effect, a disproportionate share of its impact was felt by kids.

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Trump’s third anti-kid policy affects Americans directly: The White House has urged the imposition of work requirements for a host of federal welfare and health benefits. In July, building on an April 2018 executive order, the president’s Council on Economic Affairs declared the War on Poverty “over” and claimed that victory as justification for extending work requirements to non-cash programs like SNAP and housing assistance.

Work requirements mean that parents who lose their jobs could also lose their health care, housing, and food benefits. When parents are deprived of access to such help, it is their children who immediately suffer. For example, when Maine halved the eligibility threshold for Medicaid in 2012, a substantial slice of children among the affected families lost access to care. Moreover, even if the work requirements have exceptions for some families, they make no provision for the network of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and close relatives who provide critical child care for parents in low-wage, long-hour jobs. The spillover effects of work requirements damage the institutions that care for children.

The fourth attack is less on kids in general than on minority children in particular. Just in time for Independence Day, the Trump administration rescinded policy guidance that encouraged educational institutions to account for the historical exclusion of blacks and Latinos from learning opportunities. The Department of Education is also rolling back efforts to rein in the disproportionate—and often unjustified—disciplining of black students. The predictable effect of these policies will be to expand the school-to-prison pipeline for minority kids.

The final assault on kids isn’t so indirect. In recent deliberations by the World Health Organization, the US delegation sought to dilute a resolution favoring breastfeeding over the use of formula—allegedly going so far as to threaten to curtail military aid to the resolution’s sponsor, Ecuador. Bizarrely, “Trump defended this policy in terms of women’s ‘choice’—a principle that has gotten rather less solicitude where women’s reproductive choices are at stake.

At first blush, all this seems puzzlingly counterproductive, even for the Trump administration. But to understand why it makes sense as a matter of electoral politics, it helps to see that the victims of all of these policies are disproportionately or exclusively racial and ethnic minorities. This is true categorically for family separation, the travel ban, and the affirmative-action rollback—and it’s overwhelmingly the case for work requirements and the anti-breastfeeding campaign.

According to astute observers like the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, one of the...
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The most important sources of discontent among the people who voted for Trump is a fear that they and theirs are losing out, especially to immigrants and racial minorities. In Hochschild’s analysis, these voters perceive immigrants and minorities as cutting ahead of them “in line” for admission to the American dream.

Consistent with Hochschild’s data is statistical work by the political scientist Diana Mutz, which suggests that “status threat,” rather than economic motives, can best explain the 2016 presidential vote. (Although Mutz’s interpretation has been challenged, it has not been refuted and remains a very plausible read of the available data.)

This understanding of Trump’s appeal makes the attacks on children readily comprehensible: If you’re concerned about your status, or if you’re worried that your progeny will not enjoy the same status themselves, it makes sense that you’d be indifferent to the war on kids. The pain inflicted on others’ children might not be specifically what you wanted—but that anguish is evidence that at least status is being reshuffled. The trauma of black and brown children may just be the price to pay for leveling the playing field back to “normal.”

Not all of these policies have prevailed, but there’s no reason to think that the arc of moral injustice apparent in them will break anytime soon. Given sufficient indifference from the public, the war on minority kids will be here to stay.

Aziz Huq teaches at the University of Chicago. His book How Constitutional Democracies Are Lost (and Saved) will be published in October.
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“Truly, a trip and experiences I will treasure for the rest of my life.”
—Pam, Louisville, KY (Vietnam 2017)
Our Abortion Stories

Even under Roe, women struggle with shame, stigma, stress, and fear.

Vats of ink have been spilled trying to figure out whether the coming right-wing majority on the Supreme Court will overturn Roe v. Wade. The truth is, we just don’t know; it will all come down to what’s in the hearts and minds of five anti-abortion, very conservative men. If I were one of them, I would definitely opt for keeping Roe and letting it dangle in the wind. Upending the precedent could awaken the majority of Americans who want to keep abortion legal. Right now a lot of pro-choicers still don’t pay attention to restrictions on abortion, no matter how stringent they are, as long as the procedure is technically lawful and available to them personally.

How do I know this? Abortion is already greatly restricted in many states and unavailable in huge swaths of our enormous country. Moreover, many women can’t afford an abortion, and that’s not the only problem. Some don’t realize they’re pregnant until it’s too late. Some can’t deal with the screaming mob—I mean kindly grandmas who just want to give them a pamphlet—outside the clinic. Some fall into the hands of crisis pregnancy centers, which feed them lies to frighten them into keeping their pregnancy or delaying their procedure until it’s too late. Some can’t make the long trip to the clinic or take three or four days off from work to meet a mandatory 72-hour waiting period. Some are undocumented and can’t travel long distances without risking arrest and detention.

And here’s the rub: We are so used to thinking of abortion merely in terms of rights on paper that we don’t think nearly enough about what women go through right now to end their pregnancy. As long as they’re successful in the end, the difficulties along the way don’t matter. But why do we accept that women should have a hard time? Do anxiety and stress and fear not count? What about loneliness and having no support, even from the people closest to you? What about stigma and shame?

We Testify, a National Network of Abortion Funds program guided by the phenomenal reproductive-justice activist Renee Bracey Sherman, promotes storytelling as a way to expand the understanding of abortion experiences, especially those of low-income women of color. Here are a few of their stories:

In 2008, 16-year-old Stephanie, pregnant from a sexual assault, wanted an abortion. Since she lived in Florida, that meant she had to notify her parents, who were deeply religious and wanted her to have the baby. Moreover, because clinics were under such pressure from anti-choice activists and the state, Stephanie had to bring a parent to the clinic to prove her identity. She got her abortion, but afterward her parents refused to let her use birth control (she was on their Medicaid, so they’d know). Her dad told her to close her legs. The next year, a condom broke, and the pharmacist wouldn’t sell her 18-year-old boyfriend emergency contraception, which under- age Stephanie couldn’t buy without a prescription. (The law was changed shortly after.) It took her three weeks to navigate the state’s judicial-bypass system, which finally allowed her to have an abortion without notifying her parents.

Kelsea had two abortions, both in Florida but under wildly different circumstances. The first time, she was surviving on $800 in unemployment benefits and was about to lose her apartment. Her mother and boyfriend were supportive, but “I was deep into hating myself for needing an abortion,” she recalls. “Even in the pro-choice community, there’s stigma: Why were you so careless?” Kelsea tried herbs and vitamin C, which didn’t work, and finally found her way to the National Abortion Federation hotline, which helped out with funding. She chose a medication abortion and found it painful. The second abortion, also by medication, was completely different. She could afford it; she was over the stigma and felt surrounded by love and care. The abortion itself was no worse than an ordinary period. “I’m convinced that stigma and shame make abortion more painful,” says Kelsea, who now works at a clinic in North Carolina. “One Saturday, no protesters showed up. It was such a good day! Patients didn’t feel as much pain. They
were calmer; sedatives worked better.”

Aimee had an abortion in Texas in 2003 when she was 25. “I have started to tell my story in order to combat the anti-abortion-movement claims that abortion causes mental-health issues,” she says. “When I got pregnant, I was still an undergraduate because I spent years in a manic and depressive cycle. I was self-destructive; I couldn’t stay on track. I was bipolar, undiagnosed. The abortion itself was very easy—at that time Texas had very few restrictions—and it was the turning point in my life. My abortion enabled me to become healthy—and I am! If I had had the baby, I wouldn’t be here today. I wouldn’t be in a healthy relationship with my partner. I wouldn’t have graduated from college and gone on to law school. I wouldn’t have helped care for my father during his brain tumor, and I wouldn’t have had two children when I was ready and able to make them my priority.”

Aziza had an abortion in Chicago in 2012, at the age of 33. “I’d never even had a pregnancy scare,” she told me, which is why she didn’t think she could get pregnant. She couldn’t afford to have a child. Unemployed, with no health insurance, she called a lot of clinics, but $400 was too much. But for $75, she was able to get an abortion at a public hospital. It was a “less than stellar” experience: “We were like cattle—a line of women snaking through the bowels of the hospital, ending up in the basement sitting on metal chairs.” Aziza talks about it now with humor, but “it wasn’t compassionate care.”

Whatever the future holds, this is how too many of us are living right now. It doesn’t have to be like this. Inform yourself, reach out to your local abortion fund, volunteer, get your friends involved, donate. Contact the National Network of Abortion Funds for more information: abortionfunds.org.

**SNAPSHOT / FRANCISCO SECO**

**Standstill**

A man takes a picture of the parked taxis blocking Madrid’s Paseo de la Castellana, one of the city’s longest and widest avenues, on July 30. Taxi drivers across Spain are striking in protest against ride-hailing apps like Uber, which they say threaten the livelihoods of the country’s 69,000 cabdrivers.

**JOB DESCRIPTION**

“Bill Shine, who was forced out of Fox after being accused of aiding and abetting the sexual predator Roger Ailes, is named White House communications director.”

— News reports

He’ll give the truth a Donald Trump–like twist, He’ll have his office working on a list Of all Trump’s enemies, who must be dissed. Occasionally, he might arrange a tryst.
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“THE WHOLE WORLD IS WATCHING!”

Sasha Abramsky
A key figure in and historian of the New Left, Todd Gitlin was president of Students for a Democratic Society in 1964-65 and helped organize the first national demonstrations against the Vietnam War. He is the author of *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, among many other books, and a professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia University, where he teaches an American-studies course on the 1960s. Sasha Abramsky spoke with him in April.

**SASHA ABRAMSKY:** Fiftieth-anniversary dates for the events of 1968 are rolling out thick and fast. Let’s talk about what happened at the Democratic Party convention in Chicago that summer. Perhaps more than any other protest in that momentous year of upheaval, the street fighting in Chicago in August came to symbolize the crisis at the heart of American politics. You were there during that week of protest, and you’ve written extensively about it in the decades since. What made the events in Chicago so emblematic of the broader moment?

**TODD GITLIN:** 1968 was the crystallization of a lot of forces. Lyndon Johnson had been president for four-plus years. He had undertaken the most sweeping policy of domestic reform since [Franklin] Roosevelt. But he had also massively escalated the war in Vietnam. And beginning in April 1965, there had been repeated mobilizations against the war. By the fall of ’65, they had settled into a pattern—big mobilizations on both coasts in mid-April and again in October. They had grown from the 25,000 who showed up in Washington in April 1965 to hundreds of thousands.

The anti-war movement was like a counter-nation. It was everywhere: in small towns, cosmopolitan centers, in the East and the West, but also in community colleges, state schools, high schools, and in every profession—doctors and nurses, clergy, social workers, and teachers. And also in labor, even though the leadership of American labor was hostile to the anti-war movement.

By ’68, the effort to find an [anti-war] Democrat to run against Johnson in the primaries had finally become successful: Gene McCarthy declared as a candidate against Johnson. He ran in the primary in New Hampshire, and he got a substantial minority of the vote—substantial enough to worry Johnson. Then Bobby Kennedy, coming late to the parade, declared his own candidacy. So now we had two anti-war candidates.

Troop strength [in Vietnam] had now grown to half a million—by the end of the year, more than 35,000 of them would be dead. The Tet Offensive [in January–February 1968] was a big, fat “What the hell, who do you think you’re kidding?” announcement to America. In conversations, Johnson had acknowledged the war was unwinnable. On the other hand, he’d been enlarging the commitment, upgrading the intensity of the war. Anti-war sentiment, even in Congress, had been growing. And the circle of advisers around Johnson who had signed off on the war, both in formal government positions and among informal elites known as the "Politicos," had decided that there needs to be a mobilization at the Democratic convention. These were the “politicos.”

