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JOAN WALSH
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10 (More) Races to Watch

The Nation opened the 2018 election season with a list of 10 candidates we were keeping our eyes on: politicians who proposed “not just a change in party, but an end to status-quo politics.” Eight of them eventually triumphed in their primaries and will be on November ballots across the country, including gubernatorial contenders Stacey Abrams in Georgia and Ben Jealous in Maryland, as well as Wisconsin lieutenant-governor candidate Mandela Barnes. The same goes for Jocelyn Benson, a voting-rights activist running for secretary of state in Michigan, and January Contreras, an advocate for victims of human trafficking, who is running for attorney general in Arizona. Two House candidates, Scott Wallace in Pennsylvania and Liz Watson in Indiana, also won their primaries and are now mounting races vital to flipping control of Congress. So is a progressive Senate candidate we identified in April, Beto O’Rourke, who’s in a tight battle against Ted Cruz in Texas.

We’re still enthusiastic about that list, as we are about the Democrats’ prospects of retaking Congress. But the urgent challenges of the moment—ending austerity, addressing inequality, upending systemic racism, replacing militarism with diplomacy, and saving the planet from climate change—demand more than changing R’s to D’s. So here are 10 more vital races (eight candidates and two referendum fights) that we’re keeping our eyes on for signs of a progressive wave on November 6.

§ Andrew Gillum, candidate for governor of Florida: The 39-year-old Tallahassee mayor upended conventional wisdom by running a progressive primary campaign that proposed criminal-justice reform, adoption of gun-safety measures, state-based Medicare for All health care, and a plan to create jobs and address climate change by making Florida the country’s “solar capital.” Polls said he didn’t have a chance, but with a big boost from Bernie Sanders, people of color, and young supporters, Gillum beat his better-funded primary rivals. Now he faces the noxious, Trump-quoting Republican Ron DeSantis, who’s been criticized for mounting a racist campaign against the man who would be Florida’s first African-American governor. If Gillum’s progressive project prevails in this battleground state, he’ll provide a model for beating Trump in 2020.

§ Janet Mills, candidate for governor of Maine: The state’s Republican governor, Paul LePage, is one of the most Trump-like figures in the country. In 2016, he failed to respond to the state’s opioid crisis by vetoing a bill making it easier to obtain the overdose drug Narcan. Rejecting science and common sense, LePage claimed that reversing overdoses perpetuates opioid abuse. That was too much for State Attorney General Janet Mills, a Democrat, who took the lawsuit-settlement funds controlled by her office, bought the lifesaving drugs, and distributed them to first responders. “Making Narcan available to police agencies is simply part of my responsibilities to law enforcement and is in aid of their responsibility to save lives,” she explained. Now Mills is running to replace LePage. If the woman who refused to file his amicus briefs supporting Trump’s immigration orders is elected, a reactionary governor will be replaced by one who “has made it her mission to stand up to those who have tried to exploit Maine people.”

§ David Zuckerman, candidate for Vermont lieutenant governor: An incumbent backed by the Vermont Progressive Party (of which he’s a longtime member) and the Democratic Party, in a state where votes on separate party lines can be combined, Zuckerman is an organic farmer who has a talent for getting urban and rural voters together in support of progressive initiatives: legalizing marijuana, labeling genetically modified food, defending net neutrality, raising wages, and welcoming refugees. Using the bully pulpit that comes with a statewide office, Zuckerman has taken bold stands—and voters respect him for it. In 2016, when Democrats lost the governorship, Zuckerman beat a Republican legislator by more than 20,000 votes. This year, he faces...
BY THE NUMBERS

94%
Percentage of young people in China, ages 12–15, who are optimistic about their country’s future, the highest of the 15 nations recently surveyed by Ipsos

50%
Percentage of young people in France who are optimistic about their country’s future, the lowest in the survey

63%
Percentage of young people in Saudi Arabia who say their political leaders care about them, the highest in the survey

16%
Percentage of young people in Brazil who say their political leaders care about them—tied with France for the lowest in the survey

49%
Percentage of young people in the United States, ages 12–17, who think they can make a difference in how their country is governed—Chris Gelardi

the Republican minority leader of Vermont’s House in an intense race. But Zuckerman’s running as he always has: as an independent progressive who Bill McKibben says exemplifies “what’s very best about citizen politics.”

