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THE AOC EFFECT

On behalf of insurgent candidates, the Democrats’ new rock star Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is taking her populist message cross-country.

JOHN NICHOLS
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Zephyr Teachout for NY AG

Every election matters. But 2018 finds the country—indeed, the entire world—teetering on the brink of multiple catastrophes, many of them brought on or seriously aggravated by the actions of Donald Trump, a man catapulted into the White House by the wealth, power, and celebrity he amassed through businesses based in New York. With the Environmental Protection Agency set to self-destruct, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau under attack, Wall Street in the driver’s seat on tax cuts and banking, and the fossil-fuel industry dictating policy on fracking, attorneys general across the country suddenly assume a crucial role in ensuring that America remains a country of laws, rather than a bastion of crony capitalism and unbridled greed. This is especially true in New York, whose laws give an attorney general with the will to go after big business or tackle political corruption a powerful set of tools.

This year has also seen—in the extraordinary candidacy of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—the first tangible sign that when Democrats stop cowering in the center and instead offer common-sense solutions on health care, immigration, the economy, and the environment, voters respond.

That’s why the race to become New York’s next attorney general is so important. All four candidates for the Democratic nomination on September 13 are decent. Though she now works as a lobbyist, Leecia Eve has a long résumé of public service. Sean Patrick Maloney is New York’s first openly gay member of Congress and previously ran for the AG position in 2006. Letitia James, New York’s public advocate, was the first citywide officeholder to win on the Working Families Party line. But only Zephyr Teachout could be described (as she was recently in The New York Times) as “the godmother of the current moment—the first of a spate of female candidates...to emerge from anonymity and reveal the depths of dissatisfaction with establishment politics.”

Teachout was also the only AG candidate to support Ocasio-Cortez’s primary bid. Returning the favor, Ocasio-Cortez has said she’s “pride to endorse the only candidate for attorney general that is rejecting...corporate money.” And as the board of New York Communities for Change, which voted unanimously to endorse her, points out, only Teachout “has refused to accept campaign contributions from the real estate industry.” (New York politics, Teachout has said, “is poisoned by real estate money.”) That willingness to take on the power brokers is why we believe Teachout is the only candidate for attorney general who combines an ability to use all the tools at her disposal with proven independence from the corrupt, corporate-friendly, centrist politics represented by Governor Andrew Cuomo.

Perhaps because she literally wrote the book on the subject—Corruption in America (2014)—Teachout has been able to see and explain why corruption, not conspiracy, is the thread that connects New York’s lack of affordable housing with the Republicans’ death grip on the State Legislature (imposed by Cuomo’s friends in the so-called Independent Democratic Conference) and the lawlessness in the White House. “I think the wrong people are in jail,” Teachout said in a recent interview with the editors of The Nation. If elected attorney general, she pledged “to enforce New York State laws against criminality at the top level in real estate.” In her view, that very much includes the developer in the White House, whose New York base makes him uniquely vulnerable to an attorney general determined to use the resources of the country from corporate power run amok.

“I see the job of attorney general as the single most important legal office in the country when you can’t trust the federal government,” Teachout explains. “When the EPA is run by people who want to poison...instead of protect us, where do you turn?”

New York, she continues, “should be the living counterexample to Trump’s America, and instead, we’re enfeebled at home and people are suffering.”
This is because, thanks to Cuomo’s long collaboration with state Republicans (even as he spouts defiance for the cameras), New York lags behind other states on issues ranging from immigration and police accountability to public education, health care, and political reform.

Teachout reminded us that it was Cuomo’s decision to abolish the Moreland Commission, which was investigating political corruption, and his refusal to push for public funding for state elections that prompted her to run against him in New York’s 2014 Democratic gubernatorial primary. That may have seemed quixotic, though she did well enough to give the governor a bloody nose—and to pave the way for Cynthia Nixon’s candidacy. This time, however, Teachout has a real chance to win.

In a way, Teachout has been preparing to be a state attorney general her whole life. As a young lawyer working on death-penalty cases in North Carolina, she saw the school-to-prison pipeline and the terrible consequences of mass incarceration at close range. She has long decried the “chickenization” of the US economy, which not only reduces farmers and small manufacturers to a kind of serfdom but also, she says, “leads to political fear” for the rest of us. Within days of Trump’s inauguration, Teachout filed a lawsuit accusing him of violating the US Constitution’s emoluments clause, which forbids government officials from accepting gifts from foreign governments. In March, a federal court allowed a similar suit by the State of Maryland and the District of Columbia to proceed; Teachout has promised that New York would join that suit if she’s elected.

Teachout’s rhetoric and record have made her some powerful enemies, not least in Albany. So it’s not surprising that Cuomo would strive to derail her candidacy—including trying to destroy the Working Families Party by pressuring its union backers to cut off funding. That’s why it’s disappointing to see Letitia James trade her independence for the governor’s endorsement—and his fund-raising clout.

Attorney General Teachout could be a formidable partner for Governor Nixon (indeed, the two women recently endorsed each other)—or, if Cuomo is reelected, a constant and independent goad to prevent him from abandoning all the progressive positions he takes during this campaign.

“We are at a revolutionary moment right now about what kind of society we want to live in,” Teachout says. “Monopoly and antitrust [laws] aren’t just technical, sideline issues. These are fundamental swords that you can use to restrict excessive power.”

With Zephyr Teachout as attorney general, New Yorkers can be sure those swords won’t rust from lack of use.

A Young Insurgency

How do you cover an insurgency like the one now roiling the Democratic Party? The mainstream media’s treatment would give readers a severe case of whiplash. The 2018 primaries had barely started when The New York Times announced the virtual demise of the movement sparked by Bernie Sanders. Then, when newcomer Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez eviscerated Joe Crowley, the fourth-ranking Democrat in the House, in a New York primary, the Times ran a story headlined ‘There Is a Revolution on the Left,’ warning that “a new generation of confrontational progressives has put Democrats at the precipice of a sweeping transition.”

Then, when some of the candidates that Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders stumped for lost, Politico declared Down Goes Socialism (without bothering to tell us when “socialism” had been up), while The Washington Post concluded Liberal Insurgency Hits a Wall.

There is clearly a powerful reform movement building on the left. It is spearheaded by activists inspired by the Sanders campaign, but also by movements like Black Lives Matter, the Dreamers, #MeToo, and growing environmental activism. What is surprising—and what should be exciting to Democrats—is that much of the energy is focused on electoral politics, on remaking the Democratic Party rather than leaving it.

This upheaval is a long-overdue response to the failure of the Democratic establishment. The policy failure is expressed in stagnant wages, rising insecurity and inequality, widespread corruption, and unchecked climate change, to name a few calamities. The political failure is undeniable, with the loss of the White House to the most unpopular candidate in modern times, control of Congress to a remarkably reactionary Republican Party, and a thousand seats in state legislatures across the country.

To date, the reform movement has made its greatest gains in the war of ideas. This shouldn’t be surprising. The reforms that the activists are championing are bold, striking, and address real needs: Medicare for all, tuition-free public college, a $15 minimum wage, universal pre-K, a federal jobs guarantee, a commitment to rebuild America, a challenge to big-money politics, police and prison reforms, and a fierce commitment to liberty and justice for all.

These ideas aren’t “radical.” They enjoy broad popular support—even the Koch brothers own polling demonstrates that. Not surprisingly, these ideas are increasingly championed not just by progressives like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, but by more mainstream liberals like Kirsten Gillibrand, Kamala Harris, and Cory Booker as they gear up for the 2020 presidential race.

Almost without exception, the leaders of the reform movement—from Ocasio-Cortez and Warren to Sanders and Ben Jealous—dismiss the much-ballyhooed tension between “identity politics” and economic populism. That supposed choice was driven by the Wall Street wing of the Democratic Party, which hoped to use social liberalism as a cover for a neoliberal economics that doesn’t work for working people. Insurgent candidates of all races and

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President Trump’s tax cuts all but guaranteed that 2018 would be a fantastic year for shareholders. Predictably, corporations are taking advantage of this windfall not by funding other companies or boosting worker pay, but by showering their shareholders with cash. Of course, 2017 wasn’t a bad year for shareholders either. Indeed, the last four decades have seen shareholders take home larger and larger slices of the economic pie.

In the early 1980s, economists started to believe that a company’s only goal should be to maximize the wealth of shareholders, who would then pour money back into the economy as investments. During this time, our laws and institutions were radically overhauled to make this happen. One especially crucial change occurred in 1982, when the Securities and Exchange Commission made it legal for firms to buy back company shares—giving more money to investors and allowing corporate boards to prop up stock prices. This “shareholder revolution” transformed the nature of capitalism, though it has taken until now to see just how extreme it would be.

Granted, shareholders have always gotten returns in the form of dividends for—at least in theory—bearing risk and monitoring management, but the scale is new. From the 1950s to 1970s, shareholders took about 1.7 percent of GDP in the cash paid in dividends and in the net number of stocks that were bought; now it’s around 4.7 percent of GDP. This is a shift of about 3 percent of GDP, or $567 billion a year.

This is a staggering number, and it can easily overwhelm our sense of proportion. Three percent of GDP in a single year is enough to give every working adult a nearly $3,500 bonus. Three years of this increase could wipe out all student debt. It could also give us a magnificent set of public goods. With just two-thirds of that increase each year, you could have free public college, universal paid family and sick leave, universal preschool, and a rapid expansion of Social Security and Medicare.

These programs would actually help people, unlike all this money that is shoveled to shareholders every year. None of the promised benefits of shareholder primacy have come to pass. Instead of a wave of entrepreneurs taking advantage of a constant flow of new capital, we have seen the business-formation rate collapse by 35 percent since the early 1980s. The money also isn’t going to investments. As the economist Thomas Philippon has noted, a firm’s profitability used to predict how much investment it would make. Now that relationship has broken down, and that break is particularly strong in industries that are more concentrated and face stronger shareholder pressure.

These shareholders are also probably not you. Despite what you may have been able to save in a 401(k), the top 4 percent of households hold half of all stocks; the bottom half own just 9 percent.

People increasingly feel the economy is rigged against them, but can’t quite understand why. It’s led people to lash out at immigrants, trade, and technology, and even to lose hope that things can change at all. That we’ve given so much power to shareholders is a central part of the problem. Despite what you hear, shareholders don’t actually own companies; they just own a claim to its earnings. Shares are mostly used by early investors to get money out of firms once they are stable, and they are just one stakeholder in a whole web of contracts that make up the modern economy.

The economy is a vast community of workers, customers, and communities, and we shouldn’t let a handful of people suffocate it in order to better suck the wealth out. We can ban and limit the way they channel money to themselves—but to change these structures, we have to admit we have a problem, and that this problem is big.

**The Engorgement of Shareholders**

It’s big. It’s new. It’s bad for the economy.

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**Economists started to believe that a company’s only goal should be to maximize the wealth of shareholders.**
Eric Alterman

Working the Ref

Facebook caves to conservative critics by embracing Fox-friendly “news.”

Among the myriad roadblocks in the way of sensible democratic discourse in America is the fact that Mark Zuckerberg runs what may be the most powerful communications platform ever assembled.

Nearly 1.5 billion people log on to Facebook every day; of these, approximately 185 million come from the United States and Canada. Because of a lack of quality control, Russian intelligence agencies and other nefarious Trump boosters were able to manipulate the site with lies and conspiracy theories during the 2016 election. To this day, we still have little idea what political toxins are proliferating on Facebook.

Zuckerberg initially called any attempt to connect these unscrupulous practices to the election results “crazy.” But the company eventually admitted to finding as many as 583 million automated accounts. Facebook has finally sought to scrub itself of phony profiles, but it continues to insist that it bears no responsibility for policing its content for lies. Initially, the social-media giant even fought to keep the racist hate-monger Alex Jones on the site despite his horrific slander of so many people—including the parents of the Sandy Hook school-shooting victims—and his calls for the murder of special counsel Robert Mueller. The company has since come to its senses, but John Hegeman, Facebook’s head of News Feed, explained at the time that being false “doesn’t violate the community standards” and termed Jones’s incitements one among many “points of view.” He made these comments at a presentation dedicated to Facebook’s “work to prevent the spread of false news.” A few days later, in an interview with Recode’s Kara Swisher, Zuckerberg went even further and volunteered that, however distasteful he might find it personally, Holocaust denial was also totally cool on Facebook, because “I don’t think that they’re intentionally getting it wrong.”

One phenomenon that truly does give Zuckerberg the heebie-jeebies, however, is being accused of “liberal bias.” For years, Zuckerberg has been on a personal campaign to convince thepurveyors of right-wing disinformation that they have a happy home on Facebook. In July, BuzzFeed’s Ben Smith attended an off-the-record meeting between Facebook officials and a group of publishing executives. Roughly half were from right-wing media outfits and voiced that old canard that straight-news publications like The New York Times were “liberal” and needed to be offset with sites that regularly lie in support of politicians like Donald Trump. (Though they didn’t phrase it exactly that way.) Next came an almost three-hour hearing with Zuckerberg before the House Judiciary Committee, in which Republicans continued to complain about the alleged bias against the falsehoods they so often need to tell in order to placate Trump supporters. (Again, they put it a bit differently.) Representative Steve King (R-IA), for instance, wanted to know why Gateway Pundit had seen less traffic recently, presumably because Facebook should be lavishing more attention on the Trump-beloved conspiracy site that has energetically attacked the survivors of the Parkland school shooting. Zuckerberg listened politely, and he may have later consulted right-wing former senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ), whom he hired to review his company’s practices, or former George W. Bush adviser Joel Kaplan, Facebook’s vice president of US public policy.