**SASHA ABRAMSKY:** Which groups?

**TODD GITLIN:** Students for a Democratic Society, having really triggered the national anti-war movement in ’65, had backed away from taking the war as its central activity. It was doing all kinds of things relating to race and racism, university reform, military activity on campus, corporate activity on behalf of the war. SDS chapters were viscerally anti-war, but SDS itself wasn’t organizing national anti-war projects at that point. It fell to a number of veterans of the New Left, in particular Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis, to team up with some of the elders of the anti-war movement—in particular Dave Dellinger, who was the editor of *Liberation* magazine and a longtime pacifist. It fell to them to issue the call for the mobilization in Chicago.

At the same time, you had a separate crowd, the Yippies, [which began as] a half-dozen people stoned at a New Year’s party who said, “We declare ourselves to be the Youth International Party… YIP!”—who, in a wilder, less strategic, more hippie-ish, more extravagant, more flamboyant spirit, decided to call for a “Festival of Life” in Chicago, a cultural gathering that would stand in opposition to the war and militarism and so on.

Both the politicos and the Yippies had settled on the Chicago manifestation before Johnson opted out [of the election]. The politicos were organized into the National Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam. The Yippies were not an organization—Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman were the key people. They had a conspicuous media presence. They also had a theory: You announce photogenic events and spray America with the invitation to participate in them, and you aim to convert the media into your megaphones. They resolved to cluster in Chicago.

The Black Panthers were not involved in this at all. It’s a peculiarity of history that when the indictments were issued by the federal government for conspiring to organize the Chicago demonstrations, they roped in Bobby Seale, whose involvement was minimal. He was chairman of the Black Panther Party; he was in Chicago for only a few hours—flew in, gave a couple of speeches, and left. [The protests were really the work of] the “Mobe” and the Yippies—a loose network.

*Sasha Abramsky’s latest book is Jumping at Shadows: The Triumph of Fear and the End of the American Dream.*

“Wise Men”—not dovish people, but Cold War pioneers, former secretaries of state, secretaries of defense, other officials, Wall Street honchos, and so on—they had been summoned to advise about the war after Tet. Their advice was, essentially: “Trim it, reduce it, end it. The country is coming apart; the armed forces are riddled with dissension.”

So that’s our situation in the run-up to Chicago. By late ’67, some of the better-known leaders in what was a rather sprawling, decentralized movement had decided that there needs to be a mobilization at the Democratic convention. These were the “politicos.”
Sasha Abramsky: By the summer of ’68, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy have been assassinated; you’ve had the uprising in Paris and the Prague Spring, the urban conflagrations following King’s assassination, and the campus occupations. They are all, obviously, different events, but they all feed into the idea that 1968 is a year of revolution. My sense of ’68 is that as the months progress, history speeds up—it’s one of those periods where everything gets condensed.

Todd Gitlin: That’s a crucial element in understanding the mentality of both the movement and the establishment. There was a swelling up of apocalyptic feeling, a sense of chaos, a sense of astonishment and shock—what was going to be next? Just pair these two events: Johnson on March 31 says he’s not going to run [for reelection]; there’s dancing in the streets in places like Madison, Wisconsin, centers of the anti-war movement. And then, four days later, King is killed. Imagine the whiplash. Everything is accelerated; old centers are not holding. Some people think that what’s coming is revolution; others think that what’s coming is fascism.

Whatever is coming is coming fast and precipitously. The authorities in Chicago have made it plain they’re going to organize a massive, quasi-military—and in some cases, actual military—apparatus, ostensibly intended to protect the convention. Permits to provide sleeping space in public parks are denied. Permits to protest near the convention site are denied. The [Chicago Mayor Richard J.] Daley administration is looking for a fight—they’ve made it clear already, in response to utterly peaceful local demonstrations, that they’re going to come out swinging. At the same time, the movement organizers are moving toward a more militant and confrontational spirit. There is fighting in the streets and, on the campuses, attempts to prevent Dow Chemical, inventor of napalm, or the military or the CIA from recruiting. By April, there was the occupation of the buildings at Columbia University over racism and war-related issues. This culminates in about 700 arrests and many injuries in the clearing of the buildings. There’s a sense of a looming confrontation, which could very well result in violence. To some people in the movement, this is exactly what’s required. Some of the leadership looks forward to polarization. Tom Hayden was already feeling in 1967 that the only way to win the war was to “arouse the sleeping dogs on the right”—that is to say, to animate a division, a social conflict, so intense and so destructive of business as usual that it would force America out of Vietnam.

Not only were Chicago police being mobilized in mass numbers, but so was the National Guard. Also, units of the Army were flown in from Fort Hood in Texas. They rolled down Michigan Avenue between the Hilton Hotel and Grant Park with these barbed-wire-covered armored personnel carriers. I was in Grant Park when the Army arrived. There was something of a cheer on our side, because the spirit of the demonstrations at that point was: “Now we’ve penetrated the fraudulent pretense of the administration that it’s lawful and orderly. We’ve shown they can only rule by force.” This would have been on Tuesday or Wednesday; there’d already been nights of fighting. Lincoln Park, on the North Side, had been cleared with a lot of tear gas and a lot of beatings by police. The chant was heard resoundingly when the Army rolled in: “The whole world is watching!” Network cameras were there. There were scads of reporters. It’s an important element of the intense craziness of the week that under Daley’s rule—and there’s no doubt this was a command decision—the authorities meant to punish the press. They targeted photographers, cameramen, journalists with press passes, injuring dozens: “You think you have rights here? No.” We were already getting a whiff then that the powers that be had decided the press was their enemy. The targeting of journalists was not incidental to their general project of belittling the scope and the legitimacy of the opposition, while presenting themselves as [defenders of] what Nixon would soon call “the silent majority.”

Sasha Abramsky: So these themes that will play out over the next 50 years are coming out in embryonic form in Chicago. Are we seeing in this the emergence of a new order?

Todd Gitlin: I’d put it differently. What we were seeing was the dissolution of an old order. The Democratic Party, which had mostly been in power since 1933, was now coming to the end of its hegemony. In the run-up to the Chicago demonstrations, public opinion was now for the first time concluding that the war was a mistake. Then there was the violent resistance to the civil-rights movement, and the desertion of much of the white population from the alliance that had held it within the Democratic Party for decades. That resistance was fierce enough that the sense both of America’s stability and shining destiny was battered to the breaking point.
And we haven’t even talked about the emergence of the women’s movement, which began to shatter the taken-for-granted order of things.

There would be, from these different sectors, different accounts of something breaking. But there was a consensus that an old order was breaking down, and that—the assassinations are central to this—violence had shattered the orderly pace of things. America was now a country with a question mark.

As I mentioned, the encampments in Lincoln Park were chased out two nights running. A lot of people were arrested and injured. There was a sense of the squall and unpredictability of violence, a growing and brooding expectation that things would get worse. They got dramatically worse on Wednesday, when there was a permitted demonstration in Grant Park, which was the largest of the week.

There were, in the crowd, agents provocateurs—this became known when they testified later in the Chicago Eight trial. One succeeded in becoming Jerry Rubin’s bodyguard; someone who looked and played the part of a biker turned out to be an undercover cop. There were a number of provocateur incidents. One of them had to do with the taking down of an American flag by a kid whom none of the movement veterans recognized. It is likely this person was also an agent provocateur. Eventually, we came to learn that there were a large number of military-intelligence people illegally in the crowd.

People were throwing things at the police. And the police had been incited to smash and batter. They smacked a lot of the speakers; they knocked down the speakers and bloodied them. Some of the leadership of the Mobe, in particular Hayden, urged the crowd to spill out. He said that if they’re going to spill blood, let it be spilled all over Chicago. In the meantime, tear gas had been released over a large area of Grant Park. The crowd was being corralled and pressed against the east side of the Hilton Hotel. The police weren’t letting anyone out; they were squeezing those people against the edge of the hotel and smashing them with clubs.

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And so it went. The details are less important than the mood, and on the movement side this was: “They’ve declared war on us.” There was an apocalyptic, confrontational spirit. There was a lot of improvisation, great spikes of rage, and also among the crowd a certain exhilaration, a kind of joy of confrontation. As Dylan put it, “The line it is drawn / The curse it is cast.... The order is rapidly fading.” [There was] this sense of purification and exhilaration now that the sides were clear.

SASHA ABRAMSKY: Why isn’t this just ancient history? Why, 50 years on, is “Chicago ’68” still so relevant? Is the very phrase a shortcut for a host of political assumptions?

TODD GITLIN: I’ve often thought, “What the hell are we doing, 20 years after—30, 40, 50 years after—these events?” We’ve enshrined some version of these events—propagandistic, simplified, cartoonish—as part of common consciousness. If someone had proposed in 1968 that we remember 1918 and its politics, people would have said: “What?” There would have been a collective mystification. We were not singing the songs of 1918 in 1968; we were not not irradiating the culture with oldies-but-goodies. Yet ’68—and the 1960s in general—have played a part in virtually every presidential election, for example, since ’68. There’s some sort of shadow presence.

Hillary Clinton is, in the worldview of the right, some kind of demonic incarnation of what is, to them, the most regrettable activities of the ’60s. The ascendency of a woman, an Ivy League woman, a woman who’d worked against Nixon... She’s a symbolic bag of the undead ’60s, the ’60s that pushed men around—pushed white men around in particular.

You know, it even crops up a little bit on Trump’s side. It’s weird and interesting, and I’m not sure what to make of it, but ’Trump represents the other side of the ’60s. He’s not operating in the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr., God knows—he’s operating in the spirit of Hugh Hefner. That’s his ’60s: the liberated guy fucking around at will, grabbing women. He’s living the Playboy philosophy as Hefner articulated it. The cleavages over sex and then sexuality, over race, over cosmo-politanism, over the virtues of the majority—those are unresolved, unfinished business, deep, crisscrossing dimensions of social life. And, obviously, 1968 for many reasonably assumes the proportions of a kind of prologue or overture or intimation of what else is coming. Certainly for the right, especially over race—the unforgiving white supremacy, especially as it’s being re-weaponized by white men whose economic position has only fallen in the intervening decades.

What we are living in now is, in important measure, the return of the repressed. That’s Freud’s term. In his terminology, when emotions that crop up in early life are not properly dealt with, they continue on in a kind of rancid and poisonous, subterranean churn that bursts up like [pus from] an unhealed wound. These are more than “issues”—they are conditions of American life.
What is freedom? We who came of age half a century ago found ourselves well placed by unearned good fortune to test its limits. Our parents, having suffered the privations of the Great Depression and the anxieties of World War II, had subsequently harnessed themselves to the task of rebuilding. From their discipline emerged a world of prosperous plenty sickled o’er with the pale cast of gray-flannel conformity and lonely crowds. We wanted more. Throughout 1968, our inchoate desire bubbled over into the public sphere.

The nature of that desire—perhaps I should call it a yearning, because it was vaguer than desire, limitless and without object—was vividly evoked by a surprising witness to what happened in Paris that spring: Yves de Gaulle, the grandson of Charles de Gaulle, who was president of France at the time of the May ’68 student uprising turned general strike, and whose grip on power was loosened by what the French to this day simply refer to as “the events.”

In a documentary recently aired in France, the younger de Gaulle recounts a dinner with his grandfather at the height of the uprising. The 77-year-old general asked what all those strangely agitated young people wanted.

“Vivre plus!” Yves, then 17, replied. (“To live more!”)

“And what can I, as head of state, do to satisfy that desire, which I fully understand?”