§ Dana Nessel, candidate for Michigan attorney general: “The AG’s job is to protect Michigan citizens against the individuals and corporations that would do them harm, not the other way around,” says Nessel, who has mounted an unapologetically progressive campaign to take charge of one of the most powerful law-enforcement posts in the country. With experience as a prosecutor, civil-rights attorney, and head of the LGBTQ-rights group Fair Michigan, Nessel promises to “aggressively prosecute hate crimes and all cases of discrimination, protect women’s rights to access health care, and defend immigrants from federal overreach.” She’s ready to “demand justice for Flint” and fight pipelines that threaten the Great Lakes; defend workers and labor unions; and “work in concert with AGs around the country to push back against many of the worst policies from the Trump administration and their allies in Congress.”

§ Ricardo Lara, candidate for California insurance commissioner: Big states like California can lead the nation in developing single-payer health-care models, just as Saskatchewan did in Canada. State Senator Ricardo Lara knows this; he led the fight for the Healthy California Act, one of the most innovative single-payer proposals in the country. As insurance commissioner, he’d be uniquely positioned to implement desperately needed reforms—a fact the California Nurses Association/National Nurses Organizing Committee has emphasized in its advocacy for his bid. Lara’s also a defender of immigrants, an ally of unions, and a fighter for LGBTQ rights who would serve as a national champion for economic, social, and racial justice.

§ Ammar Campa-Najjar, candidate for California’s 50th Congressional District: “Country Over Party” is the central message of Campa-Najjar’s campaign, which offers a progressive alternative to the low-road politics of Representative Duncan Hunter, one of Trump’s closest allies. Running in a San Diego-area district gerrymandered to favor Republicans, the Democrat is asking voters to turn out an incumbent who was recently indicted on charges of diverting a quarter-million dollars in campaign funds to cover personal expenses. Hunter’s running a vile campaign to save his seat, with ads claiming that Campa-Najjar, a 29-year-old Palestinian-Mexican American, is engaged in a “well-orchestrated plan” to “infiltrate Congress” and poses a “security risk.” The ads fail to mention, of course, that Campa-Najjar served for four years in the Obama White House and the Department of Labor. Campa-Najjar is rallying voters to reject “Hunter’s un-American, racist attacks.” Democrats have targeted 10 GOP-held seats in California in their effort to flip the House. By electing Campa-Najjar, however, voters can do something more: They can reject the foulest expression of Trumpism.

§ Jahana Hayes, candidate for Connecticut’s Fifth Congressional District: Raised in a public-housing project by her grandmother as her own mom struggled with drug addiction, Hayes says she was “cast aside.” Yet she worked nights, attended community college, and earned an education degree. Her remarkable ability to connect with students in her history classes earned her the 2016 National Teacher of the Year Award. Nonetheless, when she announced her candidacy this year, Hayes recalls that “people told us we had no chance and no business trying to upset the status quo.” On August 14, she proved them wrong, beating a candidate backed by party leaders in the primary. Running for an open seat in a district that leans Democratic, this committed union activist and progressive advocate now has a good chance of becoming the first African-American congresswoman to represent a New England state. Hayes says she comes from a place “where people are strong, but they aren’t supposed to run for Congress.” But she’s changing that calculus because she knows that “if Congress starts to look like us, no one can stop us.”

§ Kara Eastman, candidate for Nebraska’s Second Congressional District: When Progressive Caucus co-chair Mark Pocan made an Omaha stop on her behalf, Eastman told him, “I can’t wait to join you in the Progressive Caucus.” While many candidates in swing districts mount insidiously cautious campaigns, Eastman is running as a true progressive. A social worker who has made Medicare for All central to her bid, she declares in ads that “I won’t take a penny from insurance companies.” Eastman’s also ready to take on Trump. “Here’s the truth: This Republican Congress and the Trump administration are united in cutting funding for Social Security and Medicare,” she bluntly declares. “Democrats want to not just protect those benefits, but expand them. The rest is just noise.”

§ North Dakota Measure 3, the Marijuana Legalization and Automatic Expungement Initiative: Willie Nelson’s Texas has not legalized marijuana, and neither has Andrew Cuomo’s New York, but North Dakota might just do so on November 6, when jurisdictions across the country vote on legalization. The state voted by an almost 2–1 margin to legalize medical marijuana in 2016, and now it’s entertaining a sweeping proposal that would permit people 21 and older to possess, use, buy, sell, or grow marijuana for recreational purposes. “If it’s marijuana, it’s legal,” explains the advocacy group Legalize North Dakota. In addition, the measure proposes a process to automatically expunge the records of North Dakotans with marijuana convictions. That’s legalization and criminal-justice reform all at once.