The results of working the world’s most important media “ref” were plain to see in July, when Facebook announced its first slate of new segments designed to combat misinformation: Nearly half of the schedule will come from Fox News. “The network leads off coverage first thing in the morning, snagged the prime mid-day spot with a version of ‘Fox News Update’...and will get two weekend time slots,” notes Gizmodo’s A.J. Dellinger. “It’s the only news network that is a part of the Facebook-funded project to have a show on Facebook Watch every day of the week.”

Perhaps it’s mere coincidence that all this right-wing misinformation just happens to be tremendously profitable.
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Zuckerberg noted that no “news” source drove more interaction on Facebook than Fox News. “It’s not even close,” he added.

(continued from page 4)

genders have no problem championing social progress and economic populism.

The insurgent candidates have fared remarkably well, given the odds. They are, almost by definition, fresh and inexperienced. They face opponents who start with more money, more experienced operatives, and greater name recognition. Deep-pocketed outside groups line up against them. Many are seeking to build small-donor and volunteer-driven campaigns from the ground up.

The victories in the various House primaries—Ocasio-Cortez in New York, Kara Eastman in Nebraska, Rashida Tlaib in Michigan, Katie Porter in California—are impressive. But less well-known is the remarkable surge of insurgent candidates in down-ballot state and local races. One that did get attention was the upset victory of Wesley Bell for St. Louis County prosecutor, ousting a 27-year incumbent who had failed to even charge the officer involved in the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

Moreover, the media too often assume that if the movement candidate has lost, a “moderate” has won. In the Michigan gubernatorial primary, for example, Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez stumped for Abdul El-Sayed, who wound up with 30 percent of the vote. But the victor, “establishment favorite” Gretchen Whitmer, was hardly a conservative Democrat. A strong advocate for working people, Whitmer ran with the support of the United Autoworkers and campaigned on a $15 minimum wage, universal preschool, the creation of a state bank, and the legalization of pot. Similarly, Brent Welder narrowly lost his primary in Kansas; the victor, Sharice Davids, is a lesbian Native American veteran running as a feminist on an economic-populist platform.

The media need to focus less on the horse races and more on what’s being built and what’s being discarded. The insurgency is neither on its deathbed nor about to sweep out the old. Indeed, Democrats are still in the early stages of a huge debate on the party’s direction. Insurgent candidates are only starting to build the capacity to run serious challengers. But there is new energy in the party and a new generation demanding change. This reality is forcing more established Democrats to adjust. In the face of Trump’s venom, Republican reaction, and the failure of the party leadership, that is surely a good thing.
A Friend of a Friend

In August, an Associated Press investigation revealed that the US-backed, Saudi-led coalition against the Houthi rebels in Yemen has been coordinating its efforts with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Coalition forces have paid Al Qaeda leaders to abandon strategic areas, and Saudi-supported Yemeni military commanders have been recruiting AQAP fighters into their ranks. AQAP is aligned against the Iranian-backed Houthis and thus shares an enemy with the United States, which has sold precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia, fueled coalition airplanes, and provided targeting information. But the United States is conducting its own drone war against AQAP, which the AP calls “the most dangerous branch of the terror network that carried out the 9/11 attacks.” And hawks in the White House have long used the threat of Al Qaeda to validate the US military presence throughout the Middle East. President Trump’s national-security adviser, John Bolton, and his secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, have even launched a none-too-subtle campaign to link Al Qaeda to the Iranian government in an apparent effort to vilify Tehran and legitimize a possible US attack.

“I’m now almost impossible to untangle who is AQAP and who is not since so many deals and alliances have been made,” an analyst told AP. The war against Al Qaeda, he said, is a “farce.”

—Chris Gelardi

The Color of Speech

When is it fair to speak in someone else’s voice?

In Boots Riley’s new film Sorry to Bother You, Cassius, the movie’s black protagonist, struggles to make a living as a call-center salesman. An older, more experienced black colleague named Langston comes to his rescue: “Use your white voice,” he advises. As K. Austin Collins noted recently in Vanity Fair, “The white voice is a fantasy of whiteness, as Langston explains it; even white people don’t really live up to it…. It’s what success sounds like—with the added implication that when it comes to race, success is not meted out equally.”

Indeed: Some years ago, I lost the audition to record the Audible.com version of one of my own books. A talented professional actress won the role of speaking me. She did a fine job, and her delivery was probably much better than mine—although I had to learn to hear myself in her, and to own this rendering of my words. Later, I was told that the reason I failed the audition was that my voice “did not sound black enough.”

The rub, in both scenarios, is between the “sound of success” and stereotyped accents of woe; between the plain meaning of a message and the social context that renders its messenger credible, or incredible. Who is empowered to say what about whom? That question is at the heart of many recent debates about the uses of “white voice,” “brown voice,” “blackface,” transgender casting, minstrelsy, mockery, and the complexities of appropriation. The politics of representation are never easy. “Pussy” can be a cat in Britain, a hat in New York, a satirical Riot in Russia, and a vagina in the mind of Donald Trump. It all depends on context, intent, history, time, place, and diction.

Trump impersonated a call-center worker during a 2016 campaign rally. Transliteration is dangerous, but it sounded something like “we yahfr from Indy-yah.” The “joke” was prelude to his expressing disgust at the worker’s not being American by abruptly hanging up the phone. Trump was speaking in a voice he disowned in order to mark racial and ethnic difference as contemptible; that’s why it was hurtful.

By contrast, in Sorry to Bother You, identical ideas are heard as not-identical when spoken in a white rather than a black accent. Cassius used a voice that was not “his own” to mock illogical assumptions of racial difference. That made it fair game.

At another rally, Trump delivered a ham-fisted “Asian” accent to ventrilquize Chinese and Japanese businessmen (“We want deal!”). A self-described “Asian guy” then wrote on Twitter that he wasn’t offended because “I mimic southern hicks [in the US] all the tiimmeee.” The self-serving disingenuousness of such a tit-for-tat misses the point: It’s not about political correctness, or freedom of speech, but that the “voice” is a crude reduction designed to diminish anything substantive said by “hicks” and greedy Asian businessmen alike. The implication of this type of speech is that we don’t have to listen to someone who is nothing more than a funny accent.

The deeper ethical dimension of this argument centers on the use of metaphor. Metaphors allow us to give form to a phenomenon by invoking a likeness as it appears to us. They inevitably reveal our inner sorting mechanisms: Recently, I heard a man call to his small dog, “Come here, Mommy!” What attributes does he assign to dogs and/or mothers in joining them taxonomically? How does such joinder affect his behavior toward either? Metaphor, cataphresis, anthropomorphosis, code-switching, “passing,” inflection, speaking in a different voice, satire—these all reflect versions of what we receive as truth. It follows that the relentless typecasting of underrepresented religions, cultures, or ethnicities—i.e., populations generally unable to present themselves in mass media—keeps us stupidly naive. Hari Kondabolu’s documentary The Problem With Apu makes this point brilliantly by examining the intent, connotation, and effect of Hank Azaria’s “brown voicing” of Apu, The Simpsons’ most prominent South Asian character.

Everyone on The Simpsons is a caricature: bratty kids, deadbeat dads, mad scientists, stupid
teachers, and so on. But the problem with Apu is that he’s a meta-caricature: an animation of white Americans performing what they imagine South Asians to be. Apu is little more than the avatar of a specific team of white television writers and producers carelessly and inaccurately mouthing how they think Indians speak—despite more than two decades of complaints from actual Indian Americans and South Asians who get bullied with Apu-isms every day, and who resent relentless requests to “do the accent.” Kondabolu repeatedly points out the faulty syllogism: In The Simpsons, Apu is the singularized cultural representation of his parents—but his complex, plural parents are not Apu.

Kondabolu’s film looks at the wider social injury of various forms of minstrelsy that are too often romanticized as “funny” or “exotic” or “typical” of “them” and “their culture.” On-screen and off, the show’s producers grow anxious when Kondabolu explains the lived consequences of their misrepresenting Indian-American experience with no humanizing countercurrent. Over and over, they question whether criticism of Apu means that they can never use accents or speak for another.

Yet humor without wholesale misrepresentation or diminishment is not impossible. What it does require are thought and research, as well as a disciplined refusal to crudely generalize. If we can’t see that Apu is a projection of white self-regard and not a “real Indian,” then we probably won’t ever grasp the insidious irony of Donald Trump blackfacing and brown-voicing the world beyond our borders, while White House-voicing Alex Jones and David Duke. When comedic reductionism becomes (sur)realpolitik, it is no longer just minstrelsy; it is disenfranchisement. We cakewalk to the polls.

SNAPSHOT / JUAN MEDINA

A Fresh Start

Migrants shower on board the Open Arms, a rescue boat operated by the Spanish NGO Proactiva, in the middle of the Mediterranean on August 3. So far this year, nearly 62,000 people have made the risky sea crossing; more than 1,500 are estimated to have died attempting to reach Europe.

MANAFORT AND GATES

Their tales of corruption and thieving and fraud Don’t alter the president’s views in the slightest. He’s comfortable boasting, when all’s said and done, That he has attracted the best and the brightest.

He said he could keep all the swamp critters out. Consider who managed to sail by his test: Scott Pruitt, Chris Collins, and Tom Price, and Ross—A grifter’s idea of the brightest and best.
Worse Than Lead?
The chemical industry strikes again, shifting from lead to flame retardants that also sicken and kill—a *Nation* investigation.

JAMIE KITMAN
Today, thanks in part to the efforts of a single Virginia family, as many as 97 percent of Americans have toxic flame retardants in their blood. Deeply poisonous, and linked to cancer, genetic damage, and behavioral and learning difficulties, the prevalence of flame retardants, here and around the world, owes to the fact that these chemicals have been placed in many of the objects of daily life—in our homes, automobiles, and workplaces, even in our beds.

While the flame-retardant business has grown explosively and with tragic consequences, the world has yet to reckon with this morally challenged industry, which started taking off more than 40 years ago. Nor has the US government held manufacturers accountable for the original evil that spawned the proliferation of flame retardants: the monumentally unsafe business of adding lead to gasoline. Now, new research undertaken by The Nation reveals the startling connection between these two scourges to public health and the environment.

Meet the Gottwalds of Virginia, one of the 100 richest families in America and the most powerful shareholders in the Albemarle chemical company, based in Charlotte, North Carolina. In September 2016, Floyd Gottwald Jr. gave $50,000 to Trump Victory, a joint fund-raising committee for Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, continuing a family tradition of Republican funding that goes back decades. Yet you’ve probably never heard of them. The Gottwalds keep a low profile—perhaps understandably, given that they’ve built their wealth by blanketing the planet in lead and flame retardants.

A deadly neurotoxin that never biodegrades, lead assaulted the public health throughout the 20th century, largely through its role as an additive to gasoline. When the United States began phasing out leaded gas in the 1970s, the Gottwalds pivoted to flame retardants. Often manufactured with the chemical element bromine, flame retardants are also extremely toxic products. But they have never been effectively regulated, much less banned, as lead eventually was—even though the banning of lead was scandalously delayed, as its manufacturers fought off regulation for decades with a mixture of outright lying, deceptive advertising, and the financial lubrication of elected officials (as I documented in an investigation for The Nation back in 2000).

Flame retardants have been identified not only as carcinogens, but as mutagens (i.e., agents that mutate genetic material). Many are now understood as first-class endocrine disrupters, implicated in a growing variety of learning difficulties, IQ deficits, and behavioral disorders, especially among the young, including hyperactivity and behaviors consistent with autism and, among the older set, diminished fertility, miscarriages, premature births, obesity, advanced puberty, thyroid hormonal problems in postmenopausal women, and an increased risk of ALS.

Traces of flame retardants are now found virtually everywhere on earth, including in the water and dust inside our homes. According to the Chicago Tribune, the level of certain flame retardants doubled in the blood of adults every two to five years between 1970 and 2004. In a 2014 study of California day-care centers, researchers found flame retardants in 100 percent of the dust samples. A recent Chinese study revealed their presence in e-cigarettes. Remote locations aren’t safe either; the chemicals have been consistently found in the blubber of Arctic sea mammals.

It’s no wonder. The global consumption of flame-retardant chemicals is projected to top 7 billion pounds.
by 2022—a staggering amount, especially when you consider the most incredible fact of all: In the quantities in which they’re typically employed, flame retardants don’t retard flame very much.

These compounds became ubiquitous starting in the 1970s, as governments around the world were persuaded by corporate campaigns that flame retardants were essential fire-safety tools. Much of this campaigning was hysterical and dishonest; almost all of it was written under the products’ manufacturers, including the Gottwalds’ Albemarle Corporation and the chemical industry of which it was a part. Working in concert with the tobacco industry, these manufacturers mounted aggressive scare campaigns to create a perceived need for their products: They crafted regulations and lobbied legislatures to adopt them; attacked scientific findings they didn’t like; ridiculed public-health advocates; spun journalists; and bought political access with millions of dollars in campaign contributions. This anti-public-health offensive explains why flame retardants are now embedded in an astonishing array of consumer products, including furniture, bedding, electrical equipment, and—most despicable of all—children’s clothing and car seats.

Although they were launched more than 50 years apart, flame retardants and leaded gasoline share a common corporate pedigree. The story begins with the addition of lead to the gasoline supply, an act of breathtaking greed and deceit on the part of four blue-chip companies: General Motors, DuPont, Standard Oil of New Jersey (these days known as ExxonMobil), and, later, Dow Chemical. The story continues for nearly a century, as the mass production of leaded gas gave way to the mass production of flame retardants.