The general’s grandson had no answer. But he had experienced firsthand the exhilarating bedlam at the Odéon national theater, which had been “occupied” and declared a site of “permanent revolutionary creativity” by a committee of “students, artists, and workers.” Evidently, Yves came away with his blood stirred by the spectacle of so much public passion in a society he had never before seen so unbuttoned or unbridled.

He managed to convey something of this unprecedented exuberance to his grandfather, who might not have understood what those “bed-shitters” (chien-en-lit) wanted but nevertheless drew the conclusion that nothing less than a “change of society” (mutation de société) would suffice if order were to be restored. It was the classic conservative response to the perennially baffling desire of the young to “Live more!”—a stratagem mem-
orably formulated by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in *The Leopard*: “Everything must change so that everything may stay the same.” And so it did.

Somehow we bed-shitters had shaken things up, wrong-footing the guardians of the old and illuminating the new, if only by flickering match-light.

Success emboldened us, and not only in France. President Lyndon Johnson, as astonished as de Gaulle by the sudden thaw in an order of things to which the Cold War had imparted the illusory solidity of a deep freeze, had already announced in March that he would not run for reelection. Change appeared to be contagious. We might therefore be forgiven for thinking that we had scored political victories—nay, worked miracles—even if they soon evaporated when the Gaullists, capitalizing on a growing reaction against the events in May, crushed the opposition in the June elections, while Richard Nixon captured the American presidency in November.

Never mind the reversals: We had come together and things had happened, so to us 1968 seemed an annus mirabilis. Of course, it was also a year of horrors—riots, repression, racist reaction, bloodshed, assassinations, the Tet Offensive, Khe Sanh—but in our festival of fraternity, we experienced mainly one another. The rest was silence (and, as it turned out, mostly the seething, angry silence of the silent majority, appalled by our dereliction of duty).

We had discovered the ecstasy of solidarity, the joy, evanescent but indelible, of what Jean-Paul Sartre in his amphetamine-induced haze called the “group in fusion.” Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven! Wordsworth had our number: He knew how “the meagre, stale, forbidding ways / Of custom, law, and statute” could suddenly acquire “the attraction of…romance.”

To older liberals, this romance was suspect. The French political theorist Raymond Aron warned that it was merely a “lyrical illusion.” We were said to be reenacting as farce what others had tragically lived.

One writer in particular had anticipated what our elders took to be the error of our ways. In 1958, Isaiah Berlin had delivered a lecture in which he famously discerned “Two Concepts of Liberty.” In 1969, that lecture was published as one chapter of a book that brought the contrast between Berlin’s two liberties—positive and negative—to wider attention. Readers discomfited by the events of the previous year could read this text as prophecy: It was the seductive allure of positive liberty that had led the younger generation astray.

To simplify Berlin’s arguments brutally, negative liberty was “freedom from,” or the enjoyment of a zone of noninterference, of guaranteed exemption from coercion, while positive liberty was “freedom to”—the freedom to be (or, more sinisterly perhaps, the freedom to choose) one’s own master. These, Berlin argued, might seem to be “concepts at no great logical distance from each other,” but in fact they were in “direct conflict,” because the adept of positive liberty might conceive of “the real self” as “a social ‘whole’ of which the individual is an element or aspect.” In pursuit of the will-o’-the-wisp of positive liberty, in other words, the individual risked surrendering herself to voluntary servitude, indented to some seemingly transcendent cause; and then, sliding down a slippery slope, she might feel herself entitled to coerce others “blind or ignorant or corrupt” to recognize what was in their own best interest.

For Sir Isaiah, such thoughts of coercion-for-good, when not mere “political claptrap,” could all too easily pave the road to serfdom. The heedless expansion of positive liberty could compress the zone of noninterference, or negative liberty, which in Berlin’s estimation was nothing less than the “mark of high civilization.”

These ideas, wrapped in a characteristically erudite package, summed up the wisdom of a certain Cold War ideal of liberal democracy. It was implicitly conceded that actually existing liberalism hadn’t achieved the best of all possible worlds, but in the aspiration to live more adequately lurked a danger to liberty itself. Since we had the best of all existing worlds, it was selfish not to revel in our good fortune.

We, of course, weren’t buying it—but who, exactly, were “we”? Seekers of enlightenment or self-indulgent draft dodgers? Blissed-out hippies or deviant subversives? Or, again, perhaps merely the herd of veaux...
Certainly, most of us knew, even at the time, that politics was not our vocation. We were famous, after all, for our insistence on “doing our own thing”—the very antithesis of the collective action that politics entails. In the United States, unlike in France, few even among the leaders of the countercultural left were indoctrinated in the ways of sectarian political infighting. Few except the veterans of the civil-rights movement had any experience of jail or police violence, and most of us never did much more than lend our bodies on occasion to the symbolism of mass protest, interpreting the political as the public expression of private moral conviction rather than as a daily chore, as frequently unavailing as it was unifying.

Yet that “own thing” we prided ourselves on doing wasn’t purely an individual undertaking. No matter how short it fell of being “collective,” it was nevertheless social. We complained about the way we were governed, but what we actually had the power to change was the way we lived. We did our own thing not alone but in the nurturing company of small groups, rejecting the individualism that Tocqueville had feared would sap the vitality of democratic public life. In place of suspect domestic tranquility, we substituted collective improvisation.

Above all, we sought connection—not just to family and colleagues in the cocoon of home and workplace, but to a kaleidoscopic variety of others thrown together by the changing times. There was the “straight” world, with the reliable regularity of something made by machine, and our world, as brave in our eyes as it was new, which had somehow retrieved from the savorless ambient sameness “the crooked timber of humanity” (Kant, as repurposed by none other than Isaiah Berlin). This, and not the May uprising in Paris or the August riots in Chicago, was the heart of the ’60s, the enduring legacy of 1968.
uprisings, in which young Americans joined the natives in rebellion against older versions of themselves.

Rock and roll penetrated the Iron Curtain far more effectively than did Radio Free Europe. To the east, the United States stood for national liberation, while to the west, it was stigmatized as its scourge. I recall arriving in Ljubljana, in then-Yugoslavia, in the summer of 1968. The group of children who surrounded the car I was driving demanded to know where I was from. (A 21-year-old American driving a British sports car was a rare sight in Ljubljana in 1968.) “Boston,” I said. Immediately they began shouting, “USA! JFK! USA! JFK!” In my own eyes, I represented the American counterculture, searching the world for an idea of liberty more congenial and expansive than the one I’d grown up with. But for those Slovenian youngsters, I stood for what they could only ogle and covet from afar: freedom as wealth and power and domination, precisely what I thought I was fleeing.

For me, 1968 ended abruptly. On November 12, one week after Nixon was elected, I was drafted. I spent a year in South Vietnam and discovered among the ranks a very different kind of solidarity, born not of freedom but of its radical absence.

It became impossible to apply the pronoun “we” to the entire baby-boom generation in the breezy, capacious sense I’ve been using it so far. The birth cohort to which I belonged contained multitudes. I had always known this, but in my rosy-fingered Wordsworthian bliss, I’d lost sight of those for whom the postwar decades had been less glorious than they were for us, the happy few celebrants of the cult of post-Berlinian liberty—the cult from which I had been so peremptorily snatched by that unwanted “greeting” from Uncle Sam.

My new comrades and I, united by the absence of freedom, were divided by our sense of the world we had left behind in that winter of ’68. I saw rupture; they saw continuity. I thought a new kind of life might just be possible; possible for you, they thought, but not for us.

If they thought of my good fortune as a privilege, they did not resent me for it—not yet. Indeed, my privilege proved in their eyes that they were right, that 1968 had changed nothing. The privileged had always been with them—or, rather, apart from them—and always would be. For them, the only anomaly was that I should be temporarily sharing their misfortune. When they learned that I’d been drafted out of an elite graduate school, they were incredulous: “Sheeeet, man, you’re supposed to be smart—how did you wind up here with us?”

Such commiseration was comforting, but over the ensuing half-century I watched that tolerant accommodation of privilege curdle in some of those former comrades into a deep suspicion not only of inequality, which is justified, but also of difference, which is more problematic. For a part of America, 1968 was a watershed year; for another part of America, it was not. This—with intertwined, the racial and class differences that figured into the separation of the happy few from the increasingly unhappy many—has been a factor in all the subsequent eruptions of resentment, all the culture wars, Tea Parties, and Trump rallies that have given us the sullen, polarized, stalemated society in which we live today. Having broken bread with those embittered ex-grunts when they were young and scared, before their hearts hardened, I can almost understand why they think I’ve become their enemy, one of the despised liberal elite whom the jeunesse dorée of the ’60s grew into. Even when I shared their hardship, I already bore the mark of the beast: I had been one of those to whom so much had already been given but who still demanded to live more. As America’s collective good fortune waned, such hubris, such aspiration to a freedom beyond Berlin’s polar pairing, became unpardonable.
Elena Poniatowska recalls the government attack on peaceful student protesters.

Student protesters after their arrest (top) following the demonstration in Tlatelolco Plaza (bottom), October 1968.

Tlatelolco Massacre in Mexico

Elena Poniatowska remembers the bloody government assault on peaceful protesters.

Michael K. Schuessler
Elena Poniatowska is the author of more than 50 books that span almost every literary genre. Despite her wide-ranging production, she is best known for the genres she reinvented in Mexico: the chronicle and the testimonial novel. An outstanding example of the former, *Massacre in Mexico* (first published in English in 1975), is a collective account of the bloody 1968 assault on students by government forces in Mexico City’s Plaza de las Tres Culturas (also known as Tlatelolco Plaza), in which dozens of demonstrators—and perhaps as many as several hundred—were killed.

*Massacre in Mexico* is a collage of desperate voices that are at the same time the work’s content and form. It is also a systematic condemnation of the Mexican government’s brutal response to the emboldened students who wished to take advantage of the international publicity generated by the Olympic Games (hosted for the first time by Mexico) by inviting foreign reporters to witness various acts of civil disobedience, including peaceful marches, demonstrations, and rallies. The students’ demands were judicious and well-defined: They asked for the dissolution or expulsion of the right-wing student groups supported by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had governed Mexico for over 30 years; indemnification for the families of those killed or wounded in previous skirmishes with the *granaderos* (riot police); the immediate release of all jailed students; the disbanding of the *granaderos* and other repressive police units; and the abrogation of Article 145 of Mexico’s penal code, which allowed for imprisonment based on the crime of “social dissolution.”

Although Poniatowska—who in 2014 was awarded the Cervantes Prize, considered the Nobel of the Spanish-speaking world—has enjoyed enormous success as a writer and journalist, for many years she found herself somewhat excluded from elite Mexican literary circles. Working as a reporter day and night, Poniatowska rarely had time to participate in the activities of local cafe society. Moreover, she was still quite young when she came to the conclusion that the only books worth writing were useful ones, books meaningful to her country. (This once prompted the novelist Carlos Fuentes to exclaim, “Look at poor little Poni! There she goes in her beat-up VW Bug, on her way to interview the head of the slaughterhouse.”) Poniatowska’s attitude regarding the subject matter of her growing body of fiction led her to write what many consider her most significant novel, *Here’s to You, Jessica* (1969, first published in English in 2001). At once testimony and fiction, the book tells the story of an admirable yet cantankerous woman who fought in the Mexican Revolution, whom Poniatowska discovered one morning when Jesus was cursing from the rooftop of her humble vecindad apartment.