§ California Proposition 10, the Local Rent Control Initiative: Access to affordable housing has become a front-burner issue across the country. Candidates like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York and Ben Jealous in Maryland have made housing central to campaigns that address economic and racial inequality. Yet even in supposedly liberal states, restrictions still prevent communities from using rent-control laws to help working families obtain affordable housing and remain in gentrifying neighborhoods. Backed by the Coalition for Affordable Housing, unions, and Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, Proposition 10 would overturn laws that preempt local authority, making it possible for cities to protect working-class tenants.
Banking on Unions

As President Trump and his fellow Republicans roll back banking regulations, many reformers are looking for other ways to build a safer and more accountable financial sector. Progressive politicians still call for breaking up the biggest banks and for similar top-down structural changes. But there’s another mechanism for accountability that needs to be more widely discussed: improving the working conditions of low-level employees. Why not unionize the financial sector as part of a reform agenda? This idea of “regulation from below”—a strategy coined by labor activists Stephen Lerner, Rita Berlofa, and Molly McGrath—would be an important fix.

You can see how bad working conditions lead to bad behavior by looking at what went wrong at Wells Fargo. The bosses there insisted that workers meet punishing sales goals. They demanded that their employees sell customers additional products they didn’t need, like car mortgages or home loans. This created an environment where workers felt compelled to create fake and unauthorized accounts—the kind of abuse that could easily be checked if employees had a say in their own working conditions.

Regulation from below is the perfect complement to “regulations from above”—the ones that address the size of banks, their activities, and their balance sheets to keep them from threatening the entire economy. Such regulations are essential, but they present two major problems.

The first is that it’s easy for conservatives to simply disregard regulations once they’re in power. Republicans can look the other way and appoint regulators who aren’t interested in doing their jobs. The FBI and others were aware of the extensive fraud that existed in subprime mortgages in the early 2000s, but the Federal Reserve ignored it because policy-makers assumed that markets take care of themselves. Unions, however, are self-reinforcing, since they’re guided by workers.

The second problem is that a top-down approach is bad at catching corporate malfeasance. Even in the wake of the financial crisis, there have been numerous scandals in high-end finance, from money laundering to the manipulation of interest rates. Yet the criminal prosecution of corporate offenders has lagged under both Republican and Democratic administrations. Though unions wouldn’t necessarily affect the behavior of executives further up the chain, they would provide a safer environment for whistle-blowers and those who want to hold their own firms accountable. Even if a new Democratic president appoints regulators who take these issues seriously, there’s only so much they can cover in an industry this vast. Putting workers into play on the side of accountability helps accomplish this goal.

And because the financial system is so massive, unionizing would also improve the lives of millions of employees. The six largest banks alone have over 700,000 workers in the United States. That’s about the same as the total number who work in the country’s mining and resource-extraction industries. It’s also a workforce that isn’t going anywhere and will only grow as the service industries, including financial services, become a larger part of the economy. Organizing them will create a middle class for the future.

Those at the top of the financial sector make a lot of money and constitute a disproportionate number of the 1 percent. Yet, as in most industries, their high wages are built on the labor of people making far less. This was seen in 2016, when JPMorgan Chase raised its minimum wage from $10.15 to between $12 and $16.50 an hour for 18,000 employees—in a year when the bank’s CEO, Jamie Dimon, made $28 million. There are half a million bank tellers in the country, and their median wage is only $13.50 an hour. Finance isn’t all billionaires; for most people in the sector, it’s a blue-collar job.

There’s a level of dignity that should be associated with work. Workers shouldn’t face injury or death, sexual harassment, or poverty. And they also shouldn’t be forced to commit fraud. Workers should be organized for the sake of their own agency. But it’s an added bonus that unionizing the finance industry would also help stabilize the sector itself.

Why Unionize Bank Workers?

1. The financial industry has a massive number of workers:

8.6 million
That’s 5.7% of all US employment.

2. The vast majority are low-level bank workers who need higher pay:

$13.52 an hour is the median wage for the 502,700 bank tellers in the US.

3. They could be a fraud solution:

Organized, empowered workers could help regulate the industry from below.

$12 billion
Amount the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau returned to 29 million defrauded customers between 2010 and 2017.

Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics; author’s calculations; Financial Services Committee
2018 Infographic: Tracy Hunte-Lee/Bloomberg

MIKE KONCZAL
A Zephyr of Change

A cademic and activist Zephyr Teachout has joined The Nation’s editorial board to advise on issues close to her work combating corruption and crony capitalism. Together with her fellow ed-board members (see the mast-head on page 26), she will help advance our mission of providing a deeper understanding of the world as it—and as it could be.

“It is an honor to join The Nation’s esteemed editorial board,” Teachout said. “The integrity of our democratic system is under attack by forces that would undermine the rule of law and the sanctity of truth. The Nation’s role trumpeting an equitable and just society and government is more vital now than ever, and I look forward to bringing my robust experience as an activist and advocate to help advise the important work they do.”