While certain flame retardants have been phased out over time, others have been phased in; the Gottwalds and other manufacturers are not going quietly into the night. Notwithstanding the proven health and environmental harms that their products inflict, the suppliers of flame retardants intend to sell increasing amounts of this toxic product for years to come. The Gottwalds have made that clear enough, as their Albemarle Corporation has expanded its bromine-production capacity and its partnerships around the world, recently with a 2014 linkup with Israel Chemicals, Ltd.

Like other makers of dangerous chemicals, Albemarle has stayed one step ahead of the law and public outrage by perfecting a cynical version of the classic bait-and-switch scam. When regulators ban one flame retardant because of its undeniable health impacts, the manufacturers simply tweak a molecule here and there to produce a similar but legally distinct product. Then they give that product a new name and hustle it back onto the market.

Albemarle declined interview requests for this article and did not respond to a detailed list of questions about its activities.
turned this unanticipated lemon of a business problem into the lemonade of bigger profits by making leaded gas part of GM’s new push for “planned obsolescence.” For some years, GM and the rest of the US auto industry had confronted a structural problem: Their productive capacity was outstripping consumer demand for their products. Americans didn’t need, or didn’t think they needed, as many cars as the industry could build. Sloan, GM’s future president and CEO, who championed the concept of planned obsolescence, set out to change their minds.

To entice people to buy more cars, GM began changing its cars’ designs, colors, and capabilities year in and year out. Provocative advertising was introduced, and customers were allowed to pay in installments. Cars became status symbols as much as transportation machines.

Though unintended, the propensity of leaded gasoline to wear out engines and their components amounted to a supercharged form of planned obsolescence. The business logic was as simple as it was cold and calculating: GM profited directly from every vehicle it sold. Then it earned an additional royalty, through its joint stake in the Ethyl Corporation, on every gallon of leaded gas sold—whose damage to engines and components in turn generated additional earnings when GM supplied the replacement parts or, better yet, a whole new car. For GM’s leadership, it was what you might call a win-win-win.

But what was good for GM wasn’t so good for its customers, some of whom were powerful enough to make their displeasure felt. Before long, representatives of the US Army and Navy and the British and Canadian air forces were informing GM and Ethyl executives that leaded gasoline was wreaking havoc on their airplane engines. “I am bringing this matter to your attention as some action must be taken on the part of the Ethyl Gas Corporation or they will lose the business of the US Army and Navy,” a high-level executive of the airplane-engine maker Pratt & Whitney wrote to Kettering on November 11, 1927.

The commercial risks posed by leaded gas were so worrying that they triggered disension within GM’s ranks, the company’s internal files reveal. The heads of Buick and Cadillac, GM’s luxury-car divisions, were initially reluctant to recommend leaded gas to their customers because of its destructive properties. Letters of concern from the two division heads led CEO Sloan to fire a terse missive back to Buick’s general manager, H.H. Basset, on May 2, 1924: “[If it continues as it looks now, [leaded gasoline will] be a very big earning power [for the corporation] competing with our Car Divisions, all without the employment of hardly any capital at all.” Translation: You don’t understand. We’re going to make more money selling this stuff than we do selling cars. Before long, the Buick and Cadillac divisions fell in line.

Still, a new engine failing after just 1,500 miles proved to be a bit much, even for cutthroat businessmen like Sloan and Kettering. They needed to find a way to expel more of the lead from engines. A quick fix was found with the discovery of ethylene dibromide. Often known by the acronym EDB, it’s produced by the reaction of the hydrocarbon ethylene with bromine. Manufactured by Dow Chemical engineers, EDB worked as a chemical “scavenger”: It turned lead into lead bromide, making it less prone to build up in engines and more likely to be expelled with the exhaust into the air.

Problem solved—except for the people breathing that air, because elemental bromine is no day at the beach. With a name derived from the ancient Greek word *bromos*, for “stench,” bromine is the only nonmetal element that is a liquid. It’s most readily found in mineral halide salts or dissolved in salt lakes and brine pools. And, as will be detailed below, it is definitely not good for you.

If leaded gasoline was to come into widespread use, huge additional quantities of bromine had to be found. After a few false starts, the Ethyl Corporation’s scientists hit upon the answer: the ocean. Seawater contains about 67 parts of bromine per 1 million parts of seawater. In 1934, a huge plant opened at Kure Beach, North Carolina. The plant sucked in millions of gallons of seawater each day, removed the bromine from the water, and then expelled the wastewater back into the sea.

After additional extraction plants were built, the worldwide production of bromine...
reached 40,000 tons in 1941, 90 percent of which found its way into leaded gasoline. By 1970, global production had increased by a factor of eight to reach 320,000 tons. A reckoning, however, was fast approaching.

In the 1960s, airborne lead was increasingly seen as an urgent public-health issue, as scientific certainty overturned decades of specious corporate-funded research. In 1974, the US government required that unleaded gasoline be put on the market to permit the use of catalytic converters. These were essential to meeting the terms of the Clean Air Act of 1970; placed in a car’s exhaust system, the catalytic converter dramatically reduced air pollution, slashing nitrogen-oxide emissions by 98 percent, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency. But there was a catch: Catalytic converters were incompatible with the use of leaded gasoline, because the lead contaminated the component’s catalyst. As a result, leaded gas had to go.

Lead was gradually phased out of the gasoline sold in the United States and finally banned outright in 1986. The European Union did the same, albeit more slowly; its ban became official in 2000, the same year that bans also took effect in India and China. Other nations followed suit, but even more slowly; as of March 2017, the UN Environment Programme reports that only three countries (Algeria, Yemen, and Iraq) still permit the sale of leaded gasoline.

The phaseout created an obvious problem for the makers of leaded gas: How could they keep the profits rolling in? GM, however, had seen that problem coming years earlier and had taken steps to protect its interests. Along with its partners, GM arranged to dump the Ethyl joint venture. Which is how the Gottwalds enter this tale.

In one of the strangest transactions in US corporate history, the Ethyl Corporation was unloaded in 1962 by its creators—GM and Standard Oil of New Jersey—onto the Albemarle Corporation. At the time, the Ethyl Corporation was 13 times larger than Albemarle; its purchase price of $200 million was 100 times greater than Albemarle’s annual profits. “It was like a Mom and Pop grocery buying the A&P [supermarket chain]!” Monroe Jackson Rathbone, the president of Standard Oil of New Jersey, exclaimed at the time. The deal was so unlikely that it made the front page of The New York Times, and was covered by The Wall Street Journal in an article headlined Jonah Swallows the Whale.

The inside story of this deal wasn’t revealed until
Ethyl's official history was published decades later—and even that history left out a key detail that the Gottwalds might not have known. At the time, Ethyl’s purchase ranked as the largest leveraged buyout that Wall Street had ever seen. And it took place only because of extraordinary backroom muscling on the part of Ethyl’s corporate founders. The company’s official history recounted that GM and Standard Oil of New Jersey applied intense pressure on Chase Bank and a handful of leading insurance companies to lend the Gottwalds the $200 million they needed to buy Ethyl. Rathbone acknowledged that his company and GM “really guaranteed the banks that they would not lose anything if loans were made to Albemarle for the purchase of Ethyl,” according to the official history.

Why did GM and its partners want to unload Ethyl so urgently, selling the joint venture for a fire-sale price? The answer may lie in something that the public didn’t know: GM was quietly working on a solution to curb automotive air pollution. But that discovery wasn’t announced until 1970—eight years after the sale of Ethyl—when GM president Ed Cole stunned the automotive world by announcing that the industry could meet the standards of the Clean Air Act by introducing catalytic converters. In short, GM had vociferously opposed tighter pollution standards throughout the 1960s—from the original Clean Air Act of 1963 through its 1970 amendment—even though it and others were actively working toward a new technology that would meet those standards. The question that GM has never been forced to answer is: Why did you fight emissions regulations—and during those years of secrecy, how many people were sickened or killed as a result of the delayed pollution standards? Contacted by The Nation, representatives of GM, DuPont, ExxonMobil, Dow Chemical and the Albemarle Corporation all declined to comment.

In any case, the subsequent phaseout of leaded gas became the Gottwalds’ problem—a risk they then blamed GM and the other sellers of Ethyl for failing to disclose. Yet the new owners of the Ethyl Corporation were a resourceful bunch with no apparent moral compass, and so they managed to turn this situation to their advantage. First, Ethyl tried to sell EDB as a fumigant, a quick-acting pesticide to spray on soil and post-harvest crops. EDB killed fungi, rodents, insects, and other vermin with aplomb, but shortly after its arrival on the market, its residues started turning up in breakfast cereals and cake mixes. By 1981, the EPA had concluded that EDB was a “potent mutagen, which should be removed from the food chain.” The EPA also linked EDB to damage to the liver, stomach, adrenal glands, and reproductive systems, especially the testes. And when burned, EDB creates methyl bromide, a major contributor to the hole in the earth’s ozone layer, which increases skin cancers and respiratory problems.

It took time and a few dead ends, but the Gottwalds eventually found a profitable solution: brominated fire retardants. Although these fire retardants had been in use since the 1950s, they didn’t become huge sellers until the 1970s. What changed?

As the 1970s unfolded, a purported epidemic of house fires began attracting attention in the United States. Fingers were pointed at the tobacco industry, which had been adding chemicals to cigarettes that caused them to stay lit for 10 minutes or more. People smoking in bed would nod off, and before they knew it the bedroom was in flames. Government regulators and legislators began calling on manufacturers to develop cigarettes less likely to start fires.

The tobacco industry wasted no time in deflecting suggestions that it come up with a safer cigarette. Instead, as the Chicago Tribune revealed in an award-winning investigation in 2012, Big Tobacco worked to shift the public focus from its product to the risk of household objects that might burn, including foam-filled, upholstered furniture.

Remarkably, the State of California seemed to agree. In 1975, a state agency enacted a regulation that proved to be a godsend for the manufacturers of flame retardants. Known as the California Furniture Flammability Standard Technical Bulletin 117, the rule mandated that all furniture offered for sale in the state pass an open-flame test: The foam inside upholstered products was required to withstand 12 seconds of exposure to an open candle flame.

The Ethyl Corporation rushed to satisfy the demand for flame retardants created by California’s regulation. The potential market was enormous, because other states and even foreign countries would go on to adopt California’s approach, much as they had a decade earlier with automobile seat belts and air-pollution standards. Flame retardants soon found their way into a dizzying array of household items: not just furniture but carpeting and...
flooring materials, bedding, baby products, computers, televisions, and other electronic equipment, as well as cars, boats, and aircraft. Like lead in gasoline, flame retardants became pervasive, spreading on a sea of clever marketing, strategic half-truths, and lies.

However well-intentioned, the far-reaching California regulation proved to be scientifically unfounded. When scientists with the US Consumer Product Safety Commission applied flame to two upholstered chairs—one with flame retardant in its foam, the other untreated—both chairs were consumed by fire in less than four minutes. “We did not find flame retardants in foam to provide any significant protection,” said Dale Ray, a commission official who oversaw the tests, in 2009.

But such studies only emerged decades after the California regulation took effect. Meanwhile, Albemarle and its fellow manufacturers joined with the tobacco industry to convince the public, the press, and government officials that flame retardants were the necessary cure for all things fire-related. This propaganda campaign was assisted by Burson-Marsteller, a public-relations giant that boasted a Hall of Shame client list: not only the tobacco barons, but also Union Carbide (after the Bhopal gas leak in India that killed 15,000 people); the company responsible for the Three Mile Island nuclear-power-plant disaster; and the military junta that prosecuted Argentina’s “dirty war” in the late 1970s. As Burson-Marsteller founder Harold Burson said in 2008, “We are in the business of helping companies through difficult situations.”

Retained by the flame-retardant makers in 1997, Burson-Marsteller urged the creation of the Bromine Science and Environmental Forum, a group less interested in science and the environment than in weakening the US ban on methyl bromide. Along with industry associations like the Methyl Bromide Working Group and the Methyl Bromide Global Coalition, the forum lobbied state and federal legislatures and fought the Montreal Protocol, the international community’s effort to repair the ozone layer.

“Burson-Marsteller has helped the bromine industry advocate on how flame retardants enable manufacturers to increase the ignition resistance of materials used in a wide range of applications including in the automotive sector,” a Burson-Marsteller representative told The Nation.

Peter Sparber, a former tobacco-industry executive, recruited the National Association of State Fire Marshals, the organization representing the top fire officials in all 50 states, to propose federal rules mandating flame retardants in furniture. Sparber attended meetings with the US Consumer Product Safety Commission on behalf of the marshals for years, sometimes offering the scientifically bogus claim that the foam inside furniture was “solid gasoline” that needed to be treated. Marshals claimed not to have known that Sparber was billing the industry-funded Tobacco Institute $200 an hour for his work with them.

Burson-Marsteller helped run the Alliance for Consumer Fire Safety in Europe, which is similarly bankrolled by flame-retardant manufacturers. The alliance’s front man was a British firefighter named Robert Graham, a high-strung individual whose tactics included setting furniture alight outside the European Parliament to make his point. An Alliance for Consumer Fire Safety website, now removed, solicited memberships with horror stories of combustible consumer products, including allowing viewers to watch sofas from a selection of countries being burned.

As with leaded gasoline, the manufacturers of flame retardants knew early on that their product wasn’t safe. In 1977, Arlene Blum and Bruce Ames, two chemists at the University of California, Berkeley, published a report in Science magazine whose damning subtitle plainly stated: “The main flame retardant in children’s pajamas is a mutagen and should not be used.” The authors explained that tris(2,3-dibromopropyl) phosphate, or Tris-BP, a frontline flame retardant of the day, was a likely carcinogen that caused sterility in animal tests. With a chemical composition alarmingly similar to EDB, the lead scavenger, Tris-BP was certain to pose disturbing
A resolute willingness to pollute has been central to Albemarle's strategy from the beginning, and a key to the Gottwalds' financial success.