For Poniatowska, the price of chiles and tomatoes, and the reports of evictions and land invasions, was much more meaningful than the often vogueish ideas of the contemporary literary vanguard. Yet far from belonging to Mexico’s underclass, Poniatowska has a royal pedigree: She’s descended from the last king of Poland, Stanislas Augustus Poniatowski, and Prince Joseph Ciolek Poniatowski, a marshal of the empire in Napoleonic France. Among its illustrious ancestors, her family includes an archbishop, a composer, an astronomer, and several writers, including her Aunt Pita—Guadalupe Amor, the astonishing poet who proclaimed herself “the absolute queen of hell.” Given Poniatowska’s strong left-wing inclinations, which were in opposition to what she calls her “absurd nobility,” some people in Europe have dubbed her “La Princesse Rouge.”

### Mexico 1968: The Night of Tlatelolco

In October 1968, a crime of epic proportions abruptly cast a long shadow over Poniatowska’s literary endeavors. The government-planned attack on a group of students holding a peaceful rally at the Plaza of the Three Cultures will live forever in the collective memory of all Mexicans, especially those who personally experienced what was later christened “The Night of Tlatelolco.” Such was the case with Poniatowska, at that time 36. Many years after the events of that afternoon, and still visibly moved, she recalled the immediate sense of denial, which gradually turned into outrage, that the news of these senseless acts incited in her:

I heard about the massacre at 9 o’clock that night, when María Alicia Martínez Medrano and Mercedes Olivera [both active in Mexico’s civil society] came to my house…. I thought they had gone mad. They told me that there was blood on the walls of the buildings, that the elevators were perforated with machine-gun bullets, that the glass windows of the shops were destroyed, that tanks were inside the plaza, that there was blood on the staircases of the buildings, that they could hear people shouting, moaning, and crying.

Early the next morning, Poniatowska decided to see for herself. What she witnessed she would never forget, in particular the surreal image of dozens of pairs of shoes that were piled throughout the plaza’s archaeological site. She also recalled hearing a soldier speaking on a pay phone, insisting that he wanted to hear his child’s voice on the line—certainly to confirm that, unlike many students, his son was safe. Thus began the compilation of Poniatowska’s most polemical work and, at the same time, her most celebrated chronicle, which was first published in Spanish in 1971 as *La Noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de Historia Oral*, with over a half-million copies sold to date. As she recalled:

> At 7 o’clock in the morning I went to Tlatelolco. There was no running water and women were lined up around a hydrant. There was no electricity and the soldiers were also lined up in front of the phone booths. Among the pre-Hispanic ruins, next to the building that houses the Ministry of Foreign Relations, I saw the shoes of those who had been able to escape. I returned home and felt extremely indignant, along with my husband, Guillermo Haro, the founder of astrophysics in...
Evidence of the events. According to Poniatowska:

The next day I went to find Oriana Fallaci, the Italian journalist, who was at the French Hospital because she also had been shot. I found her in a wheelchair, very upset, but with no major wounds... [Later] she placed a long-distance call to the Italian Parliament, requesting that the Italian delegation boycott the Olympic Games as an act of repudiation directed at the government of Mexico. She said that she had been a war correspondent in Vietnam, and that there at least a siren sounded a warning before the bombings or shooting began, so that people could take refuge, and that Mexico was the only country where she had ever seen soldiers shooting point-blank at civilians. Besides, they were inside a plaza, trapped, unable to escape.

I took my interview to the newspaper Nuevadates, but they turned it down because there were orders not to publish a single word about the incident. From that moment on I became more concerned and went to the Military Camp No. 1 to see what had happened to the students. The soldiers would not let me in, so I went to the Lecumberri jail many times to interview the student leaders.

From the people she interviewed—parents of the dead and of those whose whereabouts were unknown; leaders of high-school and university unions; intellectuals, poets, and others whose only connection was that of being, to a greater or lesser degree, involved in the violence in Tlatelolco—Poniatowska assembled a chorus of eyewitness testimonies, slogans, and songs, combined with snippets of news coming from official outlets and from the ranks of the institutional bureaucracy, that resulted in the book that remains the definitive account of the events of that awful night.

Massacre in Mexico is an unsparing examination of the bloody actions of the Mexican government. Given the political circumstances, Poniatowska’s book received almost no publicity; José Emilio Pacheco, one of Mexico’s leading poets, wrote the only published review. Nonetheless, the book was advertised by word of mouth among professors and university students eager for an explanation of the events. According to Poniatowska:

The book sold many copies because it was rumored that they were going to pull it from circulation, that agents of the Federal Security Agency had entered the bookstores to buy up the copies. Some readers would purchase 10 or 20 copies at a time. Prior to that, the publisher received a letter claiming that a bomb would be placed on the premises if the book were published. My editor, Tomás Espesate, along with his daughter, Neus, responded that they had been in the Spanish Civil War and that both of them perfectly grasped the meaning of battle. The book finally came out and many legends were spread about it, and all those rumors only benefited the book.

Demonstrating absolute cynicism, the upper echelons of the Mexican government decided that the most efficient way to reduce the book’s impact was to canonize it. They did so by conferring upon its author a coveted literary award. As Poniatowska tells it:

One day, [the journalist] Francisco Zendejas called to inform me that I had won the Xavier Villaurrutia literary prize. Fausto Zapata, President [Luis] Echeverría’s private secretary, told me that he was pleased that I had won it. I declined it through a letter to the newspaper Excélsior, where I demanded: “Who will award prizes to the dead?” It is not a book of celebration. It is a work of condemnation.

Poniatowska, now 86, compares the Night of Tlatelolco with the mass kidnapping and disappearance of 43 students near the town of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, on the night of September 26, 2014. She considers this event even more appalling, because there has still been no satisfactory official explanation of what happened, despite the parents’ unrelenting demands that the government carry out a full investigation into the fate of their children, all of whom were attending the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College. With one exception, not even the students’ remains have been discovered, which would at least help these parents find some small amount of closure to this despicable crime.

Poniatowska alludes to one commonly held theory: that the government is reluctant to fully investigate the disappearances because the army was directly involved. According to this theory, the army was instructed to intercept the students by a local official, José Luis Abarca, whose wife was holding an event that Abarca didn’t want to see ruined by a group of unruly students commandeering public buses for a protest. (It should be pointed out that, as odd as it might seem, this is a tradition in student protests in Mexico, with the buses always returned later to their owners.) Many believe that the military then handed the students over to a local drug cartel, which murdered them and disposed of their remains.

Despite this apparently hopeless situation, Poniatowska believes that, given the dramatic sea change in government with the recent victory of left-wing candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, justice might finally be served for the loved ones of the disappeared students. Indeed, after meeting with Mexico’s president-elect, Poniatowska stated that his sweeping victory has awakened feelings of hope, something like a collective catharsis. When asked if she has always supported López Obrador, she offered a categorical response: “I have supported him since the day he was born, and he could be my son.”
Hurricane Maria sent Magha Garcia back to the beginning. In 2010, a brigade of 18 farmers had helped her cut trees, open roads, build a cistern, and start to plant a nursery for her new farm, Pachamama Bosque Jardín, on 13 acres of land in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. Five years earlier, Garcia had been living in the city of Corozal when mass layoffs hit. She lost her job as a social researcher, and wondered what to do next.

Garcia was 45, an age at which capitalism “doesn’t consider you a person who’s producing anymore,” she

As climate change alters how and where food is grown, Puerto Rico’s agroecology brigades serve as a model for sustainable farming.

Audrea Lim

Can Farming Save Puerto Rico’s Future?
says, unless you’re someone with knowledge capital, “a consultant or adviser.” That was not García’s case, and so her future in the city looked grim. She had been raised on a farm, in a family of farmers. “Better start growing my own food,” she decided.

In September 2017, Hurricane Maria dumped more than 30 inches of rain on parts of Puerto Rico, destroyed about 80 percent of the islands’ crop value, and left some towns without power for more than six months. Most distressingly, an accurate death toll remains elusive; though the government’s official toll lists 64 people as having died from Maria, some studies have come up with counts of more than 4,600.

García’s root vegetables—ginger, cassava, taro, yams—survived the deluge, but most of her fruit trees were ruined.

Soon thereafter, another brigade arrived at García’s farm, helping to clear the felled trees and restore a measure of order. She lives alone on the land and doesn’t have a lot of money. Government help was slow to materialize on the islands—the Federal Emergency Management Agency has been accused of being absent in the days after the storm—and ultimately proved to be inadequate. Without the volunteer assistance, García says, rebuilding “would’ve been really challenging.”

In the absence of robust government aid, farmer brigades have helped to repair and restore countless farms since the storm. Some are affiliated with the Organización Boricúa de Agricultura Ecológica de Puerto Rico, a network of small-scale farmers that counts García as a member, and that has been promoting the practice of agroecology on the archipelago since 1989.

Agroecology is an approach to farming that promotes diversity (through crop rotation, polycultures, or livestock integration), uses natural systems (such as planting flowers to attract insects that keep pest levels under control), and relies on farmers’ knowledge of local conditions. The result can be higher yields at lower costs, along with the more efficient use of resources and space, self-regulating agricultural environments, and self-sufficiency for farmers, who not only can feed themselves (rather than simply grow commodity crops for export), but won’t have to depend on commercial seeds and chemical pesticides and fertilizers.

This holistic approach treats farming as a component of its surrounding ecology, unlike the industrial monoculture model that seeks to maximize profit and efficiency, often at the expense of the environment. The negative effects of industrial farming are well-documented: pollution from fertilizers and pesticides, depleted water sources, degraded soil. Furthermore, the global food system is responsible for around a third of the world’s man-made greenhouse-gas emissions, largely from agricultural production, the manufacture of fertilizers, and refrigeration. The changing climate is already forcing farmers to adapt, and has even pushed some off desertified lands. The growing frequency and intensity of extreme-weather events, like Hurricane Maria, have been linked to climate change.

Agroecology isn’t the only way of farming that utilizes a holistic approach. Yet in Puerto Rico, at least, there is a harder-to-quantify piece of the agroecology movement that has been crucial to its success: the aforementioned farmer brigades.

These brigades not only act as crisis-responsive organizations and mutual-aid recovery teams; they are also facilitators of adaptation and climate-smart policies. As García notes, the brigades didn’t merely arrive when she was building her farm—or rebuilding it after the storm. Whenever farmers in the Organización Boricúa network need help, she says, they invite others to come with proper tools, shoes, eating utensils, and a dish to share. She considers her farm something that she shares with other Organización Boricúa members, in the sense that everyone—farming in different microclimates throughout the islands—can offer or accept help as needed, and either share or receive crops in times of abundance or scarcity.

This sharing model has its roots in the Movimiento Campesino a Campesino, which began in Guatemala in the 1970s and has since swept through Mexico and Central America. Its values of solidarity and a communal approach to production, consumption, and ownership are a stark contrast with the individualized, private-property-oriented mind-set that predominates throughout much of the United States.

At the end of the workday, the farmer hosting the brigade usually gives a workshop. In García’s most recent workshop, she introduced the many varieties of taro root and discussed how she harvested them from wild areas to plant on her farm. This was important because many of the newer farmers are young, and some don’t know how to eat the root, much less farm it.

As the climate and ecological systems are transformed, this knowledge-sharing among small farmers will be indispensable. What crops are most resilient? What methods work best? Similar interactions between farmers and the people they feed are part of the ecosystem, too. And they are at the heart of agroecology.

Tara Rodríguez Besosa didn’t understand this when she helped to start a multi-farmer community-supported agriculture group, or CSA, in San Juan in 2010. But she learned quickly.