For nearly two decades, Teachout has been at the forefront of progressive reform. She literally wrote the book on corruption in America. In the past few years, Teachout has also injected much-needed debate into several New York elections by giving voice to the progressive populist sentiment rumbling across the state and throughout the country. (The Nation endorsed Teachout’s campaigns for governor of New York in 2014 and for state attorney general in 2018.) She is also a key architect of two ongoing cases against President Trump for violating the US Constitution’s emoluments clause.

Our Brutal Saudi Ally

The alleged gruesome murder and dismemberment of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul has thrown a huge wrench into the Trump administration’s Middle East policy. Already, major corporate players like JPMorgan Chase, the Blackstone Group, and Ford have pulled out of a Saudi economic summit planned for late October, and members of Congress on both sides of the aisle have begun speaking of placing sanctions on the Saudi officials they suspect of complicity in the murder, including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, in crafting a Saudi-Israeli-US axis against Iran, had persuaded the president to put most of his eggs in the Saudi basket. The judgment of both men, long doubted in many quarters, has now been thrown into even sharper question.

Turkish authorities say they have bone-chilling audio of the killing of the journalist. Turkish police have also insisted that the murder was carefully prepared, saying they have evidence that 15 Saudi operatives flew into Istanbul and then back out on the day Khashoggi disappeared—and that one of those specialists was a medical examiner with experience in cutting up bodies. After initially denying any role in Khashoggi’s murder and insisting he had left the consulate—an assertion disproved by Turkish surveillance video—Saudi authorities may be changing their story, with sources at press time indicating they may claim the death was the result of an interrogation gone bad. Trump has begun speaking of “rogue killers,” suggesting that he will grasp the lifeline that the crown prince’s aging father, King Salman, is throwing him so as to salvage the administration’s Middle East policy.

In his initial reaction to the news of Khashoggi’s alleged murder, Trump underlined that the business deals he had conducted with Saudi Arabia would take precedence over human-rights concerns. Trump had gone to Riyadh with his entourage in May 2017, right before bin Salman sidelined the last of his rivals to become crown prince and the power behind his father’s throne. As Kushner worked the phones with Lockheed Martin, Trump announced $110 billion in new Saudi commitments to US arms purchases and, beyond that, billions of dollars of investment in the United States. Kushner is alleged to have gushed over bin Salman, after having received a chilly reception in his earlier attempts to intervene in US and Middle East diplomacy. According to one of his friends, quoted in Michael Wolff’s book *Fire and Fury*, getting to know the crown prince was like “meeting someone nice at your first day of boarding school.”

The Saudi arms-buying commitments, however, turned out mainly to consist of relatively meaningless letters of intent signed with major arms corporations, rather than firm contracts. The Saudi interest in arms was not, on the other hand, feigned. Some 10 percent of annual US arms exports have gone to the kingdom in recent years. The Saudis are fighting a mostly aerial campaign in their disastrous war against neighboring Yemen, and their technological edge via purchases of sophisticated US weaponry is one of the few hopes they have of extricating themselves from a quagmire.

Kushner and Trump were not the only ones taken in by the modernizing rhetoric of the crown prince. David Ignatius of The Washington Post has a long history of coddling Saudi “reformers,” Mohammed bin Salman included, and New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman helped announce the crown prince to the world in a fawning interview for which Friedman was widely criticized, in that he neglected to mention Saudi Arabia’s legions of political prisoners, its flogging of dissidents, or its war crimes in Yemen. Friedman responded to his critics at a Brookings Institution event by saying that the Middle East is in flames, “and so when I see someone who is having the balls to take on the religious component of that, to take on the economic component, to take on the political, with all of his flaws…I wanna stick my head up and say, ‘God, I hope you succeed.’ And when you do that the holy hell comes down on you. Well, ‘Fuck that’ is my view, O.K.?” One suspects that Friedman might have worn less deeply rose-colored glasses had bin Salman not signaled a willingness to ally with Israel against Iran.

Bin Salman likes to portray himself as a genial reformer pulling around with Silicon Valley luminaries, but his inner psychopath may have once again revealed itself, as it did when he arbitrarily imprisoned dozens of Saudi princes last year and extorted their wealth; or when he kidnapped the sitting prime minister of Lebanon; or when, in 2015, he abruptly ordered a massive bombing campaign on Yemen that continues to this day, with the Saudi-led coalition responsible for most of the civilian casualties in that country’s civil war, according to the United Nations.

US sanctions on Saudi Arabia and a cooling of relations between the two countries would derail the attempt by the neoconservatives around Trump to solidify an odd-couple alliance against Iran between Israel and the kingdom. Saudi Arabia has
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already failed to gain key allies among the Gulf Cooperation Council states in this drive against Iran, with Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar having made it clear that they are not on board. A Saudi Arabia under US sanctions would have even less credibility in marshaling its partners for the effort.