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Worse Than Lead?

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health impacts.

Blum and Ames further observed that Tris-BP inevitably entered the ecosystem through wastewater from laundry. Six bed sheets treated with Tris-BP and washed in 30 gallons of water resulted in six parts per million of the poison in the wash water, when only 1 ppm was needed to kill goldfish. Like all flame retardants before and after, Tris-BP was seen to leach readily into the bodies of people wearing treated fabrics. “We found a child who’d never worn Tris-treated pajamas,” Blum recalled in an interview. “We had the child wear Tris-treated pajamas for one night, and we found Tris breakdown products in her urine” soon after. It was easily picked up, Blum added, and “screamingly mutagenic.”

Three months after the Blum and Ames paper was published, the Consumer Product Safety Commission banned brominated Tris in children’s clothing. But in a response that set the stage for the next 40 years, flame-retardant manufacturers simply rolled out a related product: chlorinated Tris. No matter that chlorinated Tris was also a known carcinogen.

In another round of chemical whack-a-mole, when EDB was banned in 1984, the world’s bromine makers rallied around a substitute known as tetrabromobisphenol-A. TBBPA’s most widespread application has been as a fire retardant in electronic equipment, a market that expanded dramatically thanks to the growth of the Asian economies and the rapid obsolescence of electronic goods.

Today, TBBPA is the world’s most-produced brominated flame retardant, with millions of pounds sold each year. Like all flame retardants, TBBPA will escape in time from wherever it’s placed and enter the homes, offices, and bodies of people, as well as pets, livestock, wildlife, plants, streams, and rivers. Once in the human body, it can cause cancers, mutations, learning disabilities, behavioral issues, fertility issues, and reduced IQs. A 2014 study by the National Toxicology Program found that TBBPA caused cancers of the uterus in female rats exposed in the 2012 investigation by Citizens for Fire Safety, which was united to ensure that our country is protected by the highest standards of fire safety.” But the group’s only funding came from three different chemical companies.

To defeat the California bills, Citizens for Fire Safety spent tens of millions of dollars on a variety of underhanded tactics. For example, the group paid a retired burn sur-
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geon who falsely testified about burn victims and misled lawmakers about the effectiveness of flame retardants. (He later surrendered his license to practice medicine.) The group also falsely claimed to work with a federal agency, an international firefighters’ association, and the American Burn Association, all of which denied any connection with Citizens for Fire Safety when contacted. And seeking that last refuge of contemporary scoundrels, the group rolled out a phony social-justice argument, maintaining that poor children would experience the most harm if flame retardants were removed from household items. The group summoned witnesses to repeat this bogus assertion at hearings, including a 10-year-old boy who told California legislators, “I just want you to imagine a child crying for help in a burning building, dying, when there was a person who only had to vote to save their life.”

The Chicago Tribune’s exposé of the industry’s skull-duggery had an impact, however. Shortly after its publication, Albermarle and other flame-retardant manufacturers announced that they would defund Citizens for Fire Safety. The lobbying on the industry’s behalf would be now undertaken by the American Chemistry Council’s newly formed North American Flame Retardant Alliance. Just as it had retooled banned products with new names and slightly different chemical profiles, the flame-retardant industry slapped a fresh coat of paint on its lobbying efforts and got back to work resisting regulation.

Nevertheless, California lawmakers voted in 2013 to amend TB 117 in a subtle but important way: Now the materials covering the furniture, rather than the underlying foam, needed to deter fire. To the industry’s chagrin, this new standard could be met with smolder-resistant materials—leather, wool, or synthetic weaves—rather than with flame retardants. And in 2015, a new labeling law took effect in California, requiring that furniture that contained flame retardants be identified as such.

Alas, none of these changes spelled an end to their use. As other states began taking note of the hazards posed by flame retardants, the American Chemistry Council stepped in again, taking the fight to state legislatures. In its 2010 tax returns, the council told the IRS that it had “helped defeat, amend or postpone the passage of more than 300 flawed bills dealing with chemicals and plastics in 44 states,” many of which concerned flame retardants.

Despite the industry’s best efforts, 16 states were actively considering legislation to ban certain flame retardants as of March of this year, according to the Pew Charitable Trust. Often, the states have been motivated by a lack of regulation at the federal level. A shocking fact: The EPA maintains a database of some 85,000 chemi-

### TRAVELS

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September 22–October 3, 2018

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October 14–24, 2018

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November 2–14, 2018

**CUBA: HAVANA TO TRINIDAD**
with Peter Kornbluh
November 3–10, 2018

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**COLOMBIA: A COUNTRY ON THE RISE**
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**CONTEMPORARY AND IMPERIAL MOROCCO**
April 2019

**US CIVIL RIGHTS: ON THE ROAD TO FREEDOM**
May 5–12, 2019

**SOUTH KOREA: CULTURE AND POLITICS OF THE PENINSULA**
May 14–26, 2019

**GREECE: ANCIENT WORLD AND CURRENT CHALLENGES**
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“Truly, a trip and experiences I will treasure for the rest of my life.”
— Pam, Louisville, KY (Vietnam 2017)

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cals that have been manufactured or processed in the United States, but it has subjected less than 300 of these to rigorous testing under the Toxic Substances Control Act and has banned only five (including PCBs.) Crucially, some of the pending state legislation would prohibit manufacturers from substituting other hazardous chemicals in place of the flame retardants that the legislation restricts. Provisions like this, which strike at the heart of the industry’s modus operandi—“You don’t like that flame retardant? Try this one!”—are particularly reviled by these companies.

Indeed, it may have been the fear of aggressive state regulation that led the chemical industry to endorse a major overhaul in the federal regulation of chemicals that was passed by Congress in 2016. The Frank R. Lautenberg Chemical Safety in the 21st Century Act is generally considered a compromise between the industry and the environmental and public-health communities. The latter liked the fact that, for the first time, the law gave the EPA the right to regulate chemicals based on their health effects alone, without reference to economic costs and benefits. (A previous EPA ban on asbestos had been thrown out by a court and watered down on the grounds that it failed to weigh the ban’s cost to industry.) Health and environmental advocates also liked that the act mandated a safety review of many previously untested chemicals and expanded the EPA’s ability to require testing of new and existing ones.

Despite this, the American Chemistry Council lobbied strenuously on behalf of the bill, presumably because it limits the ability of states to pass their own laws regulating chemicals. If the EPA rules that a chemical is safe, that decision preempts a state’s ability to say otherwise. Even if a state compiled clear evidence that a given chemical was poisoning its residents or waterways, it would have to wait for the EPA or Congress to take action. History teaches that the odds of such a federal interruption of the chemical industry’s business practices are slim. The moral: In a post–Citizens United environment, where corporations and the wealthy can flood electoral campaigns with unlimited amounts of untraceable money, it is easier to buy Congress than to buy 50 statehouses.

Flame retardants are more prevalent in 2018 than they’ve ever been, as the industry continues to promote the venerable falsehood that all of its products are safe and effective. On its website, the American Chemistry Council boasts that the EPA has identified more than 400 safe flame retardants, but it fails to note that many of those now in widespread use are not featured on that EPA list. Old fear tactics continue to proliferate as well. “Every 23 seconds, a fire department responds to a fire in the U.S.,” the council has warned ominously. This fact cynically elides the actual effectiveness of flame retardants. Indeed, most of the fires that a department responds to are, by definition, ones in which a flame retardant has failed to prevent the fire.

In “The Facts Behind Misconceptions of Brominated Flame Retardants,” the industry revs up its fog machine one more time. This slippery document, featured on the website of the Bromine Science and Environmental Forum, decorously concedes that not all flame retardants have been good for people, but then assures readers that “one flame retardant does not represent the entire family…. It is very difficult to attribute properties or findings from one small group or sub-group of substances to an entire family of chemical substances.”

As the industry supposedly continues its search for new and safer materials, it has refined its bait-and-switch scam, even pretending to embrace environmental consciousness by recasting out-of-favor products with green-sounding names. Thus, in 2016, Albemarle retired its HBCD flame retardant in favor of an allegedly more sustainable product with the moniker GreenCrest, while Afton Chemical, another Gottwald-headed/controlled company, calls one of its gasoline additives “Greenburn.”

Albemarle is also stepping up its export efforts. As the company enthused in a quarterly report last year, “[W]e continue to believe that improving global standards of living, widespread digitization, increasing demand for data management capacity and the potential for increasingly stringent fire safety regulations in developing markets are likely to drive continued demand for fire safety products.”

The global demand for flame retardants has skyrocketed—from 526 million pounds in 1983 to 3.4 billion pounds in 2009—with the demand projected to top 7 billion pounds by 2022. Market analysts have predicted that global sales, around $6 billion in 2015, could reach $10 billion per year by 2020.

With products like the appealingly named GreenCrest and Savtex coming to market, the manufacturers of flame retardants continue to march ahead, spreading disease and death with every step. Consider it a gift from the Gottwald family to you. All of you.
The AOC Effect

On behalf of insurgent candidates, the new Democratic rock star Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is taking her populist message cross-country.

by JOHN NICHOLS
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez preaches that “the movement for economic, social and racial justice knows no zip code.” Radical campaigners for a new politics have long held on to this faith, but the 28-year-old democratic socialist, whose upset victory in New York’s 14th Congressional District made her one of the most recognizable political figures in the nation, is determined to prove it. Since her win, she’s been crisscrossing the country—from Detroit to Honolulu, Wichita to Los Angeles—on behalf of insurgent populists.

Let’s test her theory. Mail sent from the 10462 zip code in the Bronx, where Ocasio-Cortez trounced veteran Democratic Congressman Joe Crowley, must travel at least 1,427 miles to reach the 67025 zip code of Cheney, Kansas. Conventional wisdom says that bold political messages cannot possibly leap the ideological divide between an urban borough that gave just 10 percent of its vote to Donald Trump in 2016 and a rural state like Kansas, where Trump carried 103 of 105 counties.

Janice Manlove disagrees. It’s a midsummer night, and I am sitting with Manlove, a 64-year-old retired postal worker, on the back of a hay wagon decked out with campaign signs for Democratic congressional candidate James Thompson, a civil-rights lawyer whose challenge to a Republican incumbent has attracted the support of Ocasio-Cortez and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. We’re waiting to join the parade that kicks off the annual Sedgwick County Fair in this community of 2,100. It’s almost 100 degrees and wickedly humid. Manlove is irritated—not with the weather, which she’s used to, but with the politicians and pundits who say that Middle America won’t take to Ocasio-Cortez and her message of working-class solidarity. “That’s just crazy,” Manlove says. “People love her.”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but there were a lot of working people in Kansas,” she continues, thereby joining the roiling debate about whether a party that has been wrestling with its identity since its traumatic 2016 defeat should rally around this self-proclaimed “girl from the Bronx.” The proud president of Sedgwick County Democratic Women, Manlove says a call to arms from Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders might be just what it takes to get working-class voters, especially young ones, to the polls in November. She does not buy the argument from former senator Joe Lieberman, who wrote in The Wall Street Journal that Ocasio-Cortez is a “far from the mainstream” radical who threatens “to hurt Congress, America and the Democratic Party.”

Illinois Senator Tammy Duckworth has also warned against getting too enamored with Ocasio-Cortez. “I don’t think that you can go too far to the left and still win the Midwest,” she said in July. But as James Thompson’s pickup truck pulls the Sedgwick County Democratic Party’s float onto the main drag of a very Midwestern town, Manlove praises what she hears from Ocasio-Cortez as “commonsense language.” “She’s not looking at what divides us; she’s looking at what unites us,” Manlove explains. “She’s saying that if Congress would just stop worrying so much about taking care of big business and start taking care of working people, we’d all be better off. That’s what Democrats should be saying. I think it’s inspiring.”

So do a lot of other grassroots voters. When Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders arrived in Wichita a few days later to campaign for Thompson, the new Democratic star was given a hero’s welcome. Five thousand people showed up, many wearing blue-and-white “ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ FOR CONGRESS NY-14” T-shirts they had ordered online. Thunderous applause greeted her as the New York candidate outlined a robust economic- and social-justice agenda and declared: “They said the people of Kansas did not want these things. They told me I would not be welcomed. But you have proven them wrong.”

The response was just as enthusiastic in Missouri, where Ocasio-Cortez traveled to campaign for insurgent congressional candidate Cori Bush, and in Michigan, where she made a two-day swing through Grand Rapids, Flint, Detroit, Dearborn, and Ypsilanti on behalf of gubernatorial candidate Abdul El-Sayed, a 33-year-old who made his name as Detroit’s crusading health director and was backed by the progressive political-action committee Justice Democrats. In the Wolverine State, Ocasio-Cortez drew standing-room-only crowds and lines of young people waiting to take selfies, including 24-year-old college student Lia Fabbri, who told her, “One day when I run for office, it will be because of you.”

El-Sayed ended up losing his bid, as did Bush and labor-lawyer Brent Welder, another congressional contender that Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders appeared with in Kansas. But civil-rights activist Rashida Tlaib, who was also supported by the democratic socialist from New York, won a closely contested primary for a Michigan House seat and is now likely to become America’s first Muslim congresswoman. In Kansas, Thompson won his primary by a 2–1 margin; he’ll face incumbent Ron Estes in November.

Nonetheless, the pundits who reduce the struggle for the soul of the Democratic Party to a weekly scoreboard were quick to note the defeats. But Ocasio-Cortez has said from the start that she won’t play it safe. She talks instead about a movement strategy: go for the wins that are possible, but also look to “build power” and “make unlikely races flippable for the next cycle.” That’s a smart way to use one’s newfound prominence to “advance the front lines for economic and social justice everywhere.” And make no mistake, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has a lot of newfound prominence.