Rodríguez Besosa had been working at the stand of her mother’s farm CSA at the local farmers’ market, where she met other growers, discovered new vegetables, and learned how to cook them at home. She realized that, were it not for her job, she might never have known about these ingredients, much less have access to them. Most people in Puerto Rico shop at the islands’ supermarkets, which are full of cheap packaged foods from global exporters and the US mainland. Rodríguez Besosa also noticed that the organic produce at the city’s farmers’ plazas (which are permanent establishments, unlike the pop-up farmers’ markets) came from California, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, but not Puerto Rico. To understand what had happened to agriculture on her island, she began to read.

Starting in 1898, US colonialism cleared a path for the corporate takeover of Puerto Rico’s agricultural land. But in the 1940s, Operation Bootstrap, a series of projects designed to modernize the
 territory's economy, promoted a shift away from agriculture toward industrialization, and many farms closed. By 2012, 83 percent of the islands' farms were smaller than 50 cuerdas (48 acres), but those farms amounted to just a quarter of Puerto Rico's agricultural land—and that land continued to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. The result is that Puerto Rico now imports about 95 percent of the food it consumes (before Maria, it was 85 percent). And because of the 1920 Jones Act, which requires all goods shipped to Puerto Rico to be transported on US vessels, the imported foods are costly.

By 2010, Rodríguez Besosa had learned enough to take action. She created El Departamento de la Comida in San Juan, an online distribution company and CSA connected to local organic farms. When she began posting photos of the produce online, people asked, “Where can I eat it?” Before long, La Comida had added a restaurant with a menu that changed according to the available produce, in an effort to reduce food waste.

But Rodríguez Besosa, now 34, decided not to reopen the restaurant after it was flooded during Maria. The farmers she worked with had nothing to sell, and, more important, their safety and livelihoods were at risk. Instead, she began raising money for small farmers and the long-term development of agroecology, utilizing the newly launched Puerto Rico Resilience Fund. And as volunteers streamed into Puerto Rico after the hurricane, the fund also started its own brigade, coordinating visits to one or two farms a week.

The brigade didn’t only visit farms. In April, its members drove to the Berwind Elementary School in San Juan, which now also houses students from the Berwind Middle School, which had been damaged by Maria. The teachers were struggling; one classroom held three separate classes at once. And despite the overcrowding and heat, some rooms didn’t have fans, says Carol Ramos, a graduate student at the University of Puerto Rico's School of Planning.

Ramos is working on a pilot project to introduce bottom-up decision-making into the school—no small feat for a school system used to top-down decision-making. And that project involves agroecology: On the three acres of green space attached to the school—highly unusual for Puerto Rico—Rodríguez Besosa’s brigade helped to build a greenhouse that will be transported to the middle school once it has been repaired. Inside the greenhouse, pumpkins, beans, tomatoes, sunflowers, oregano, guanabanas, coconut trees, and melons are growing; students will care for the plants at home over the summer.

This is important for Ramos, because agroecology is about more than just food. It’s about “food sovereignty,” she says, “which means you can decide politically where, how, and when…you want to grow food in your country.”

Still, much of Puerto Rico’s agricultural land remains in the hands of large corporations, and political and policy change comes slowly, if at all. A debt crisis, exacerbated by austerity measures that President Obama signed into law, had been slamming the territory even before Maria.

But for Ramos, dismantling the “colonial context” involves learning to make political decisions, including at the community level: What food should we grow? Should we compost? What, if any, chemicals should be used, and where? In Ramos’s view, there was no better place to start than by teaching these ideas to students—thereby empowering the next generation of leaders.

With over 500 million family farms producing about 80 percent of the world’s food, this is another way of asking whether agroecology’s lessons in democracy—and the human relationships it engenders—can be scaled up. For people like Rodríguez Besosa, the need is urgent: “We’re being bought out, literally—and not only through corporations and bonds, but also our land,” she says. “Every day, I see another person that’s not Puerto Rican purchasing something around me, either in the city or country.”

Yet her own story gives Rodríguez Besosa hope that change is possible. She just bought her own farm this spring, after Maria jeopardized her plans for a time. “I’ve seen the importance of getting something that can be owned by a Puerto Rican,” she says.
In-Justice

David Cole’s paean to Anthony Kennedy outdid itself in being fair-minded and respectful toward this “moderating force” who “this term…voted with the conservatives in all 14 of the Court’s 5–4 decisions” (“Anthony Kennedy’s Legacy,” July 30/August 6). However, looking back at Kennedy’s support for Citizens United, and his willingness to mangle the Affordable Care Act and dismember the Voting Rights Act, I am not at all surprised that the justice decided to retire well before the midterm elections this year. Surely he knew, with foresight, that giving Trump another appointee on the Supreme Court will utterly destroy any hope of moderation in the Court for generations to come. Cole entirely missed referencing Kennedy’s most tellingly significant judgment: “If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future.”

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America’s War Habit

The articles in your special issue “Needed: A New Foreign Policy” [July 16/23] exaggerate the potential for a public challenge to militarism and the readiness of the public even to do so. Unfortunately, US exceptionalism and militarism have created an addiction to war, and the American public doesn’t seem to know or care about the need for cuts in defense spending and overseas bases and deployments. Twenty years ago, then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was featured on a Time magazine cover in a flight jacket under the headline “Albright at War.” Albright personified this addiction when she arrogantly professed: “If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future.”

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When the ground was first broken in 1900 to build a subway under the crowded streets of New York, some 25,000 of the city’s residents gathered to watch the ceremonies and cheer: “To Harlem in 15 minutes!” Not that it would be easy—removing 3 million cubic yards of earth and laying rails under the city was a job that would take four years and thousands of workers, 54 of whom lost their lives during the construction.

When the subway finally opened, it was a day of civic celebration. The city’s factories gave workers a half-holiday, and every passenger was permitted to ride free of charge. Some 150,000 people did. Yet what was perhaps most remarkable was just how quickly New Yorkers adapted to this engineering miracle. One reporter for The New York Times observed that after their exploratory journey, people poured out of the stations and made their way quietly home, “having finished what will be to them the daily routine of the rest of their lives.”

The story of the subway, then, is one of an extraordinary achievement that came to be regarded as perfectly ordinary, and it is, in a way, the urtext of any book about New York. “It is a miracle that New York works at all,” wrote E.B. White in his famous paean to the city. “The whole thing is implausible.” Yet this sense of awe and mystique, even as it animates much writing about the city, can also make New York difficult to see clearly—especially in relation to the rest of American history.

Often, writers treat New York either as the apotheosis of America or as a national outlier. It is perceived as the center of trends that have shaped the rest of the country’s history—the heart of immigration, the capital of finance—or as an extreme metropolis that has little in common with the rest of America, the so-called heartland. To a certain extent, some of the difficulties inherent in writing urban history (or perhaps any history at all) show up with special force in histories of New York: Is the purpose of writing about the city to illuminate its distinguishing features, or to tell a larger story of which New York is representative?

Mike Wallace’s *Greater Gotham*—the second of what he hopes to be four books about the city—manages to do both. It is a book about New York in all its bewildering particularity, yet it also addresses the sweep of American history in the early 20th century. *Greater Gotham* is the sequel to the Pulitzer Prize–winning *Gotham*, in which Wallace, along with co-author Edwin G. Burrows, told the story of the rise of New York over its first 300 years: the transformation of an unassuming island into the hub of a vast city.

*Greater Gotham* covers a shorter span, the period from 1898 to 1919, but there can be no doubt that the book is a remarkable scholarly achievement. At 1,196 pages, divided into five parts and 24 chapters, it manages to cover what can seem at times like almost every facet of life in the city over the 21 years that separate the consolidation of its various boroughs, in 1898, from its emergence as the nation’s economic capital by the end of World War I. There are chapters on the economics that drove the skyscraper boom of the early 20th century and the labor processes and technological developments needed to make possible the construction of the first subways. We learn about the fissures that divided local activists in the Industrial Workers of the World from those in the Socialist Party, as well as the machinations of the Socialists’ Morris Hillquit, who kicked the IWW’s Big Bill Haywood out of the organization.

Wallace also discusses the public-health campaigns of the early 20th century, which reduced the death rate in the city from 27.2 per 1,000 in 1890 to 13.4 by 1914 despite the organized opposition of the city’s doctors, who feared the state’s expanded role in medical care. He analyzes the proliferation of prostitutes in immigrant enclaves in which men greatly outnumbered women. He also places the worldly city within the larger world, examining the role of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the pogroms that followed in driving hundreds of thousands of Jews to New York.

On top of all of this, there are wonderful sections on Coney Island, Irish politics, the literary and visual arts, the rise of Harlem as a center of African-American life, Lenin’s appreciation of the New York Public Library, and the strength of anarchist traditions in working-class Italian neighborhoods. Out of this welter of specificity comes a distinctive portrait of something far larger than New York itself: The city’s story, we come to learn, is really the story of American capitalism. It is also the story of the radical politics that emerged in response to it. This is certainly one way to read the book’s title: America itself became New York’s “Greater Gotham.”

Wallace has given a great deal of thought to the right way to tell this story. In the introduction, he outlines five major areas to examine in unraveling the city’s history: first, its emergence as the financial center of international capitalism by the end of World War I; second, its national importance as the “unofficial capital” of the United States; third, its material development, as New York took on an ever-expanding catalog of economic functions for the country; fourth, the year-by-year rhythms of capitalist expansion and contraction, which helped to spur labor organizing and radical politics; and finally, a view from the ground, the daily experience of the thrilling, chaotic city for people from all social classes and backgrounds.

Running through all of this are certain more general themes. The first is the profound ambivalence of New York’s financial and corporate elite when it came to the nature of competitive capitalism. These were people at the pinnacle of the national economy and the avatars of its achievements. Yet far from being ardent believers in the ruthless precepts of laissez-faire, they sought to tame the market and replace the “ruinous” competition of yore with corporations that dominated their economic sectors to a degree that had never been seen before. The city’s financiers presided over the great merger wave of the early 20th century. Between 1899 and 1904, fueled in part by the expansion of trading on the New York Stock Exchange, they reduced 4,200 companies to a mere 250, resulting in many of the powerful mega-firms that would dominate the American economy during the 20th century; among them US Steel, the American Smelting and Refining Company, United Fruit, and International Harvester. Many of these firms were headquartered in New York; the banks they relied on were located there as well. And their growing power pulled in the elite executives from other businesses. New York, as Wallace puts it, “sucked in millionaires and corporations as fast as they were created, and yanked some already existing ones out of other cities’ orbits.”

This flood of money shaped the physical landscape of the city. Competition between real-estate developers drove its vertical growth. Skyscrapers represented the aspiration to wrest as much money as possible from each lot of land. The very dynamic of growth spurred the buildings higher: Every additional floor meant new tenants and new rents, magnifying the value of the property as a whole, so that by 1912, New York had more tall buildings than any other city in the nation. Ultimately, the Manhattan skyline became the physical embodiment of profits literally seized from the air.

Yet far from reigning with unquestioned confidence, New York’s elites were always afraid of potential challenges to their authority, and this uncertainty forms the second major theme of Wallace’s book: the increasingly organized efforts to push back against their control. There were the
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Progressives and the middle-class reformers who sought to challenge the raucous power of the new business elite and to tame and civilize the disorderly city. And then there was the working class, which was not content simply to serve as the subject of reform experiments descending from on high. Labor unions proliferated in the city, and New York became a center of radical politics teeming with socialist and anarchist activism that often found its way into the unions and pushed them into confrontational actions against factory owners and financiers.

Even the Industrial Workers of the World, those anti-capitalist poets often seen as the organizers of the Western mines, had their pockets of strength in New York. Immigrant strikers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, sent their children to the city during the IWW-led strike in 1912, and when the hundreds of malnourished children arrived by train, they were greeted by thousands of supporters at Grand Central Station.