A bipartisan group of 11 Republican and 11 Democratic senators, including most members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, sent Trump a letter urging the administration to consider imposing Global Magnitsky Act sanctions on Saudi officials in response to Khashoggi’s murder. That may not be likely in a GOP-controlled Congress, but if the Democrats take the House in November, they might be in a position to lead a charge against Trump’s Saudi alliance, and if they could get enough buy-in from Republicans dismayed at the Saudis’ behavior, they might even be able to overrule a presidential veto.

Congress is also increasingly impatient with US backing for Saudi Arabia’s war on Yemen. California Democrat Ro Khanna put forward a resolution in late September calling for an end to US logistical support for the Gulf states attacking Yemen, on the grounds that these activities violate the War Powers Resolution. Neither the Obama nor the Trump administration sought congressional approval for going to war in Yemen alongside regional partners.

If, as seems likely, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered Khashoggi’s death, he has raised the specter of a new Moammar El-Gadhafi in the Middle East—brutal, without conscience, unpredictable, and reckless. Only this time, the strongman psychopath isn’t the shunned leader of a small state, but one who presides over a country of some 28 million, among them millions of guest workers, with an annual gross domestic product of $684 billion. Trump seems eager to sweep this menace under the carpet in order to keep intact his campaign talking points about attracting lucrative Saudi investments. Congress, notoriously skittish about getting involved in foreign affairs, may be the only institution willing and able to take a stand against a US partner who seems more serial killer than modernizer.

Juan Cole, the Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate Professor of History at the University of Michigan, is the author, most recently, of Muhammad: Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires.
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VOTER SUPPRESSION

Blocking the Native Ballot

The Supreme Court upheld a law on October 9 that effectively disenfranchises thousands of Native American voters in North Dakota. With less than a month before the midterms, Democratic Senator Heidi Heitkamp is facing a tight contest in her run for reelection, and the Court’s decision could easily cost her and the Democrats a Senate seat.

In North Dakota, many Native American reservations do not use street addresses, with residents typically relying on a post-office box to receive mail. But after Heitkamp won a Senate race in 2012 by fewer than 3,000 votes, North Dakota Republicans passed a law requiring voters to present identification with a residential address at the polls—blocking many Native Americans, whose tribal IDs list only the number for a PO box, from exercising their democratic rights.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, joined by Justice Elena Kagan, noted in her dissent that “70,000 North Dakota residents—almost 20% of the turnout in a regular quadrennial election—lack a qualifying ID.” The American Civil Liberties Union, the Native American Rights Fund, and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe have all denounced the Court’s decision.

Standing Rock Sioux tribal chairman Mike Faith said the law is clearly discriminatory: “Native Americans can live on the reservation without an address. They’re living in accordance with the law and treaties, but now all of a sudden they can’t vote…. Our voices should be heard and they should be heard fairly at the polls just like all other Americans.”

—Maia Hibbett

Eric Alterman

Where the Power Lies

Why do the media keep parroting Trump’s falsehoods?

The Toronto Star’s Daniel Dale has been tracking Donald Trump’s lies since Inauguration Day, and in the first week of October, the number of falsehoods reached the second-highest point of his presidency, with 129. But Dale’s cut-off date meant that he didn’t include the October 10 op-ed signed by Trump attacking Democratic proposals for Medicare for all, which USA Today, incredibly, agreed to run. The Washington Post’s Glenn Kessler, who has also been tabulating Trump’s lies, concluded that “almost every sentence contained a misleading statement or a falsehood.” As if he were purposely trolling the fact-checkers, Trump actually linked to one of Kessler’s items that had previously debunked a false claim he was now making again.

At first, USA Today’s editors appeared pleased with themselves, defending the op-ed’s lies with the argument that they allow “authors wide leeway to express their opinions.” Two days later, however, they made a mockery of their own excuse by publishing Factcheck.org’s assessment, which systematically demolished every substantive claim that Trump made. These were not “opinions”; they were falsehoods. And as is the case so frequently with Trump, if he was not aware that he was lying, then he should be immediately removed from office for being bonkers.

Thing is, Trump may indeed be nuts; but his constant lying is perhaps the least nutty thing about him. His relentless dishonesty works. Yes, the Post and the Star track his “falsehoods.” (So far, Kessler has called only one of them a “lie.”) The New York Times uses the word “lie” every once in a while. And, of course, Twitter fulminates. But the mainstream media almost always pass along his lies without prejudice. The same day as the USA Today op-ed, NBC News ran a story with the headline “Trump accuses Hillary Clinton of colluding with Russia as crowd chants ‘lock her up.’” Once again, everyone working at NBC News must have realized this accusation was a lie. But Trump clearly understands what he can get away with and—as ridiculous as this “I’m rubber, you’re glue” contention is—what works.