EVER SINCE SHE BEAT CROWLEY, THE FOURTH-highest-ranking Democrat in the House, Ocasio-Cortez has been on a journey reminiscent of the one that swept the young winner of the 2004 Illinois Democratic Senate primary, Barack Obama, onto the national stage. She isn’t a member of Congress...
yet, but she is all over the late-night and Sunday talk shows and has keynoted Netroots Nation, as well as solo events in packed halls in Los Angeles and San Francisco. She has more than 820,000 Twitter followers, and candidates across the country covet her endorsement. Conservative media figures savage her as “a Marxist [and] communist running for election [as] a Democrat” (Rush Limbaugh), “downright scary” (Sean Hannity), and “petrifying” (Meghan McCain). And she has provoked feverish pontificating about whether Democrats might finally abandon the centrist favored by a circle of elite campaign donors and strategists, who imagine that America is so divided that it can no longer be stitched up into a great coalition in the tradition of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal or even Obama’s “Yes We Can.”

Ocasio-Cortez wants Democrats to go big. “Don’t let them carve us up into red districts and blue districts and tell us where it is ‘possible’ and where it is ‘impossible.’ It’s all possible,” says the candidate who identifies as an organizer. “The status quo is not an option,” she tells a cheering crowd in a packed church in Ypsilanti. “There is no way forward but to fight for economic and social and racial justice for working Americans.”

Ocasio-Cortez’s call to arms pits her against the managerial elites who have made centrism the default position of the Democratic Party, even as it lost control of the presidency, Congress, the majority of governorships, and close to 1,000 state legislative seats. To renew its fortunes, grassroots activists argue that the party must stop pulling its punches. For these veteran campaigners and newcomers alike, Ocasio-Cortez speaks the language they want to hear from party leaders. When she took a poke at the billionaire class and its political pawns in early July—“New Rule: any campaign swing. She peppers her speeches with historical details that connect with her audiences, adding recollections of the anti-slavery struggle in Kansas or of labor battles in Michigan. And she urges activists to “leave it all on the field” as they make campaigning a moral mission.

A brand-new Congress: Ocasio-Cortez could be joined in the House by Ayanna Pressley (left) and Rashida Tlaib (right).

W hat’s most striking about Ocasio-Cortez, however, is her certainty that this mission is not about her. In interviews, she’ll discuss how her family’s own economic struggles influenced her decision to run in 2018. But on the trail, she spends her time detailing a program—a living-wage guarantee, single-payer health care, tuition-free college, immigrant rights (including abolishing ICE), criminal-justice reform—that addresses the hardships faced by tens of millions of people. There is nothing “super spooky” about this program, she explains; it is simply a plan for a country and a future that will “speak to people’s needs.”

Critics attack Ocasio-Cortez as inexperienced and unrealistic—in the words of National Review, “the unserious face of an unserious movement.” They could not be more wrong. Ocasio-Cortez can work out with the most dedicated policy analysts. A graduate of Boston University with an economics degree and a passion for digging deeply into budgets, she has hosted campaign events and exchanged ideas with Stephanie Kelton, the “rock-star economist” who contributes to the New Economic Perspectives blog. Ocasio-Cortez talks about “reprioritization”: having the “political and moral courage” to place the needs of working families ahead of the demands of billionaires for tax cuts, and ahead of a military budget packed with items that the Pentagon “didn’t even ask for.”

This rebalancing of priorities on the side of human needs has been at the heart of the American democratic-
socialist impulse for more than a century. At least since Michael Harrington and others founded Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) decades ago, it's been at the heart of efforts to move the Democratic Party to the left. It's the program that Bernie Sanders brought to his 2016 presidential run, in which he explained that his ideas extended from those of FDR and Martin Luther King Jr.

Ocasio-Cortez describes this agenda with the ease of a post–Cold War millennial candidate who was born a month before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and who has no trouble distinguishing between Scandinavian-style social democracy and Soviet-style authoritarianism. When she's asked what democratic socialism means to her, she replies: “We live in a society that is capable…of ensuring that we have basic frameworks where people can be covered by health insurance, can send their kids to college, where we can pursue a very bold action on climate change and save our future, and that is part of a moral and ethical economy…. I believe we are morally obliged to pursue it.”

Ocasio-Cortez is comfortable discussing ideas and ideologies that the political and media elites had successfully kept off the table until Sanders's challenge in 2016, and which have been amplified by candidates backed by groups like DSA, Justice Democrats, and Brand New Congress. She is deeply engaged with debates about the direction not just of the Democratic Party but of American politics—so much so that late-night host Trevor Noah described her as “the dream of half the country and the nightmare of the other half.”

But it's not really half and half. Polls find overwhelming support for a progressive platform that delivers health care, education, and economic fairness. Yet the elite minority who reject this agenda remain determined to thwart it with scare tactics, even to the point of ridiculousness. When Ocasio-Cortez traveled to St. Louis to campaign for Cori Bush, another Justice Democrats–backed contender running against an entrenched incumbent in a primary, hundreds of their supporters gathered at a local bar, the Ready Room, to cheer for a young Latina and a young African-American woman who proposed to break the boundaries of contemporary electioneering with an intersectional vision of politics. Virginia Kruta, the associate editor of the conservative Daily Caller website, was also there. Struck by the crowd's intense response, she wrote: “I saw how easy it would be, as a parent, to accept the idea that my children deserve healthcare and education”—an admission that prompted The Late Show's Stephen Colbert to quip, “Reading that is like watching someone almost have a light bulb go off in their head but not quite getting there.”

Ocasio-Cortez takes it all in stride. When Sean Hannity exposed her “dangerous” platform planks (“Medicare for All, Housing as a Human Right…”), the candidate tweeted: “Pretty much!” And that’s what really has people on the right shaking in fear: Ocasio-Cortez has a gift for explaining democratic-socialist ideas as common sense. As Meghan McCain griped, “Some of us do not want socialism to be normalized in this country.” In fact, such ideas were normalized long ago. Like Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez also draws inspiration from FDR—for example, promoting the “Green New Deal” as a response to climate change. Yet when she and Sanders announced plans to campaign for Thompson in a Kansas district that backed Trump by 20 points, incumbent Republican Congressman Ron Estes's campaign ripped Thompson for appearing with “the lunatic fringe of the extremist left pushing for socialist policies like raising taxes, abortion on demand and abolishing ICE.”

“Estes was saying I should disinvite her. That’s laughable,” Thompson recalls. “I think he’s scared by the message that when the working class stand together, they can beat the big money and the establishment.”

Sanders agrees: “What Alexandria did, in pulling off one of the great upsets in recent history, is show the folks in Kansas and states across this country that, yes, it can be done.”
Letters

I find my choice to publish Anders Carlson-Wee’s “How-To” [July 30/August 6], the poem received considerable criticism. Poet Nate Marshall, for example, noted that it felt like it was “trafficking inappropriately in Black language.” For his part, Carlson-Wee apologized on social media, and some readers asked that we take the poem down. Instead, in keeping with our tradition of encouraging debate, and in deference to the independence we assign the poetry editors, we posted a note by them explaining their view that publishing the poem had been a mistake. This note also raised strong objections. Some, like our former poetry editor Grace Schulman, worried that it reflected “the backward and increasingly prevalent idea that the artist is somehow morally responsible for his character’s behavior or voice.” Others argued the poem should not have been published to begin with. And still others insisted that the statements by the poet and poetry editors demonstrated a “deepened understanding of race, class, and the magazine’s readership.”

For our part, we’re glad that we live in a world in which poems (and apologies) can still arouse such fierce opinions—and we remain absolutely committed to airing them.

The Editors

Poetry, Wide Open

I was dismayed to read the craven apology of the poetry editors for their publication of “How-To,” which they rightly read initially as “an over-the-top attack on the ways in which members of many groups are asked, or required, to perform the work of marginalization.” Only the most literal of surface readings could miss that was the poem’s point. It was satirical, using the repetition of insult to expose its venom and so answer it back; its empathy was all on the side of the disparaged and degraded. Instead of taking the time to instruct the tone-deaf readers who objected, the editors endorsed their rights of censorship. The apology read like a forced confession to some authoritarian police force.

I’m afraid that this is only the latest example of the dumbing down of our culture, treating satire, irony, and other genres in the most reductive, literal way, as if words had only one meaning and the power only to wound. I look to The Nation to maintain a higher standard than that. You could have published letters from the critics, rather than submit to their censorship. That censorship will have a silencing effect that bodes ill for the poetry you can publish in the future—who would dare submit something that required that no word in it might offend or insult a reader? Perhaps this could be a real moment of change for The Nation, a chance for the magazine to expand its focus beyond able-bodied bodies.

JENNIFER BARTLETT
Brooklyn, N.Y.

I find the poetry editors’ choice to publish a poem which enacts the disabled body as a stereotype of the impoverished person on society not overall surprising given the exclusion of disability throughout. Perhaps this could be a moment of change for The Nation, a chance for the magazine to expand its focus beyond able-bodied bodies. Jennifer Bartlett, Brooklyn, N.Y.

The classic black American canon—the gatekeepers of which have mostly been white, let’s be honest—has allowed it before: Zora Neale Hurston cracks open a world using black English; so does Toni Morrison. The New Yorker devoted a whole article to a guy, John McWhorter, who studies and has written books on the dialect, calling it “the black lingua franca.” It’s how some of us talk all the time because that is how we talk; it’s how others of us talk sometimes, when we’re in the comfort of our own people; and it’s how others of us talk all the time as an act of defiance. For all of it, for any of it, we are censured, except, of course, when it suits the white gatekeepers.

It isn’t that white people are barred from using our language on the page; by all means, if you feel compelled, go ahead—though know we’ll be judging you. (For what it’s worth, I thought Anders Carlson-Wee did it poorly.) And, dear readers, don’t think I’m not aware of the debate behind authenticity and how it stretches far back and into so many different spheres. It’s an important debate to have. But that’s not why I support Stephanie Burt and Carmen Giménez Smith’s decision to add an editors’ note to a poem about black suffering written by a white man in a hackneyed version of my language.

The reasons why it’s OK that The Nation’s editors acknowledged where they fell short are myriad, but it’s important to spell them out. The first: Since there are so few black people with access to the page, why not just give it to us to handle? It’s not like white people are suffering from being underrepresented in the pages of The Nation!

Second, are we not, as an institution, striving for equity? The predominant line of thinking, I think, is that black economic and social equality will come with laws. But there cannot be laws without language. There cannot be equity without talking it out. There cannot be communication without words, just as there cannot be parity in the pages of The Nation—a place so white in its leadership and public discourse.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s insurgent triumph

Perhaps the time to instruct the tone-deaf readers who objected, the editors endorsed their rights of censorship. The apology read like a forced confession to some authoritarian police force. Jennifer Bartlett, Brooklyn, N.Y.
Why didn’t they just tell people when challenged on Twitter. run screaming for the hills.

Third, The Nation is not knocking pressure or stymieing free speech by acknowledging the power imbalance that led to such a poem getting published in its pages; it’s simply acknowledging the incredible and sheer force and power of language: its violence, its beauty, and, in this case, its ability to silence.

Collier Meyerson
Brooklyn, N.Y.

The poetry editors’ apology was histrionic and self-abasing and embarrassing. All that was missing was a fainting couch. The poem itself was meh, in my opinion—but Exhibit A for racism and ableism? I read it, and so did the four or five people I read it to, as a sly attack on the “Christians” of the poem, who want to think they are good and generous, but don’t want to see the homeless as anything but stereotypes.

It’s saying: This is how you have to act to get their attention and sympathy. I didn’t even think it was necessarily spoken by a black person; I took the speech for a combination of “poetical” and addled—after all, panhandlers come in all colors. The poem has been attacked for sloppy use of African-American Vernacular English, but the black linguist John McWhorter, writing in The Atlantic, says that dipping in and out of AAVE is true to life. Also, ordinary people do in fact use the word “crippled.” Google it and you’ll find contemporary references.

I’m not saying editors should refuse to engage with readers’ criticism of their judgment, but there is no need to run screaming for the hills when challenged on Twitter. Why didn’t they just tell people to write a letter and publish a page of them in the magazine? That’s what The Nation usually does when there’s a controversy.

Kathia Pollitt
New York City

Re the poetry editors’ apology for publishing Anders Carlson-Wee’s poem “How-To”: On the one hand, this is why I still respect The Nation so much. On the other, I think they’re dead wrong. I think I got exactly where this poem was coming from the first time I read it, and I feel even more so upon a second reading: It is about marginalization from the perspective of the marginalized, who understand very well what they have been reduced to in society’s eyes and also how they must act accordingly to survive. Have we not reclaimed the right to sarcasm and irony since 9/11?

Raymond E. Young
Austin, Tex.

The Nation has demonstrated political correctness at its worst by apologizing for a poem. If a portion of your readership is deeply offended by well-meaning verse, that’s a story in itself and you should have “run with it” in an attempt to flesh out the issues involved. You could have printed a special edition giving vent to the various opinions on this matter, with insights from the public, poets, and philosophers, on what exactly is wrong (if anything) with such a poem. Instead, by simply retreating on the battlefield of free speech, you have ensured that no one is going to learn anything from this incident. By so acting, you’re helping to create a world in which “good guys” are ousted for an unintentional faux pas while the “bad guys” triumph, à la Tartuffe, merely through giving lip service to values that they don’t believe in. Nor can this ever change, as long as major US publications such as yours are too nervous to address honest differences of opinion on what constitutes offensive speech.