Two years later, during a recession, radical activists in the IWW circle organized an “army of the unemployed”: Hundreds of people marched through the streets of New York, entering churches to demand food and shelter.

This challenge to the status quo in one area of life soon fed the growth of others. Margaret Sanger was a member of the Socialist Party and a supporter of the Lawrence strikers. She became aware of the labor movement and provided spaces for black teachers to resign once they got married. In 1914, a Feminist Alliance, drawing from socialist, anarchist, and labor circles, was organized to challenge sexual inequities in the city (such as a Board of Education policy that forced female teachers to resign once they got married). The Greenwich Village bohemians—a small number of whom famously climbed to the top of the Washington Square Arch one cold January night in 1917 to proclaim the neighborhood a “free and independent Republic”—also shared a milieu with the labor movement and provided spaces for women to step outside the norms prescribed by gender.

The city’s left also spilled into African-American politics. One of the strongest chapters of Greater Gotham traces the expansion of black New York and the city’s emergence as a center of resistance to segregation and inequality throughout the country. The city’s African-American population swelled from around 60,000 in 1900 to 91,700 in 1910, as migrants arrived from the Caribbean and the southern United States.

Housing and employment were highly segregated: Black doctors couldn’t practice at public hospitals, and black teachers weren’t employed by the Board of Education until 1895. (The city’s public schools had been legally segregated since the 18th century, and they didn’t become integrated until the 1870s and even later in Queens, which had a separate Board of Education.) At first, it appeared that a moderate politics of racial uplift through free enterprise might predominate in black New York. Booker T. Washington built his “Tuskegee machine” in part through financial contributions from New York philanthropists, speaking at Madison Square Garden before audiences of corporate tycoons to raise funds. Soon, however, the city became home to a much more ideologically diverse black politics.

Wallace traces the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; the founding of The Messenger, socialist A. Philip Randolph’s magazine; and, ultimately, as Harlem emerged as the city’s center of black life, the rise of Hubert Harrison, whose politics blended socialism and black nationalism. By 1917, following what Wallace describes as a “racial pogrom” in East St. Louis, Illinois, in which some 200 black people were killed, Harrison helped organize a silent march down Fifth Avenue, with people bearing placards that read “Mother, Do Lynchers Go to Heaven?” It was the largest protest of African Americans in the city’s history, and it marked the emergence of Harlem as the heart of resistance to racism throughout the country.

Even so, left-wing politics never came to dominate New York, and, as Wallace shows, the city also served as a center for reaction. The press denounced the Industrial Workers of the World as “vicious outcasts”; the police arrested nearly 200 members of the IWW’s “army of the unemployed” on charges of incitement to riot; and open-air meetings were suspended by the city. While the fire that killed 146 workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company resulted in the passage of workplace-safety legislation, the owners of the factory were nevertheless acquitted in court of any wrongdoing. Even the suffragist movement—which gained momentum through an alliance of wealthy society women and downtown labor activists—failed to carry the city when New York State voted on a 1915 referendum to grant women the right to vote.

New York was also home to a flourishing political right. Advocates of eugenics and racist pseudoscience, such as Madison Grant and Charles Benedict Davenport, built institutional centers in the city, while Columbia University became the home base for John Burgess, the founder of political science, who denounced Reconstruction as a “monstrous thing” and built his discipline on the principle of racial difference. While many structural features of city life made it possible for radical politics to thrive—among them the city’s density, its plethora of common meeting spaces and gathering points, and above all its inequality, which placed rich and poor in close proximity—none of this meant that the city’s elites would simply allow this new politics to flourish. Instead, they were determined to retain their control, no matter how much turmoil would come as the result.

Federal agencies often helped. Anthony Comstock, the repressive US postal inspector, banned an issue of Sanger’s publication, The Woman Rebel; when Sanger kept publishing material on contraception with the aid of an IWW printer, she was forced to flee the country, under threat of a 45-year prison sentence. (Following Comstock’s death in 1915, the US attorney dropped the charges against Sanger, but only after her husband spent a month in the Tombs for selling another of her publications.) Comstock also went after the bohemian artists, at one point arresting the 19-year-old receptionist of the Art Students League of New York when she gave him a free catalog that included three nude images.

The tensions between radical and reactionary New York came to a head in 1916, as the nation’s leaders debated entry into World War I. On the one hand, the example of a multiethnic city appeared to be a challenge to the ethnic nationalism that had begun to dominate European and, to some extent, American politics. But the subject of what constituted an American national identity was hotly contested in New York, where the pro-war constituency was mostly Anglophile and upper-class and the large anti-war camp was built around the multi-
For Wallace, despite the repression that accompanied the First World War, the story of New York is ultimately one of triumph—the narrative of a vast city coalescing, despite the intense pressures that might have pulled it apart. In the final pages of the book, he suggests that the experience of New York in its first 21 years as a consolidated city points to the power of shared participation: “Despite those two decades having witnessed nonstop battling between classes, races, ethnic groups, genders, and religions—verbally and at times violently—the center had held.” The “ties that bound”—shared institutions like the subways, the theaters, Tammany Hall, and most of all “the excitement and pride of living in a great city”—kept New York together, a single metropolis and a model of the cosmopolitan ideal. Although Wallace doesn’t make this point explicitly, his “Greater Gotham” is also a city that came to represent a template for the nation as a whole, a particular vision of what it meant to be American that is nearly the exact opposite of Donald Trump’s.

While Wallace’s invocation of New York as an alternative vision of American identity is welcome, there’s a way in which the book’s concluding depiction of a city unified despite its tensions runs counter to its broader narrative of struggle and contest. New York’s political and economic consolidation in the early 20th century (especially after World War I) also meant the shutting down of certain kinds of political challenges. By the end of 1919, the ranks of the Socialist Party had been decimated, thanks both to wartime repression and the internal splits in the party after the Russian Revolution. Emma Goldman had been imprisoned for organizing anti-conscription protests; and the rich network of newspapers, magazines, and political groups that had sustained the city’s left and its artistic counterculture had been driven almost out of existence. Only a few years later, the country would pass a “genuine 100 percent American immigration law” to shut out the “scum of the earth” (to quote New York real-estate developer and eugenicist W.E.D. Stokes). There’s a suggestion in Greater Gotham that the multi-ethnic working class of New York offered a counterpoint to the world of real estate, finance, and corporate capitalism—one that was able to check and contain its dominance and provide a real alternative. But was this actually the case?

Given the heft of Greater Gotham, asking for more might seem perverse. Still, one cannot help but wonder how Wallace’s story might have been different had he brought his story forward to examine the ways the conflicts and tensions he describes affected New York’s response to the Great Depression. How did the class politics he explores inform the liberal state as it took shape in the postwar city, and how did they shape the undermining and transformation of that liberalism after the 1975 fiscal crisis? Going further forward still, how does the city he chronicles foreshadow the one of today, which is still home to dense ethnic and immigrant neighborhoods and where intense poverty exists right next to some of the most extreme wealth the world has ever known? While elements of the robust public sector that ultimately emerged out of those contests a hundred years ago still exist, the radical politics that once animated the city does not—at least, not in the forms it did during the years chronicled in Greater Gotham. Perhaps New York will someday find itself the center of such a political uprising once again, as the myriad dispossessed of a city dominated by extreme wealth might be able, even today, to discover new points of rebellion. The intensity of life “compressed” (as E.B. White put it) in the city can never, as Wallace shows us, truly be controlled from the top. But we will have to wait for the sequel to find out why this radical spirit got lost in the later years of the 20th century—and whether this narrative of the rise of a city may also be, in a way, a story of its fall.
For the first time since its 1993 premiere, *Angels in America* has once again touched down on the Broadway stage. The new production from Britain’s National Theatre, directed by Marianne Elliott, reinterprets Tony Kushner’s now-canonical play for an age in which many of its principal concerns remain deeply relevant. Although the script has only been slightly modified, the struggles that it details evoke unexpected resonances, now that *Angels*, which is about history, has become a part of history. The play’s ever-upward trajectory as a gay cultural touchstone and a mainstream success mirrors the dramatic political and social changes that have unfolded over the past two and a half decades.

*Angels* is technically two plays, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, and its skillfully arranged plotlines intersect and repeatedly double back on themselves over almost eight hours. (“This is my ex-lover’s lover’s Mormon mother” is how one character gets introduced.) Set in New York City in the late 1980s, Kushner’s story follows the relationship between Prior, a man living with AIDS, and Louis, who abandons his lover in a time of need. Louis, a Jewish intellectual, finds an unlikely paramour in Joe, a closeted Republican Mormon lawyer who has recently arrived from Utah with his depressed wife, Harper. Like both Joe and Louis, Harper is also looking for an escape, swallowing pills “in wee fistfuls”...
to turn down the volume on her unhappy marriage. This quartet is joined by Prior’s friend Belize, a flamboyant black nurse with a preternatural gift for cutting repartee, and by Roy Cohn, the real-life unscrupulous lawyer and conservative consigliere who (in the play, as in historical fact) dies of AIDS-related complications. And then, of course, there are the angels that give the play its name.

For all of his loathsome qualities, Cohn is Kushner’s most compelling creation. Trailed by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, he is also the play’s principal device for connecting its characters’ often selfish pursuit of freedom to broader political themes. For Belize, who winds up as his hospital nurse, Cohn personifies the national character: “terminal, crazy, and mean.” A self-acknowledged “determined lowlife,” Cohn is not only a vicious bigot and amoral sleaze; he is also a man who wields tremendous power—indeed, he successfully pulls strings to amass a private hoard of AZT pills, which are off-limits to the general public. Cohn’s megalomania extends to nearly all aspects of his life: He is a Jew who hates Jews, a homosexual who despises homosexuals, and a person with AIDS who claims to be dying of “liver cancer.” These disavowals underscore the self-mutilation implicit in his hyper-individualistic ideology, and they suggest an undercurrent of self-loathing in America’s egoistic politics. If freedom amounts to the narrow pursuit of one’s own interest, there is little sense in recognizing commonalities or mutual obligations. Little does this concern Cohn, even as he wastes away on his deathbed, friendless and alone.

Using Cohn to explore the pathologies of the American right was not so difficult in 1993, seven years after his death. Ironically, it is even easier today, with one of Cohn’s main protégés occupying the White House. (As Marianne Elliott has stated, “Everything that Tony captured in Roy Cohn is now in the Oval Office.”)

The new production reaps the dividends of Kushner’s accidental prescience, and Nathan Lane performs Cohn as distinctly Trumpian, playing up the overlap with lines like: “You think you know all I know. I don’t even know what all I know. Half the time I just make it up and it still turns out to be true!” Such topical humor wins knowing laughter from the audience, but its deployment also reveals how far Angels has traveled from its point of origin at the height of the AIDS crisis.

Theater director Isaac Butler and Slate culture writer Dan Kois measure this distance in a new oral history of Angels titled The World Only Spins Forward: The Ascent of “Angels in America.” Butler and Kois have conducted interviews with cast members, directors, producers, critics, scholars, and activists and have arranged their insights like the lines of a script. Their book reminds readers that any play is ultimately a settlement negotiated by the many individuals who bring it to life—including the audience. Because the earliest performances of Angels were staged at a moment when the AIDS death rate was on the rise—and ravaging the theater community in particular—the play offered an opening for actors and spectators to commune in grief. Oskar Eustis, the first director of Angels, tells Butler and Kois about a powerful moment, during the premiere of Perestroika at Los Angeles’s Mark Taper Forum, when audience members joined him in reciting the Kaddish to mourn the friends and family they had lost. As Ron Liebman, who played Cohn in the early productions of the play, comments, “We were doing a play, yes, but it became something else.”