The publishing of obvious, destructive lies by Trump and his courtiers is standard operating procedure almost everywhere in the mainstream media. Here is a tweet that appeared the same day as the NBC News story from CNN’s Jake Tapper, who retweeted a clip of his colleague Christiane Amanpour and her interview with Hillary Clinton (“Exclusive: Hillary Clinton says “you cannot be civil with a political party that wants to destroy what you stand for, what you care about”) and highlighted the reaction from top Trump aide Kellyanne Conway: “@KellyannePolls responds on Fox: ‘I think her [Hillary Clinton’s] discourse now is dangerous. I don’t like the implications here…. I don’t like that kind of talk and I avoid it. My boss has called for civility. He says he represents all Americans.’”

Such nonsense is almost always followed up by the minions at Fox News, whose job description is apparently to try to flesh out Trump’s lies and come up with reasons that might make them true. After Trump said in Topeka, Kansas, that “in their quest for power, the radical Democrats have turned into an angry mob,” conservative commentator Tomi Lahren appeared on Fox & Friends to explain that “anyone who sits right of center, anyone who’s a Trump supporter, we’re all targets” of public harassment from the left. Sebastian Gorka, an apparent fascist sympathizer who was shown the door at the White House, added on the same segment that Democrats have “normalized violence in America.” Fox’s Tucker Carlson took this claim all the way into KKK territory when he warned his viewers during the Kavanaugh hearings that liberals were bent on “genocide” of white men. Remember, these people are speaking in the service of a president who called the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville “very fine people” and offered to pay the legal costs of supporters who beat up protesters at his rallies.

And again, the day after it allowed Trump to lie on its op-ed page, USA Today happily passed along another Trump whopper. This one ended...
up in the headline—“I’ve lost billions of dollars’ since becoming president, Trump says”—and was lifted from a Fox & Friends transcript, thereby completing the circle of lies that begins with Trump, continues through Fox News, and ends up in the mainstream media, with little or no pushback.

Meanwhile, Trump and company are so devoted to peace and civility that the president’s lawyer and frequent spokesman, Rudy Giuliani, is purposefully trafficking in anti-Semitic tropes—of the kind that have traditionally inspired murderous pogroms—in order to attack George Soros. I know this because the same day I saw the USA Today headline, I also saw this headline in Newsweek: “Rudy Giuliani Spreads Message That ‘Anti-Christ’ George Soros Is Behind Kavanaugh Protests.”

Here, again, Newsweek is helping Giuliani and the rest of the Trump team spread a Hitler-style “big lie” about a Holocaust survivor. True, except for Fox, these outlets can usually point to a place in their stories where they question some of the more outlandish claims by Trump or one of his lackeys. But thanks to social media and aggregating sites, most people encounter only the headlines. Cable-news chyrons likely work the same way, as who can stand to listen to all that prattle with the sound on?

Any representative or supporter of Trump who appears on television is almost certainly lying. After all, a president who can somehow rattle off 125 “false or misleading statements” in about 120 minutes (according to Kessler’s count of one of Trump’s particularly prodigious days in September) can only be defended with more lies.

Can democracy survive this? We shall see. Just don’t expect the men and women of the media to save us. Their job, as they define it, is to be lied to and then to repeat those lies in quotation marks.

SNAPSHOT / JON NAZCA

**Uncertain Fate**

Migrants wait to disembark from the Caliope rescue boat at the port of Málaga in southern Spain on October 12, after their vessel was intercepted in the Mediterranean Sea. Spain now receives twice as many migrants as Greece and six times as many as Italy.

DONALD ❤️ KIM

Trump now says he’s in love with Kim Jong-un. In that seduction, Kim Jong-un was speedy. Some ego-stroking letters did the trick. It’s really simple when a man’s that needy.
NEW GEORGIA RISING?

If Stacey Abrams can overcome voter suppression and apathy, she’ll make history.

JOAN WALSH
As she campaigns across all of Georgia’s 159 counties—from Fulton to Brantley, Gwinnett to Chatham, Glynn to DeKalb—Democrat Stacey Abrams’s pitch comes down to this: I’m one of you. “I’m not running to be governor of Atlanta; I’m running to be governor of Georgia” is one way she often puts it.