Brian Quass
Basye, Va.

I think the editors and staff of The Nation owe Anders Carlson-Wee an apology. Carlson-Wee wrote “How-To,” a poem that represents a version of life as experienced by those who struggle on the margins of our society. Through the eyes of his narrator, the author enables us to imagine the pain of those whose suffering we usually seek either to balm with a couple of quarters or ignore. To condemn the author’s use of “disparaging and ableist language” in this context at best misses the point of the poem and at worst deliberately misrepresents its message in order to advance a political agenda.

By apologizing for “the pain we caused” by publishing “How-To,” The Nation has scapegoated and maligned an artist who aimed to strip our minds of pretense so we might see the world more clearly. In doing so, The Nation has betrayed any artist who placed faith in your publication to curate their works, which may transgress our expectations of propriety in order to help us better understand each other and ourselves.

Jason David
New York City

The Poetry Editors’ Reply

As poetry editors, we try to find poems that speak to our times with acuity and dynamism, which means we sometimes choose a poem that can spark controversy. We hope that poets will continue to send us such poems, but we made a mistake by not anticipating how the poem “How-To” would be received, and we felt it was serious enough to warrant the statement we made on July 24.

We are quite aware that “How-To” can be read as satirical, sarcastic, and voiced by a cynical character. In fact, we read it that way when we accepted it. We were drawn to the poem’s sense of desperate frustration. We saw, in it, an urgent call to readers—especially to white and to nondisabled readers—asking us to work toward a society where such tactics as this character recommends would no longer make sense.

But the poem’s capacity to give offense now seems, to us, far out of proportion to the intellectual and emotional interest that its irony can sustain, in part because of the ways in which it uses (albeit ironically) disparaging language. Such words, however familiar, can mortify those whom they describe, and require deft handling when used, even sarcastically, in poems—especially in short poems published as freestanding works (rather than, say, as elements in a collection, or within a work of prose fiction) in a national magazine with a broad, varied readership, as well as a progressive mission.

Our sense that we made a mistake comes not from a reflexive “political correctness,” but from our changed sense of how some of The Nation’s readers can—and did, and do—hear the poem.

After the poem appeared, we heard from many of those readers, not only on social media but also through more private channels. We did not substitute their judgment for our own, but we listened, and we saw the ways in which this poem might be read by physically disabled, or displaced, or chronically ill readers. We decided that it was better—as a matter of ethics, and as responsible editing—to acknowledge their perspectives than to defend, as if it were the only point of view, our own.

Art does not evolve on its own; it is made, and debated, and changed, by artists, and by those (including ourselves) who decide where and how a work of art should circulate. Works of art can change, or open, minds; they can also inflame, or appear to close off debate, or seem to
We do not view an apology as an act of censorship. We recognize the continuing debate over whether, and how, and in what senses, disparaging language, failure to listen to others, and insistence on privileged perspectives can harm the people disparaged or left out. We are not neutral in that debate. We believe that language used badly can cause harm, just as language used well can do good, though we would not equate that harm (or that good) to physical violence. Nor would we equate the language used badly can cause harm the people disparaged or privileged perspectives can.

tell writers and readers that they are not welcome. We have never apologized.

The error in judgment that placed the poem in this magazine was our own, and we wish we had recognized it earlier. We look forward to a future in which

**Stephanie Burt**
**Carmen Giménez Smith**
Cambridge, Mass.
Blacksburg, Va.

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In at least one instance, a book by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano may have saved a life. In 1997, Víctor Quintana—a Mexican congressman and anticorruption activist—was abducted by paid assassins, brutally beaten, and threatened with death. By his account, he survived by distracting his assailants with stories about soccer—quirky and lyrical tales drawn from a history of the game that Galeano had recently published. After listening to the adventures of Pelé and Schiaffino, Maradona and Beckenbauer, the killers decided to let Quintana live. “You’re a good guy,” one told him.

In another case, a book by Galeano proved less propitious. A battered copy of *The Open Veins of Latin America*, his seminal history of hemispheric exploitation, was found in the knapsack of a guerrilla who was killed fighting El Salvador’s death-squad government. “The book was mortally wounded,” Galeano later recalled. “A bullet hole went from the front cover right through the back.”

The tales of Quintana’s kidnapping and the slain Salvadoran guerrilla are both related by Galeano in *Hunter of Stories*.
Eduardo Hughes Galeano was born in 1940 in Montevideo, Uruguay, to a family of mixed European origin. The period in which he grew up—from the late 1940s to the early ’60s—marked the height of what was known as “developmentalist” economics. During this era, various Latin American governments, notably that of Juan Perón in Argentina, implemented nationalist experiments in building up local infrastructure, protecting internal markets, and substituting domestic manufacturing for imports. The Southern Cone was developmentalist’s epicenter, with Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile amassing unusually large middle classes, and with the elites in these countries envisioning them as being on a par with rising European states.

Talented and restless, Galeano dropped out of secondary school after just two years and soon became a journalist. By age 14, he was contributing political cartoons to the socialist newspaper El Sol. By 20, he was a managing director of Marcha, a storied weekly in Uruguay. Through the 1960s, he continued to edit while pursuing his own writing. Some of Galeano’s early journalistic dispatches are included in a 1992 collection, We Say No. In one, he recounts his time spent with Pele’s retinue as he awaits an interview with the soccer star—a maneuver that predated Gay Talese’s 1966 New Journalism classic “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” by several years. Scoring other high-profile interviews, Galeano published a skeptical discussion with Perón, a laudatory profile of Che Guevara (an “unheard-of case of a man who abandons a successful revolution he made along with a handful of crazies, to throw himself into launching another”), and a haunting portrait of Pu Yi, the last emperor of China, who had just completed his Maoist reeducation in a nondescript building on the outskirts of Beijing. Galeano also established a friendship with a then-rising Chilean politician named Salvador Allende.

By the 1960s, there were disturbing intimations that the authoritarian national-security state was on the rise in Latin America, and that the free press would become one of its first victims. As early as 1954, Guatemala’s mild experiments in nationalist development drew censure when they dared to hint at the prospect of agrarian reform. That year, the democratically elected government of Jacobo Árbenz was overthrown in a CIA-backed coup. Galeano rightly saw this as a defining event in the region’s history, and one of his first books was a combination of reporting, analysis, and personal reflection, later published in English as Guatemala: Occupied Country. Traveling into the densely forested mountains, Galeano spoke with indigenous Mayan villagers and met guerrilla leader César Montes, whom he found in a tent reading Pope Paul VI’s 1967 encyclical Populorum Progressio.

By the time Galeano’s book appeared in the late 1960s, his own country’s democratic prospects were dimming. In neighboring Brazil, a coup had ousted João Goulart in 1964. As labor strikes escalated in Uruguay after 1967, repression intensified. Under the pretext of fighting the Tupamaro guerrillas, the state curtailed civil liberties; then, in 1973, a military junta seized control. Allende’s socialist government in Chile fell just a few months later.

Because of his journalism and politics, Galeano soon found himself arrested in Montevideo. “[T]hey put me in a car,” he later wrote. “They moved me and locked me in a cell. I scratched my name on the wall. At night I heard screams.” He could only guess whether he would be detained for days, weeks, or years. In the end, “[i]t was days,” Galeano noted. “I’ve always been lucky.”

Shortly thereafter, he left Uruguay, fleeing first to Argentina, where he helped found and edit the influential magazine Crisis, and then, after the military took over in that country three years later, to Spain. In all, Galeano would spend nearly a dozen years in exile.

It is said that William Faulkner wrote As I Lay Dying in six weeks. Galeano claims it took him just over 12 to write Open Veins. Furiously composed as the conditions in Uruguay deteriorated, the book was released in 1971. Although Galeano already had several books to his name, Open Veins made his international reputation. It remained, for the rest of his life, his best-known work, eventually appearing in more than 100 official editions and countless bootleg ones.

Author Isabel Allende says that Open Veins was one of just two books—along with “some clothes, family pictures, [and] a small bag with dirt from my garden”—that she took with her as she fled Chile after Pinochet seized power. For his part, Galeano, who loved ironic reversals, delighted in claiming that government censors were the best promoters of his work. In Hunter of Stories, he writes that Open Veins “had the good fortune of earning high praise from several military dictatorships, which banned it. The truth is, that’s what gave the book prestige.”

Sitting all of Latin America within a common political economy, Open Veins related how, through five centuries of plunder by European conquistadors and American corporations, the region’s abundant natural resources had been extracted to enrich a few local elites and many foreign interests. From the region’s arteries flowed the silver of Potosí and the gold of Ouro Preto, the nitrate of Chile’s pampas, and the sugar of...
the Caribbean islands.

Galeano emphasized that he approached his subject as a non specialists trying to breathe life into the typically wooden histories of the region; “I know I can be accused of sacrilege in writing about political economy in the style of a novel about love or pirates,” he noted. Yet for all his protestations, Open Veins exhibits a great, erudite density; he not only breathed life, but he got many things right. The editors of Monthly Review Press, which published the US edition, described the book as “perhaps the finest description of the primary accumulation of capital since Marx.”

Open Veins was something else as well—a key work in popularizing what became known as “dependency theory.” Traditional narratives of development held that all countries progress through a series of stages on their road to modernity. As Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez explained it, “The underdeveloped countries… were considered backward, having reached a lower level than the developed countries.” Dependency theorists, however, presented a very different thesis: They saw Latin America as a prime example of how countries at the “core” of capitalism fed off raw materials pulled from dependent economies in the “periphery,” thus stunting their capacity for modernization. These theorists argued that the wealth of the North and the poverty of the South went hand in hand. As Galeano put it, with emphasis: “Underdevelopment isn’t a stage of development, but its consequence.”

As important as dependency theory’s tenets was the fact that the theory itself originated in the periphery; it represented a bold set of propositions developed primarily by Latin Americans and rooted in their national experiences. The theory, in other words, represented an intellectual declaration of independence.

Not all dependency theory was Marxist, but in the hands of its more radical exponents, it suggested changes considerably more explosive than developmentalism’s limited nationalist forays. While Galeano, looking back over the centuries, presented a tale of grim and relentless exploitation, he also saw hope in history’s dialectical motions: “The ghosts of all the revolutions that have been strangled or betrayed through Latin America’s tortured history emerge in…new experiences, as if the present had been foreseen and begotten by the contradictions of the past.” When Hugo Chávez gave Barack Obama a copy of Open Veins at a 2009 Summit of the Americas meeting—briefly rocketing the book to the top of Amazon’s sales rankings—it was a gift loaded with significance.

In exile, Galeano enjoyed some of his greatest artistic breakthroughs. During this time, he wrote a moving memoir of the “dirty war” period, Days and Nights of Love and War, as well as an experimental novel. His most important work in the period, however, was an expansive series of historical vignettes, published in three volumes between 1982 and 1986, called Memory of Fire.

Shortly after the publication of Open Veins, Galeano became convinced that political economy afforded him too narrow a focus. “I do not repent,” he wrote; “and yet I am afraid that [Open Veins] may reduce history to a single economic dimension. And if by history I mean reality—a living memory of reality—I mean a…life that sings with multiple voices.” Memory of Fire was Galeano’s attempt to capture these voices and present the Americas in all their sprawling diversity. To orchestrate his vast chorus, he pursued a new literary form, assembling an expansive and impressionistic history of the hemisphere in hundreds of short episodes, many less than a page long.

The narrative starts with pre-Columbian myth, progresses through conquest, colonialism, and independence, and then marches into the present time. On a given page, a reader might find Simón Bolívar or Bessie Smith, Augusto Sandino or Joseph McCarthy, José Clemente Orozco or Buster Keaton. Galeano sketches portraits of indigenous rituals and slave revolts; he shows Isadora Duncan dancing rapturously in Argentina and Pancho Villa learning to read in prison by studying Don Quixote—a tale, the author notes, written by a fellow jailbird.

Galeano saw himself contributing to an effort to rescue the region’s people from an enforced amnesia. At the heart of his Pan-American vision was the idea, or perhaps the hope, that there was liberatory potential in the continent’s deepest memories. “Community—the communal mode of production and life—is the oldest of American traditions,” he later wrote in The Book of Embraces. “It belongs to the earliest days and the first people, but it also belongs to the times ahead and anticipates a new New World… Capitalism, on the other hand, is foreign: like smallpox, like the flu, it came from abroad.”

Open Veins and Memory of Fire, both epics in their own way, would have been enough for most careers. But Galeano continued to write for another three decades, devoting himself to the craft of the vignette. The Book of Embraces is arguably the finest example of the style: A synthesis of Galeano’s earlier experiments, the 1989 volume extended the author’s memoirs, recounting his final days of exile. Between autobiographical segments, Galeano interspersed historical sketches, political analysis, prose poems, and anecdotes related to him by others, all rendered in brief snapshots. “When I read your work what I find remarkable is my inability to classify what I am reading,” author Sandra Cisneros wrote in a tribute. Diary, history, testimony, and commentary commingle.

Galeano also employed visual artwork. In The Book of Embraces, he included his own surrealist collages, a cross between Renaissance engravings and the dancing skeletons of José Guadalupe Posada. An image might feature an Aztec warrior emerging from the bell of a tuba or a human eye blossoming at the top of a corn stalk. At one point, Galeano playfully suggested to a friend that they should invent the genre of “Magical Epics” (1995) and Mirrors (2008), which extended the project of Memory of Fire into world history. Even more than most oeuvres, though, his thousands of vignettes can arguably be seen as a single work. Not all of these snapshots are equally effective: In his weaker moments, Galeano could be sentimental, predictable, or crudely agitprop, and his texts are best read alongside other histories, not as substitutes for more measured scholarship. But more often than not, his kaleidoscopic snippets offer fresh twists and stoke the reader’s curiosity about history, both well-known and obscure.