When Kushner began work on Angels, late in the Reagan era, an AIDS diagnosis was still regarded as a death sentence. By 1990, the average life span of an AIDS patient had been only slightly extended, even though the medical community had known about the disease for almost a decade. Officials at all levels of government hardly budged to address the growing health crisis. In fact, to the extent that there was any public response, it usually took a punitive form: Between 1987 and 1989, twenty states rushed to criminalize HIV transmission, usually as a felony. Of course, much of the stigma attached to AIDS stemmed from its identification as a “gay disease” at a time when surveys indicated that solid majorities of Americans still viewed homosexuality as immoral. The Supreme Court’s 1986 Bowers v. Hardwick ruling, which upheld state anti-sodomy laws, codified this prejudice and confirmed the strength of a religious right convinced, with televangelist Jerry Falwell, that AIDS was “God’s punishment for homosexuals” and for “the society that tolerates homosexuals.”

Given the hostile climate, it is impressive that Kushner’s script announced its politics without polemizing. Angels took aim less at plain bigotry than at the callous denial of suffering implied by Reagan’s sunny vision of “morning in America.” Joe gravitates toward this shallow optimism to deny his own vulnerability, but we don’t hate him—
1995 helped to break the silence surrounding AIDS in many rural areas and small cities. “So many mothers would come to us backstage after the show and say, ‘My son is dying,’ or ‘I just lost my son,’” recalls actress Carolyn Swift. “We were still in the middle of the epidemic, and we were in places where those losses hadn’t been recognized.” At the same time, the visibility that Angels made possible also generated reaction: In 1996, Christian conservatives in Charlotte, North Carolina, mounted a determined (though ultimately unsuccessful) effort to prevent the show from being staged. Protests became a somewhat regular occurrence, but they proved insufficient to slow the play’s ascent. As the millennium approached, Angels in America had become a cause célèbre.

In many ways, the play’s popularity tracked the precipitously rising fortunes of the gay-rights movement in the 1990s and into the 2000s. Even though political victory was far from certain, it was no longer possible to describe gay people, as Cohn does in Angels, as a negligible group with “zero clout,” who “in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council.” By the late Clinton era, gay Americans were established as a key marketing demographic and a political constituency inside the Democratic Party, with seats at the table on Wall Street and on Capitol Hill. In 2003, the Supreme Court overturned Bowers, effectively invalidating the anti-sodomy laws that remained on the books in 13 states. Gay Americans were no longer outlaws.

Though Republicans made hay of the resistance to same-sex marriage in the 2004 presidential election, the limits of political homophobia were becoming clear. 2006 was the year Colorado megachurch pastor Ted Haggard, a spiritual adviser to President George W. Bush, was discovered to have been patronizing a male prostitute and using crystal meth. His highly publicized downfall symbolized the cynicism and hypocrisy of a fundamentalist right that has since focused its efforts much more successfully on restricting women’s reproductive freedom.

The success of Angels gave Kushner a high platform from which to weigh in on these changes in American culture and politics. In 1995, Bill Clinton solicited the playwright’s thoughts for his annual State of the Union address. As Kushner’s profile rose, the play inevitably shed its insurgent posture. Prior’s response to the light show that announces the arrival of the angel in Millennium Approaches—“Very Steven Spielberg”—has different undertones now that Kushner has written the screenplays of several high-grossing Spielberg films. In 2003, HBO produced a $60 million, six-part adaptation of Angels starring Al Pacino and Meryl Streep. The film further boosted the play’s fame and reputation, but just as the LGBTQ establishment had its detractors on the left (Kushner among them), there were those who tabulated the film version’s hidden costs. Critics grumbled that HBO had dropped the play’s subtitle, “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes.” Moreover, as playwright Trip Cullman points out to Butler and Kois, very few queer people were involved in making the film. To many, Angels seemed to have bargained away its soul to advance from the stage to the screen. Had tolerance taken its toll? Was Angels still a “gay play,” if indeed it ever was?

Not that this diminishes Angels, which has always managed to be both “a gay fantasia” about AIDS (no longer viewed as a “gay disease”) and an ambitious meditation on universal themes that collide in what Kushner once described as a “catastrophic synthesis.” One of the central concerns that emerges as the play cruises from faith to love to the color of a winter sky (is it purple or mauve?) is the antimony of stasis and motion. In a reversal of her ancestors’ migration over the Great Plains, Joe’s mother, Hannah, leaves Utah for New York and by the final scene has undergone a profound transformation, finding a new life for herself in the heart of Sodom. But movement isn’t necessarily equated with liberation: “The meltingdown of the Soviet Union coincides with the melting of the polar ice caps and threatens to obliterate bedrock certainties in its train.

In the first scene of Perestroika, Aleksii Antediluvianovich Prelapsarianov, “the world’s oldest living Bolshevik,” bemoans the passing of the old order. “We must change,” he concedes as he squints into the audience, “but only show me the Theory… or else keep silent.” Theory, he insists, is necessary to organize experience, to contain it like an integument: It is the “new skin,” as Prelapsarianov puts it, necessary for life to proceed. Angels seeks to refute this logic. Theory is no protection at all against a changing world, especially one that spins as much backward as forward. Reality inevitably outruns our plans and preconceptions, forcing us to blunder forth into the stream of experience with neither a compass nor a map. What is perhaps most American about Angels is its affirmative embrace of this uncertainty—its attitude of receptiveness to what will come—and of fidelity to the desires that open us up to the new.

Kushner, who identifies himself as a “patriot” and admits to being “romantic about this country,” also doesn’t shrink from acknowledging that the burden of history weighs upon the present: We are all sinners, and there are no angels in America. And yet the possibility of redemption is there (even Belize, nobody’s fool, has a vision of utopia)—not a clean break with the past, but an honest reckoning with it. A quarter-century has passed since Angels premiered, and in that time we have seen progress, despite many defeats and far too many deaths. We may be able to come to terms with where we have been, but we cannot know where we are bound. In the storm that is blowing in from paradise, even the Angel of History faces in the wrong direction.

“Nothing’s lost forever,” Prior says in the final scene of Perestroika. But progress has meant assimilation, and the passage of time has brought with it a comfortable amnesia regarding the AIDS epidemic. As critic Dale Peck tells Butler and Kois: “Gay people became more American but America didn’t become more gay.” The current Broadway revival aspires to recover some of what has been lost, in part by stirring in a hefty dose of camp. Vulnerable minorities, especially Jews and homosexuals, at one time relied on camp as a mode of communication and survival strategy, a way of identifying one another while keeping their identities undetectable to those on the outside; writing more than 50 years ago, Susan Sontag famously described it as a “private code” belonging to “small urban cliques.” Andrew Garfield, playing a very campy Prior in this production, reportedly prepared for the role by visiting London drag revues, with the only discernible payoff being that he delivers all of his lines in the same high vocal register. Garfield isn’t a weak actor by any means, but his performance comes off as a museum piece on display from a time when “gay” referred to something shameful and subversive. That this camp-in-amber can be such lighthearted fun for all viewers points to Kushner’s embrace of this uncertainty—its attitude of receptiveness to what will come—and of fidelity to the desires that open us up to the new.
Artists don’t make news headlines very often. For Mel Chin, it happened in November 1990, with one that read: U.S. ARTS CHIEF OVER- TURNS AN APPROVAL. In the midst of the controversies that had been roiling the National Endowment for the Arts over the previous year or so—first for its support of exhibitions by the photographers Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, then for its grants to several performance artists, including Karen Finley and Holly Hughes—the NEA’s chairman at the time, John Frohnmayer, took the unprecedented step of revoking Chin’s grant, which had already been approved by both a peer panel and the advisory National Council on the Arts.

What was strange was that, unlike the commotion over Mapplethorpe, Serrano, and the rest, there were no hot-button issues of sexuality or religion at stake with Chin’s work. Instead, his grant involved a seemingly arcane topic in plant biology: phytoremediation, or the ability of plants to clean contaminated soil. Chin’s grant, in the category of “Artists’ Projects: New Forms,” was for a work called Revival Field, a sort of earthwork or land-art piece developed in collaboration with an agronomist at the US Department of Agriculture, Rufus L. Chaney. A section of toxic landfill was to be fenced into geometrically defined zones, a circle within a square, and planted with alpine pennycress (Thlaspi caerulescens), a rather unphotogenic plant known as a “hyperaccumulator”—that is, a plant capable of growing in soil that has been contaminated by heavy metals and extracting the toxins from it. In other words, Chin’s proposal was a science experiment in the guise of an artwork, or vice versa.

Not only was Revival Field unlikely to affront anyone’s moral sensibility; it was also unlikely to be seen by pretty much anyone, given that the site was off-limits to the public. Chin and his assistants were required to undergo 40 hours of training in the handling of hazardous waste before setting to work there. In this case, it seems, the worry for Frohnmayer wasn’t that the project might give offense; it was really that old chestnut “But is it art?” translated into contemporary bureaucratese (being of “questionable artistic merit”).

The idea that a work could possess what Chin called an “invisible aesthetic”—though familiar enough to aficionados of 1970s con-
ceptual art—might have seemed like a case of the emperor’s new clothes; and the idea that the removal of toxic material from soil could be compared to carving in traditional sculpture—the removal of stone or wood from a block, although in this case “the material being approached is unseen and the tools will be biochemistry and agriculture”—might have sounded sophistical. It probably was sophistical, come to think of it. All the better. Chin practices what the poet and scholar Lewis Hyde, among others, has preached: that the artist must be a trickster. As such, he appears, Hyde wrote, not only “as a messenger but as a thief, the one who steals from the gods the good things that humans need if they are to survive in this world.”

Good trickster that he is, Chin somehow managed to charm Frohnmayer into backing down; Revival Field received its $10,000 grant and was duly installed at the Pig’s Eye landfill near St. Paul, Minnesota, where it remained for three years. Scientifically, the project seems to have been something of a success: According to Peter Boswell, a former curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, “since the installation of the St. Paul Revival Field, phytoremediation has become an increasingly studied and applied area of scientific investigation, a field in which Chaney has remained an active leader.”

Artistically, Revival Field might at first seem something of a detour in Chin’s career, which has been concisely mapped by curators Laura Raicovich and Manon Slome in the exhibition “Mel Chin: All Over the Place,” on view at the Queens Museum in New York City through August 12. As the exhibition shows, an invisible aesthetic hasn’t often been this artist’s goal: Much of his work is meticulously crafted and eye-catching on a monumental scale. I first got to know it (and him) through Chin’s 1987 New York exhibition, “Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand,” a series of sculptures based on ancient Chinese and Greek cosmologies and modern astronomy that seemed to propose a half-archaic, half-futuristic, and mostly enigmatic model of the solar system. His use in these works—also presented at the Queens Museum—of what he calls “traditional to arcane materials and chemicals” showed him to be a rare sort of conceptualist, one whose ideas are mostly articulated through a dialogue with matter by way of the hand. He makes objects that question our relation to them, perhaps bearing in mind André Breton’s admonition: “So strong is the belief in life, in what is most fragile in life—real life, I mean—that in the end this belief is lost. Man, that inveterate dreamer, daily more discontent with his destiny, has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use.”

Yet it’s hard to identify any particular piece as typical of Chin’s multifarious oeuvre. If I had to cite a typically memorable one, it might be the 2012 sculpture Cabinet of Craving, a 14-foot-tall spider made of black-stained wood, like a grand piano, whose body is a Victorian-style cabinet and whose glass belly reveals an antique English teapot on a silver tray. The image of a giant spider makes one think of Louise Bourgeois, who also put this figure to spectacular use. But whereas Bourgeois’s subject is always the family—though with an awareness of the personal as political (her spider was, she perhaps surprisingly claimed, “an ode to my mother”)—Chin’s sculpture attempts to respond to history on a grand scale.