If elected, Abrams would become the state’s first black and first female governor, so it’s understandable that her political gamble has a personal edge to it. Can she take the details of her impressive biography—devoted daughter of two ministers who were “genteel poor”; loving sister of five siblings; doting auntie; graduate of Spelman College, the University of Texas, and Yale Law School; small-business owner; tax attorney; the first woman leader in either house of the State Legislature; award-winning romance novelist (yes, you read that right)—and find something in it, at every stop, to reach a different group of voters? And will this be enough to bridge Georgia’s deep fissures of race, gender, and culture?

“Well, she’s gonna have a tough time, being black,” a white suburban retiree tells me flatly as we sit down for lunch at Savannah’s historic Olde Pink House restaurant. His candor about race, which I appreciate, isn’t the only thing that surprises me. David (a pseudonym) is a lifelong conservative and Trump voter who nonetheless plans to vote for Abrams. He thinks her Republican opponent, Georgia Secretary of State Brian Kemp, is “an idiot.” Trump’s administration has turned out “worse than I even imagined,” he confesses. And in an age when we suffer at least 10 school shootings a year, “I’m sick of the NRA,” he tells me, even though he’s a gun owner and former member.

“I’m an angry Republican, and I’m trying to give my party a kick,” he declares. Even though David doesn’t want me to use his real name, he says he’s extremely vocal about his plans to vote for Abrams when talking to fellow Republicans in his affluent white retiree community. “And, honestly, I don’t get a lot of pushback,” he adds.

Years before she decided to run for governor, Abrams had famously banked on an unprecedented surge of black voters, along with other nonwhite voters and progressive whites, to win state elections. In 2013, she began the New Georgia Project, a voter-registration-and-mobilization group focused on Georgians of color. Her overwhelming victory in the Democratic primary this past May—she won 76 percent of the vote, including the majority of the white vote, against a formidable white opponent, turning out 200,000 more Democrats than had voted in the 2014 primary and 43 percent more black voters than had voted in the 2010 primary—was a powerful demonstration of this strategy. Now, in campaign speak, she needs to mobilize “low-propensity” black voters, who sometimes vote for president but rarely turn out for the midterms. Campaign officials are cautiously optimistic: According to GeorgiaVotes.com, 42 percent of the early voting has been done by African-American voters, who make up 30 percent of registered voters, a surge that Georgia hasn’t seen since Barack Obama’s election in 2008.

Unfortunately, Abrams’s opponent is, as secretary of state, also the man in charge of overseeing the mechanics of voting. A recent investigation by the Associated Press found that Kemp has held up 53,000 new voter-registration forms. Seventy percent of the registrants involved are black, but Kemp—who has long tangled with the New Georgia Project—says that this racial disparity is the group’s fault for submitting inaccurate or incomplete paperwork. The New Georgia Project rejects this assertion, and lawyers are trying to force Kemp to process the forms. “As he has done for years, Brian Kemp is maliciously wielding the power of his office to suppress the vote for political gain and silence the voices of thousands of eligible voters—the majority of them people of color,” says Abigail Collazo, spokeswoman for the Abrams campaign. “This isn’t incompetence; it’s malpractice.” Abrams has since renewed her call for Kemp to step down as secretary of state, a demand he has repeatedly rebuffed.

But in a race in which the polls have the two candidates essentially tied, Abrams also needs to pick up some “white persuadables,” by and large suburban independents turned off by Trump and Republican extremism. Drawing the far-right Kemp as her opponent—he finished second in the GOP primary to Lieutenant Governor Casey Cagle, but triumphed in a runoff after Trump endorsed him—has given Abrams an opening, especially with the business community, which had enthusiastically backed Cagle. “The state Chamber [of Commerce] is freaking out,” one campaign official told me midsummer, with some glee.

The bad news is there may not be that many white persuadables left. Only 6 percent of the electorate is undecided, according to the most recent polling, and Trump won 75 percent of the state’s white voters in 2016. The good news is that a white retiree like David, who by no means fits the definition of a “white persuadable,” is against all odds in Abrams’s corner. He’s a bonus vote, and if she gets a lot of bonus votes, Abrams will be the next governor.

“A commanding victory: Abrams won 76 percent of the vote in the Democratic primary in May.”

“I’m an angry Republican, and I’m trying to give my party a kick.”

—David, a conservative white Georgian who is now backing Abrams
Georgia Democrats have a 200,000-vote problem. That’s roughly the margin by which the party’s statewide standard-bearers have lost recent elections, whether they were scions of old-time native pols, like Michelle Nunn or Jason Carter in 2014, or presidential nominees like Hillary Clinton in 2016. Over 530,000 people voted in the Democratic primary in May, just shy of the 608,000 who voted in the six-way GOP primary, so making up that margin is not impossible. “We have over 15 field offices and 150 staffers” in both red and blue counties, says state party chair DuBose Porter, including in places where nobody’s laid eyes on a Democratic staffer in years. “It’s the biggest field operation the party has ever seen.”