In one vignette from Memory of Fire, Galeano tells of Charles Drew, a pioneer in the creation of blood banks, who resigned from the Red Cross after the organization—
wishing to avoid the interracial mixing of blood—banned donations from African Americans during World War II. (Drew himself was black.) In another, Galeano rails against the debasement of language, noting that the largest prison under the Uruguayan dictatorship was named “Liberty.” In yet another, he relates the story of an old man who had a chest of love letters stolen from his house, only to have the thieves mail them back to him, one by one.

Throughout his later work, Galeano retained a keen sense of political commitment. When he returned to Uruguay in the mid-1980s, he arrived skeptical of the limits that had been imposed on the region’s newly restored democracies. Countries emerging from military rule were saddled with debt and subject to the dictates of the International Monetary Fund, which controlled their access to international credit. Many of these new governments embraced the role of managing programs of austerity, privatization, and open markets. The era of neoliberal globalization had begun.

Given this context, Galeano warned Latin Americans that they were less participants in genuine democracy than spectators of “The Democracy Show.” He likened the lack of choice in determining economic policy to living in medical restraints—anticipating the notorious free-market cheerleader Thomas Friedman, who would perversely try to paint neoliberalism’s “gold-en straitjacket” as a positive development. In the 1990s, Galeano’s criticisms positioned him to become an articulate voice in the emergent global-justice movement, the broad outlook of which he expressed in his 1998 *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World*. He attended the first Zapatista *encuentro* in 1996 and was a high-profile figure at the World Social Forums in Porto Alegre in the early 2000s. While Galeano was a sought-after presence in those years, he never presented himself as an official spokesperson or even a journalist. Instead, he claimed the role of storyteller.

In the spring of 2014, rumors circulated that Galeano had come to regret writing *Open Veins*. *The New York Times* ran an article on the subject, headlined “Author Changes His Mind on ’70s Manifesto.” Longtime detractors—for whom Galeano was always a one-dimensional polemicist, and dependency theory a simplistic account of relations between North and South—rejoiced. In fact, as he’d done many times in the past, Galeano had simply reiterated at a public event that he was neither a trained economist nor an academic historian when he wrote the book, and that—having long since felt compelled to develop a new literary language—he would suffer if forced to reread his youthful prose. As he would later explain, the smug accounts of his alleged repentance were “seriously ill with bad faith.” Any reader of *Hunter of Stories*, with its celebrations of feminist organizers and outrage over modern-day sweatshops, will quickly learn that Galeano remained unrepentant in his leftist beliefs to the end.

Still, a number of things had changed significantly by the last decade of Galeano’s life. Among radical theorists, dependency theory has long been a defunct model—not because it was wrong per se, but because it was superseded by world-systems analysis, spearheaded by the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, which drew on dependency theory’s insights while adding more complexity.

The terrain of practical politics in Latin America had also shifted. In the mid-1960s, when Galeano was making his reputation as a journalist, another young Uruguayan socialist, José Mujica, committed himself to the cause of the Tupamaro guerrillas. Mujica was shot, captured, and imprisoned for more than a decade. Then, some 40 years later, he was sworn in as his country’s president. Mujica took office in Uruguay as part of the “pink tide” that brought left-of-center governments to power in Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, and El Salvador as well. Nations that had lived through eras of military dictatorship and market fundamentalism were now being governed by some of these systems’ staunchest opponents.

Latin America’s pink tide corresponded to a time in Galeano’s life when he could write freely, travel widely, and lecture to attentive audiences. As the anecdotes in *Hunter of Stories* relate, he was someone who was approached in public, and not just for autographs—people wanted to tell him their stories, because it was evident that he knew how to listen. And this marked a stark reversal from the time when he was hunted by death squads instead of admiring fans. When Galeano died in 2015, at the age of 74, a number of the region’s leaders sent condolences to his family. One of them, Bolivian President Evo Morales, mentioned that when he last traveled to Montevideo, he and Mujica had stopped by to see Galeano—just a casual house visit between the writer and two heads of state.

Interestingly, though, as left-leaning governments took office throughout the region, Galeano’s commentary was subdued. He celebrated the 2006 election of Morales—Bolivia’s first indigenous president—and cheered when Chileans elected Michelle Bachelet, a torture survivor and the country’s first female president. But he remarked little on their subsequent administrations. Ultimately, Galeano was most eloquent and enlivened as a poet of the forgotten and the subjugated—and also of utopian striving and the promise of rebirth. Of the messy politics in between those poles, he had less to say. Therefore, he left key questions unanswered: Was developmentalism doomed to sputter out, or could a new iteration be devised? Could leftist governments break from fossil-fuel “extractivism”? Could social movements and the progressive state remain in constructive tension, or would the relationship inevitably devolve into antagonism?

These inquiries were not a part of Galeano’s literary purview. And so, as they became the dilemmas of the day, the urgency of his writing on the region began to fade. Yet for all of that, there are few engaged writers who could manage to find their way through a rapidly changing landscape as gracefully. Writing in *The Nation* in 1987 about the first two volumes of *Memory of Fire*, critic Jean Franco argued that, in the years since Pablo Neruda’s *Canto General* (1950), the story of Latin American resistance had grown so complicated and diverse that no one literary effort, however ambitious, could hope to contain it. Certainly, there is truth to this—just as it is true that the social and political map suggested by any one life must necessarily be incomplete. But it is also the case that Galeano’s wide-ranging explorations and fragmentary style opened the door to multitudes. “A literature born in the process of crisis and change, and deeply immersed in the risks and events of its time, can indeed help to create the symbols of the new reality,” Galeano insisted in a 1976 essay. “It is not futile to sing the pain and beauty of having been born in America.”
The idea that a country should provide its citizens with an infusion of cash on a regular basis has cropped up repeatedly over the course of history, starting with Tudor England, when Sir Thomas More argued in *Utopia* that every person should receive a guaranteed income, and later gaining traction in the United States, in policies proposed by everyone from Martin Luther King Jr. to Milton Friedman.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the idea has resurfaced, once again backed by a diverse group of figures. Part of this renewed interest stems from the economy itself: Even as jobs have rebounded from the depths of the recession, wages have remained paltry and the terms of employment are often highly precarious. Part of the interest also stems from the worries that people have about the rise of automation and artificial intelligence and their fear that things will only get worse for the American worker. But no matter what motivates this renewed interest in a guaranteed basic income, it’s a policy that’s been championed by everyone from former Service Employees International Union president Andy Stern to Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes.

Stern, in his 2016 book *Raising the Floor*, argues that a universal basic income is the only way to ensure economic stability and a chance at the American dream. The UBI wouldn’t just cover gaps in household budgets; it would revolutionize society, responding to automation and allowing everyone to choose both how much they work and what kind of work they do, be it in a factory or in a studio, making art. For his part, Hughes shares Stern’s paranoia about the robots coming for everyone’s job; in his new book, *Fair Shot*, Hughes argues that regular cash payments from the government would give people security in an economy made increasingly precarious by the technology that has made him and others like him rich.

Annie Lowrey’s *Give People Money* presents many of the same arguments, although unlike Stern and Hughes, Lowrey is able to do so without hyperventilating about how technology is going to destroy our economy. Keeping a closer eye on the economic implications of a UBI, she also offers a better-reasoned and more engaging account of why the policy should be implemented in the United States. Still, like Stern and Hughes, she does fall into the trap of vastly overselling what a guaranteed income can accomplish. Realistically, while it may be able to address the problems of desperate poverty and a culture of overwork, it stands little chance of transforming the economy itself.

By Bryce Covert

Bryce Covert is a contributor at *The Nation* and a contributing op-ed writer at *The New York Times*.
things they lack. Lowrey describes seeing people’s houses in Kenya stuffed with Toms shoes that they didn’t need—each pair donated when someone buys a pair themselves—as well as soccer balls and nets that do little for a family that can’t buy enough food. “[C]ash is a proven aid intervention,” Lowrey notes, “whereas many of the goods and services provided by charities are not.” Plus it’s far cheaper and easier to disperse.

As a way to combat poverty, Lowrey contends that a UBI could work in the United States, too. It “could be a powerful tool to eliminate deprivation…. About 41 million Americans were living below the poverty line as of 2016,” she notes. “A $1,000-a-month grant would push many of them above it.”

Lowrey’s argument about poverty is persuasive. By giving every family in the United States $250 a month for each of its children, we would reduce child poverty by about 40 percent and effectively wipe out the most extreme cases. By giving every American about $3,000 a month, we would cut the official poverty rate in half and provide a higher standard of living for all—even for those who are not impoverished. In a review of the existing research on universal cash dispersals in developed countries—the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend, for example, which gives every Alaskan resident a cut of the state’s oil profits—economist Ioana Marinescu found that universal basic incomes help people improve their nutrition, education, and health.

Lowrey argues that a UBI could even change how we view poverty and the poor themselves. She recounts visiting Maine, where she interviewed people who were unable to jump through the hoops to receive the government aid they so desperately needed. “We judge, marginalize, and shame the poor for their poverty—to the point that we make them provide urine samples, and want to force them to volunteer for health benefits,” she notes. “As such, we tolerate levels of poverty that are grotesque and entirely unique among developed nations.” But giving everyone, including the poor, unconditional cash could mean seeing poor people “as deserving for no other reason than their poverty—something that is not and has never been part of this country’s social contract.”

For Lowrey, an American UBI would then be about economic justice: It is a dividend from the government that gives each citizen a cut of the prosperity that we all help to generate. A universal basic income would represent a commitment to the idea that we all contribute to society and that, in one of the richest countries on earth, none of us should go without some means of subsistence. “UBI would be sharing the public wealth,” Lowrey argues, before pressing the point:

all Americans “make” and “take” over their lives, and no business or individual is truly self-made, no matter how hardworking and innovative…. It would acknowledge our interdependence as well as our independence.

As a way to slash poverty and more fairly distribute our country’s wealth, a universal basic income could prove a powerful tool. But the problem with Lowrey’s argument, as well as Hughes’s and Stern’s, is that they see it as a solution for many other of today’s economic problems. Hughes and Stern, for example, prescribe giving people cash because they believe it will also address the issue of automation in an era in which new forms of technology continue to replace human labor.

Lowrey is skeptical of this idea. “[D]espite the creation of AI and the concern about the future of human labor, the arguments for implementing a UBI to ward off technological unemployment felt hyperbolic—or at least premature—to me,” she writes. Nonetheless, she contends that a UBI could solve other economic problems. It could fill in the income holes for those who work at jobs with erratic hours (Uber drivers, for example, or retail workers), and it could also help prevent more people from being tossed into abject poverty by the sudden loss of their jobs during a recession. It could serve other purposes as well—as an initial investment in someone’s new business, or to pay for a move to a place with better work opportunities, or to enable a person to go back to school and get better credentials.

According to Lowrey, a UBI could also address one of the central problems in today’s precarious labor market: By allowing workers to walk away from a job, it could give them considerable leverage over their employers and provide them with more say in shaping the terms of their employment. A UBI, she argues, would ameliorate the catastrophic loss of worker power…. With a basic income, workers could refuse to take a job with low pay. With a basic income, workers could demand better benefits. With a basic income, companies would have to compete to win workers over.

Here Lowrey encounters the same challenges as Hughes and Stern: None of the amounts being proposed by UBI supporters come close to giving workers the power to walk away from an exploitative job. Lowrey’s version of the UBI would consist of $1,000 a month for every citizen of the country, potentially paid for by a potpourri of policy options. (Hughes promotes an even stingier one: just $500 a month for a limited slice of the populace.) But $1,000 a month is clearly too little to live on in a society in which other necessities—rent, car payments, doctor’s visits—are also not provided by the state. Twelve thousand dollars a year wouldn’t lift even a single person without kids above the federal poverty level—an official number that doesn’t accurately measure what it takes to get by in this country. And that’s for a single person without children. If checks are only sent to adults, a single parent of two children, as Daniel Hemel has pointed out, would have to work at least 32 hours a week on top of a $1,000-per-month UBI just to clear the poverty line. A median two-parent, two-child family needs nearly $40,000 more a year above the poverty line to really make ends meet.

The current precariousness of work, therefore, would remain, since even with a basic income most Americans would still have to do a considerable amount of work and would be forced to accept the employment terms on offer. Few, if any, could walk away from a fast-food job that
refused to pay above minimum wage or offer humane scheduling and benefits if the fallback were a mere $1,000 a month. The possibility fades even more quickly for those with children and those who are the sole earners in their households. Without another source of income, a single mother couldn’t actually choose to focus on raising her children on $1,000 a month, let alone making art or starting a business or caring for her parents in their old age. A UBI might help to address questions of basic subsistence, but it’s the power to say no to crummy jobs that could truly transform the economy—and there, a universal basic income falls dramatically short.

Another policy solution that many contrast with the universal basic income might actually give workers such power: a federal jobs guarantee, or a program that would employ any willing person in a variety of societally necessary tasks in exchange for a decent living with decent benefits. If a good job were always on offer through the government, losing a job thanks to a recession or an unfair boss wouldn’t mean catastrophe. Workers wouldn’t have to put up with low pay and poor treatment; they could go get a public job instead. And for their part, private-sector employers would soon learn that they had to raise their standards to compete with good government jobs.