Cabinet of Craving is an allegory for imperialism—in Chin’s words, “a hybrid monster born out of addictions and manipulations of empires, in this case, the Victorian English craving for tea and porcelain, the Chinese desire for silver and the insidious and illegal trade of narcotics that [led] to the Opium War” of the mid-19th century. Any resonance with our culture’s continuing love affair with opiates and the profits to be made from them is strictly tacit and undoubtedly intentional. China, which was forced through gunboat diplomacy to accept imports of opium in the 19th century, is today the largest source of illicit fentanyl on the US market.

A sculpture like Cabinet of Craving, with its dense concatenation of symbol and reference, appropriation and artistry, is designed to be striking enough to command your attention and hermetic enough to keep you puzzling over it. Its enigmatic quality suggests that it comes from a surrealist lineage, and I can’t help recalling Breton’s idea that surrealist images, like those from opium, arise spontaneously and “despotically.” But where the images of the surrealists were supposed to point inward to the unconscious, Chin’s point outward, to society, history, and the environment. Maybe he should be called a social surrealist.

The blatant theatricality of Cabinet of Craving seems a long way from the invisible aesthetic of Revival Field (represented in Queens by a diorama). But even in Chin’s most spectacular pieces, there’s also much that is hidden or invisible. And a walk through the Queens Museum made me wonder whether the most basic difference isn’t that Revival Field was fundamentally optimistic in its bearing, fueled by the hope that the poisons we’ve poured into the earth could be extracted from it, and by natural means, so as to regain an earlier state of wholesomeness. That optimism is absent in much of Chin’s later work: There’s no plant for removing the toxins “born out of addictions and manipulations of empires” from society the way alpine pennywort can absorb zinc and cadmium from the soil. Although he still undertakes activist projects whose aim is to remediate some of the ills we face, most of Chin’s works are, as he calls them, “lamentations”—beautifully articulated gestures of mourning over the damage that we’ve done as much as calls to undo it. And yet the question is always on the table: Can we kick our old habits?

Sometimes the warning of danger comes in a package so witty that it takes away the sting of admonition. The Elementary Object (1993) is a briarwood pipe of such refined form that I’d imagine any smoker would like to take a puff on it. But as René Magritte said: “This is not a pipe.” That’s a fuse cord coming out of it, and if Chin is to be believed, the chamber is filled with blasting powder—not a pipe but a pipe bomb. Tobacco, like opium, is the kind of poison an individual can choose to forgo, but the toxins that become part of our environment—land, water, air, homes and workplaces—can’t be avoided.

If I had to choose the most formally concise and beautiful piece in “All Over the Place,” it would probably be Study Lamp (2018), a work that’s far from invisible but still easy to miss, since at the Queens Museum it isn’t installed in any of the rooms devoted to Chin’s show; instead, it’s in a room housing part of a collection of Tiffany lamps and windows amassed by the Austrian-born collectors Egon and Hildegard Neustadt between 1935 and 1984. (According to Egon Neustadt’s obituary in The New York Times, “He said he bought every type of lamp that Louis Comfort Tiffany made, even if he did not like it”—the true mark of an obsessive collector.) On a tall, gracile bronze base that rivals anything of Tiffany’s for art-nouveau fantasy sits a stained-glass lampshade in the shape of a human brain. Its color pattern is derived from a study of the effects of lead poisoning on the brain; the areas colored orange-red are the portions most damaged. Since the glass in Tiffany’s lamps is leaded, we can wonder whether Chin’s sculpture represents the condition of the workers who handled them day after day for years.

Lead poisoning is a recurrent concern in Chin’s work. Lead Point Portraits (2013)—
three big, stunningly creepy drawings made with lead on recycled file folders—shows the faces of three men whose lives Chin believes might have been affected by exposure to the element. The only one you’re likely to recognize is the central figure, Ludwig van Beethoven, whose famously saturnine character, poor health, and deafness have been controversially ascribed to lead poisoning. The less familiar faces flanking the composer turn out to be a couple of contemporary Americans from opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum: Albert Dunlap, better known as Chainsaw Al, the business executive who cultivated a reputation for saving failing businesses through ruthless downsizing (it later transpired that the supposed turnarounds were really just accounting frauds); and William Gardner, who in 1992 set fire to a house he’d just burglarized in order to prevent one of the children in it from identifying him; the young girl perished in the flames, along with four of her siblings. Gardner’s public defenders called for clemency on the grounds of his “developmental disorders since birth and brain impairment from lead poisoning,” but he was executed by the State of Ohio in 2010.

An artist for whom lead poisoning is a recurrent theme or metaphor would inevitably be drawn to consider the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. For a new work, *Flint Fit* (2018), Chin has eschewed the impulse toward lamentation, instead rekindling the imaginatively ameliorative spirit that animated *Revival Field*. On a visit to the beleaguered city, he took note of the volume of plastic water bottles being used by its residents. Chin’s response was immediate: “I said, ‘Hey, what are you doing with those plastic bottles? Could you give them to me?’” His scheme was to have the plastic transformed into thread for fabric. He recruited fashion designer Tracy Reese—a Michigan native best known for having Michelle Obama as a steady customer—to design a collection of rain- and swimwear that could be made using the polyester material. The garments were assembled by participants in an employment-preparation program in Flint.

The elegantly rough-hewn garments are on view in Queens in an installation that encompasses the museum’s relief map of the New York City water-supply system created for the 1939 World’s Fair. Over this map, Chin has installed a hanging sculpture, *The Water and the City Above* (2018), which maps out the Flint River in relation to the city, creating a parallelism that reminds us that, with bad governance and unchecked exploitation, a catastrophe similar to Flint’s could happen anywhere—Flint’s problems are ours, too. As modeled on mannequins scattered around this space, Reese’s designs look ready to ship to your local department store, but they are prototypes that have not been mass-produced.

The process as a whole is a kind of prototype itself, a pilot project or proof of concept demonstrating that a trickster artist’s imaginative approach to everyday problems can help sidestep some of them. In this case, the underlying disaster of Flint’s poisoned water supply is unaffected, but Chin has succeeded in showing that at least the knock-on effect of having to use bottled water can be addressed. The plastic, anyway, that made up 90,000 water bottles has been prevented from dispersing into the environment.

But polyester garments, like everything else, will eventually be discarded and end up in the land or sea. That’s not a problem that would have ordinarily occurred to me, but the experience of traversing the range of Chin’s work in Queens primed me to look at everything from its dark side.

Even what might seem like one of Chin’s most calmly meditative pieces has warning signs built into it. *Sea to See* (2014) consists of a pair of massive glass hemispheres with steel-grid frameworks facing each other from opposite walls; within these great transparent bubbles, we see the projected imagery of an underwater world. For an exhibition commemorating the centenary of the Panama Canal, Chin chose to focus not on the canal itself, but rather on the two oceans it artificially connects. So the imagery on one side comes from the Atlantic, on the other from the Pacific. It’s mostly pretty hazy and pleasantly floaty.

You’d probably have to be better informed than I am to recognize that you might sometimes be seeing endangered species or plastic debris drifting by. But the experience of being in this space is pleasurable enough that you want to spend time with it; and, with time, you might start to wonder in a more specific way just what it is you’re seeing. And once you do, you might start to ask yourself, as I did, how much of our old polyester clothing—which is no longer anything you can do collectively—ends up in these seas.

This raises a question about how information works in a discursively based practice like Chin’s. So many of his works are so larded with meaning that the meaning becomes, paradoxically, hard to extract. You have to resort to the wall texts for clarification—or, if you’re lucky, to the artist himself, who is his own most eloquent explicator. (Watch one of his many interviews on YouTube for confirmation of this.) And once you delve into the layers of meaning that Chin builds into his work, you might start to wonder what’s left for the viewer to do but reconstruct the artist’s deeper intention.

Chin’s works are not, after all, clues to the artist’s thought process so much as prompts for further discussion. He doesn’t necessarily imagine an individual viewer, as most artists implicitly do, but rather a community. Addressed as such, his lamentations are not, finally, as grim or pessimistic as they might sometimes seem—and they do connect to his demonstrative projects for ameliorative action, such as *Revival Field* or *Flint Fit*. The vividly disturbing image that reminds us how bad things are, how much has been destroyed, is meant to be a springboard for thinking harder and more creatively about what can still be done to salvage our poisoned situation. That’s a kind of thinking that can only be done collectively.
Puzzle No. 3473  
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS
1 Cheerful brew pub to have food (6)
5 Belief in Edmonton athlete’s comeback maintaining soldier? No (8)
9 Like a bull in a china shop or in a sandwich shop, house pet with energy (10)
10 Make needed changes, when retracting what goes out twice a day (4)
11 After short time, discomfort and pain for a runner (6)
12 Communicating with a 15 under the weather (1-7)
13 Onetime campaign manager to staff a military installation (8)
15 A loose relative (6)
17 Congress, for instance, is initially scrupulous and precise (3,3)
19 Those people keeping symbol back to front as a way to understand 5A (8)
21 Diana the Magician embraces abomination (8)
23 Progenitor’s paint in correct English? (6)
24 Attempt to ensnare red cardinal, say (4)
25 Frenchman has to see inside apartment (4-1-5)
26 Persevere flying kite that contains ribbon from the other side (4,2,2)
27 Papa eats unfinished part of an egg that’s not quite fresh (3-3)

DOWN
2 Get through to write review about Spielberg blockbuster (9)
3 Matricide put God in office (7)
4 Talking head baked a piece of chicken (5)
5 Strangle characters gathering for broker (4-6,5)
6 Body of water that is perceived internally doesn’t drop off (4,5)
7 Mischievous entity swapping Russian government’s $1,000 for a different $1,000 (7)
8 Vegetable held over in Hanoi, normally (5)
14 30-day tyrant, having eliminated doctor one bit at a time, is forced to answer a difficult question (2,3,4)
16 Nine large bats, as a rule (2,7)
18 In a vessel, Cruz misbehaved (5,2)
20 New York supports clear vandalism? That’s a crime (7)
22 What there is in team, ultimately: tennis with excellent racket (5)
23 Quietly call up pattern (5)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3472

ACROSS
1 ALP • HA • A • U • TO [psi]
2 [psi] (NED) 3 amg • 4 AP • NEA
5 TRAVEL[S] [psi] 6 PXT • H
7 IRONS (amag) • IDES 8 SPHIN • X
13 “sue,” she’ 15 D • RIPPED
18 BE[psi] • ER[psi] C 19 L IS ZT
21 A[p]S 22 ON [psi] [psi] [psi] [psi] [psi] [psi] [psi]
26 RAIL/MAN [psi] [psi] [psi]
27 Spun [GGL] [psi] [psi] [psi] 28 [psi]
29 O • MEGA

DOWN
1 AMP • LA • USE
2 [psi] (NED) 3 amg • 4 AP • NEA
5 TRAVEL[S] [psi] 6 PXT • H
7 IRONS (amag) • IDES 8 SPHIN • X
13 “sue,” she’ 15 D • RIPPED
18 BE[psi] • ER[psi] C 19 L IS ZT
21 A[p]S 22 ON [psi] [psi] [psi] [psi] [psi] [psi] [psi]
26 RAIL/MAN [psi] [psi] [psi]
27 Spun [GGL] [psi] [psi] [psi] 28 [psi]
29 O • MEGA

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