This is an idea that Stern, Hughes, and Lowrey all consider briefly and then dismiss. Despite his labor credentials, Stern worries about the complexity of such a program and the “huge government bureaucracy” it would require, to say nothing of the costs, whereas Hughes simply doesn’t trust the government to carry it out. “The arguments for a federal job guarantee require faith in government’s ability to connect people to jobs they want and need,” he writes. “It falls squarely in the tradition of government telling poor and middle-class people what to do with their lives.”

Likewise, Lowrey somewhat glibly dismisses the idea because it “might be a nightmare to run.” But a jobs guarantee is hardly any more utopian than a universal basic income. Part of the allure of the latter is how simple it would be for the government to just cut everyone a check. But that simplicity sacrifices larger benefits. Yes, a jobs guarantee would require far more bureaucracy and government involvement, and it could very well cost more. But in exchange, it would give Americans a lot more power over their working lives than a universal basic income would: a real choice between what’s on offer in the private sector and in the public-employment office, between the wages available at Walmart and a decently paying government job. Those who easily find themselves in careers with good benefits wouldn’t need to avail themselves of a federal jobs guarantee. But those stuck in minimum-wage work over which they have little control—or who can’t get even that thanks to barriers like felony records, racism, and disabilities—would have the luxury of options.

Of course, there are some things that a jobs guarantee can’t do. It wouldn’t value unpaid labor or question the American obsession with a job as proof of a person’s worth. Indeed, what sets the UBI apart is that it gives someone money without requiring that she leap into another job. A UBI can also help value the unpaid work that women disproportionately shoulder at home, serving as “a powerful rejection of the notion that people who toil without pay do not contribute,” Lowrey writes. She also argues that it can help attack racial income and wealth gaps by “ensuring that the minority would get what the majority got.” (This last claim is a bit more dubious: Since a UBI is distributed equally to everyone, it’s hard to see how it could minimize racial gaps in income and wealth.)

Yet despite the arguments over which policy—a universal basic income or a jobs guarantee—is better, the best approach would likely be to consider that American society needs a UBI (to eliminate extreme poverty and decouple a person’s worth from her work) and a jobs guarantee (to ensure that when she does work, it’s for decent pay and good benefits). Other policies could raise the quality of life for people in this country still further: for example, programs that make education, housing, health care, child care, and other life necessities—which often come with an exorbitant price tag—available to all.

A UBI may be moving from the realm of fringe utopian discourse to actual policymaking. Experiments in various types of universal cash benefits have appeared in Scotland, Finland, and the Netherlands; in Oakland and Stockton, California; and in Ontario, Canada. Hillary Clinton even considered campaigning on the promise of one. But a universal basic income isn’t a panacea for all of our social ills so much as one solution that must be coupled with others. It could be a powerful answer to some of our most intractable problems, but it won’t fix everything.
NOTHING LASTS FOREVER

The rise and fall of Kanye and Drake

by BIJAN STEPHEN

Oth nothing lasts forever, and the salient feature of dynasties is that they come to an end. Kanye West and Drake have been figuratively warring over the airwaves for about a decade now, with neither party—or their affiliated hip-hop constellations—quite ready to give up the battle for control of the summer. Winning that war means winning the year: Nothing goes quite so well with hot weather as a hot beat, and these two have them in spades. The rivalry came to a head this year with the G.O.O.D. Music release of Pusha T’s sublime *Daytona*, almost entirely produced by West, and Drake’s messier *Scorpion*.

On “Infrared,” *Daytona*’s last track, Pusha makes the rivalry explicit: He follows up on a relatively old beef, accusing Drake of relying on a ghostwriter for some of his lyrics. (It’s important to note that the beef—between Lil Wayne’s Cash Money label, which hosts Drake, and the Clipse, which granted Pusha T his entrée into rap stardom—began, in 2006, over who wore the A Bathing Ape brand first. It’s that old, and that petty.) Drake responded with a couple of anemic diss tracks, “Duppy Freestyle” and “I’m Upset,” in which the pop star variously announces he’s in shock at Pusha’s audacity and is thinking about buying a semiautomatic pistol and a bulletproof vest. As many have noted, “Infrared” was a feint: Pusha fired back with “The Story of Adidon,” which featured a picture of Drake in blackface on the single’s cover, made digs at Drake’s father and mother, and revealed that the rapper was hiding a child. The beef was ultimately quashed by J Prince, the legendary CEO of the equally legendary Rap-A-Lot Records, but it seems that Pusha and Kanye have won the summer again.

The theatrics, which took place in May, may have generated some excitement, but Kanye and Drake share a larger problem: Their time in the spotlight as the kings of rap and pop, respectively, appears to be coming to an end. Even as Kanye attempts to solidify his position as rap’s preeminent auteur with a spate of G.O.O.D. Music albums, and Drake moves to secure his legacy with *Scorpion*, both have missed their slide into irrelevance. Hip-hop is a young person’s game; so is pop. A new class of unaffiliated artists, working in the shadow of these two giants, have been awaiting their turn in the spotlight; this summer, they might be the real winners.

In an aesthetically savvy move, Kanye announced earlier this year that he’d be releasing five albums by well-known artists in the G.O.O.D. Music stable, all produced by him. They include Nas’s first album in six years; a collaboration with Kid Cudi; a solo outing from Teyana Taylor; and the albums by Pusha T and West himself, though aside from *Daytona*, the efforts have been mostly unremarkable. Add to this his embrace of Trump and his outrageous tweets, and it appears that Kanye is grasping at straws. On all of the albums, the production is characteristically his: The samples are heavy and well-chosen, and even where the rapping is weak, they shine. The problem, however, remains: Nearly all of the albums are retreads of ideas that West ran through in the early ’00s. It seems his originality has gone missing.

*Scorpion*, Drake’s fifth solo effort, suffers from the same affliction. Yet where the G.O.O.D. Music artists keep it short, Drake goes long: At 25 tracks, *Scorpion* is a tedious and repetitive listen that reprises all of Drizzy’s hobbyhorses—anxiety, money, money, money...
naked need, problems with women, and a perpetual hope for transformation.

A large part of the album has Drake addressing the rumors about his son. “Single father, I hate it when I hear it,” he confesses on “March 14.” “I used to challenge my parents on every album / Now I’m embarrassed to tell ’em I ended up as a co-parent / Always promised the family unit / I wanted it to be different because I’ve been through it / But this is the harsh truth now.” The album also finds Drake resting on his formidable laurels—animals that lose a fight but don’t die limp back home to lick their wounds. “Who’s givin’ out this much return on investment? / After my run, man, how is that even a question?” he raps on “Survival,” Scorpion’s first track. But a general sense of exhaustion wends its way throughout the album. Drake sounds tired, uninspired, and uninterested in his usual subject—himself.

Meanwhile, younger artists like Cardi B and Rico Nasty have released albums that are quiet masterpieces, innovative, and, above all, fresh. There’s none of the ennui or ambivalence about success that now feels characteristic of Kanye and Drake, two dudes who have been on top for so long that it’s gotten boring; there’s a flame in these younger women and their cohort that’s been missing since Views and The Life of Pablo.

Rico Nasty’s latest album, Nasty, dropped in mid-June, and it is nothing short of a declaration that it’s time for the existing order to be upended. “Bitch I’m charged up!” Nasty yells in “Bitch I’m Nasty”:

Bitches wanna beef, get you burnt up, I am the best, bar none
And I’m screamin’, “Fuck Trump!
Black girls, stand up!”
Bitch I’m nasty, and I don’t give a fuck like, what is classy?
Smokin’ on cat pee and my voice is raspy
I know these hoes can’t stand me
I’m a black queen in a black coupe
With some black niggas in some black suits
If you run up on us, then they gon’ shoot

It’s a thrilling performance that makes Nasty one of the best rap albums of the year; even that glancing reference to Trump feels contemporary in a way that renders Kanye’s latest efforts to address his presidential fandom so much empty bunk. In “Ye vs. the People,” Kanye attempts to explain: “I feel an obligation to show people new ideas / And if you wanna hear ’em, there go two right here / Make America Great Again had a negative perception / I took it, wore it, rocked it, gave it a new direction / Added empathy, care, and love and affection / And y’all simply questionin’ my methods”—which only proves he doesn’t get it. Nasty’s distaste for Trump is rooted in her love of black people, which is itself a political act; Kanye’s love of Trump grows out of his inability to process Trumpism as an ideology of real consequence, as something more than aesthetics.

While not explicitly political, Cardi B’s studio debut, Invasion of Privacy, also boasts a liveliness that Kanye and Drake appear to lack. Released to rave reviews in early April, it’s almost explicitly made for the summer. “I Like It,” which features the Latino pop star J Balvin, sounds like it was scientifically engineered in a lab somewhere to be blasted at the neighborhood block parties that seem to spontaneously emerge when the temperature rises above 80°F. Cardi’s having fun. Consider her verse on “I Like It”:

Hotter than a Somali, fur coat,
Ferrari
Hop out the stu’, jump in the coupe (coupe)
Big Dipper on top of the roof
Flexin on bitches as hard as I can
Eating halal, driving the Lam’
Told that bitch I’m sorry though (sorry)
’Bout my coins like Mario (Mario)
Yeah, they call me Cardi B
I run this shit like cardio

Compared to the old heads, the kids are alright.

What’s frustrating about Kanye’s and Drake’s mutual decline are the occasional flashes of brilliance that the two still display. The Kanye-produced Daytona is pure old-school magic: It sounds like a classic, and will undoubtedly go down as Pusha T’s best album since he and Malice (now No Malice) made Hell Hath No Fury in 2006. “This ain’t for the conscious, this is for the mud-made monsters / Who grew up on legends from outer Yonkers / Influenced by niggas straight outta Compton, the scale never lies / I’m two-point-two incentivized,” Pusha raps on “The Games We Play.” Part of the appeal is that Pusha returned to his cocaine-dealing roots and found the ground there fallow and fertile. As a result, the bars on Daytona are some of the best of the year, and Kanye’s sample-heavy production elevates them to the sublime.

As for Drake, his recent songs “God’s Plan” and “Nice for What,” both from Scorpion, are bops in the classic Drake mold, written explicitly for women (“Workin’ hard, girl, everything paid for / First, last phone bill, car note, cable / With your phone out, gotta hit them angles,” he raps on “Nice for What”) or for his homies (“And you know me / Turn the O2 into the O3, dog / Without 40, Oli, there’d be no me / Imagine if I never met the broskies,” he says on “God’s Plan,” about his frequent collaborators). The old brilliance is there, the same ease that suffused 2011’s Take Care and 2013’s Nothing Was the Same and vaulted Drake onto the top of the charts and the world.

But the world has changed. Both of the genres that Kanye and Drake defined have now moved on as a new generation—artists like Cardi B and Rico Nasty and Tierra Whack—comes onto the scene. Over the last two years, a certain self-confidence has been punctured, and music has started to capture the rising sense of alarm, the realization that things might not turn out the way we thought they would. That takes ferocious sounds. If the rappers at the top of the game can’t provide them, others will.
Puzzle No. 3474
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS
1  Gets angry when Oakland team is taken in by dubious faith (3,1,3)
5  Honest union leader encounters PR battle, avoiding false start (7)
9  Renovate unsightly 26 (9)
10 The moon's changing shape! (5)
11 King’s song, ever at #1 (6)
12 Vegetable, for example, with green design at end of root (8)
14 Check for concrete strengthening (13)
18 Reusing parts of air vents with self-confidence (13)
20 Mars Rover overturned, with blade pierced by failing water source (3,2,3)
22 Surgical instrument is extraordinarily clean ahead of time (6)
25 Prize Sounds of Silence at the front door? (5)
26 Small conflict disrupting 9 (5,4)
27 Nanny’s quiet self-esteem at last (3-4)

DOWN
1 Race participant, having swallowed twisted cord, is deep into it (4-4)
2 Until now, couch is on top of rug (2,3)
3 First, folk get upset as they’re encountered in warehouses (9)
4 Recited story’s end (4)
5 Hug nine icy bats? That’s filthy (10)
6 Tear from grim, unprotected pet (3,2)
7 Promise to cook ragù—something you put in a pot with a bit of escarole (9)
8 Attempt to encompass (take in) an agreement (6)
13 Front of ballet dancer’s equipment held up by UK native, a legendary trickster (4,6)
15 In German car, half of beats are completely drowned out, perhaps (9)
16 Sketchy leases? Hey, they’re in your face (9)
17 Weariest screwball, so to speak (2,2,4)
19 After Republican defection, strange realignment of representatives (6)
21 From the South: “Oil of Leaf” (5)
23 Marx’s elegant ring (5)
24 Pound calamari, except for the head (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3473
ACROSS 1 UBEP (anag.) + EAT
5 RELIGIOS (rev.) + N
9 IN DELI + CAT + T + 10 rev.
11 S + T + ITCH 12 EM + ALING
13 MAN A FORT 17 S + EXACT
19 THEO LOGO [o]Y 21 hidden
23 P + AREN'T 24 BIRD 25 PIEDATE
RBE 26 KEEFNTHT (kite anag., tips rev.)
27 DAYOLI [i]LD

DOWN 2 PENETRATE 3 ELECTRA
4 T + HIGH 5 letter bank
6 L[I]E + SWAKE 7 [U][G][E]-REMLIN
8 rev. hidden 14 [n]O/NTH + [d]ESPOT
16 anag. 18 A CHILD UP 20 LARGE
(amag.) + NY 22 NO 1 S + E 23 P + LAID

UPBEAT RELIGION
EL THE HR
INDELICATE EDIT
EC GL SM
STITCH EMAILING
RR SWI
MANAFORT AUNTIE
TH N AK
SEXACT THEOLOGY
CHA AE
ANATHA PARENT
OES GL E
BIRD PIEDATE
S O N I N A
KEEPATIT DAY OLD

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