The Abrams campaign has also been bolstered by visits from high-profile Democrats, a rarity in a state long written off as solidly red. Former vice president Joe Biden and Senators Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, and Cory Booker have all showed up to campaign for her; one writer dubbed this parade of potential presidential candidates “the Stacey Abrams primary.” For better or worse, this is a nationalized race, much like the gubernatorial contest in Florida, where Andrew Gillum could become the state’s first black governor if he defeats the Trump-worshipping Ron DeSantis. (Gillum currently has a small lead.) Meanwhile, in Maryland, another African-American candidate for governor, Ben Jealous, trails far behind GOP incumbent Larry Hogan. The news is better in the race for a US Senate seat in Mississippi, where the black Democratic candidate, Mike Espy, is given a good chance of making it into a late-November runoff.

Abrams and her campaign strongly dislike the notion that her race is somehow a rematch of Clinton versus Trump. And they positively hate the idea, peddled by The New York Times in July, that the two parties’ extremist wings are squaring off in the Peach State. The Abrams-Kemp battle, the Times wrote, “has come to mirror the disorienting polarization of the Trump era and expose the consequences of a primary system that increasingly rewards those who appeal to the fringes.”

That equivalency, of course, would require Abrams to be as far to the left as Kemp is to the right, which is patently absurd. She supports the expansion of Medicaid, which is backed by 73 percent of Georgians (including a majority of Republicans); he favors a wildly unpopular religious-freedom restoration act that would allow discrimination against LGBTQ citizens. She has worked successfully with Republican Governor Nathan Deal on criminal-justice reform, education, and tax bills; Kemp, who calls himself a “politically incorrect conservative,” has slavishly embraced Trump and promised to “round up criminal illegals” in his pickup truck.

And yet at least part of the media narrative fits. Like the 2016 election, the Georgia contest is being played out against the backdrop of racial transformation and white backlash. In 1990, the state was over 70 percent white, but today only 54 percent of registered voters identify as white, and within less than a generation, the state is projected to be majority-minority. And then there’s the live wire of gender. White women in Georgia backed Trump in 2016, as they did elsewhere in the country, while women of color were the party’s solid-blue wall. Abrams and her campaign aren’t necessarily expecting to change that dynamic in one election cycle, but like Democrats nationwide, they are hoping to ride a wave of women activists and first-time candidates who have been galvanized by Trump’s election.

The confirmation of accused sexual assailant Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court only adds fuel to this fire. During the nomination fight, Lucy McBath, a candidate for Congress in Georgia’s Sixth Congressional District, told me on the trail, “That’s the reason more women have to run. We’re not just numbers and statistics—we’ve lived these experiences.” But the effort to mobilize the state’s women voters long predates the Kavanaugh fight.

“Georgia women have been organizing for a while,” former Savannah mayor Otis Johnson tells me. “During my campaigns, the people who I could always depend on were women. ‘The difference this year is that they’re running.’ And boy, are they running! As I travel with Abrams from rural Nahunta to metro Atlanta and places in between, I meet astonishing women, many of them black, who have moved from being organizers to candidates themselves. “Yes, ma’am, I plan to be the first,” Nahunta mayoral candidate Barbara Mayfield tells me. “First black, first female!” a friend adds, making sure I get it. “After the Women’s March, we were telling women to step up, and I said, ‘OK, I gotta step up!’” says Julie Jordan, a registrar in suburban Brunswick who’s running for the Georgia House of Representatives. In suburban Marietta, north of Atlanta, I followed Essence Johnson, who was an Indivisible activist when she knocked on doors for Jon Ossoff in 2017. He narrowly lost that special congressional election. But now Johnson is knocking doors for her own campaign, also for a State House seat. Abrams is counting on these women to lift her, and they’re counting on her to lift them. If they succeed, the future will finally overtake the past here in Georgia on November 6.

But Abrams is not merely the lucky beneficiary of this unprecedented surge in women’s political participation. In Georgia, she’s one of its original and prime sponsors. “She’s been at the center of it for a long time,” Johnson tells me. When Abrams became Democratic leader of the State Legislature in 2010, Republicans held all statewide offices and were on the verge of attaining a legislative supermajority that would prevent any checks on their plans to curtail women’s rights, labor rights, or voting rights. So Abrams began working around the state to groom a new generation of Democrats, many of them black women. “It was part of my mission to build the capacity of new voices to enter the political arena,” she tells me. “I had a very intentional focus on women and people of color.” This behind-the-scenes recruitment, many
Democratic activists believe, was part of the reason she enjoyed that lopsided primary victory, despite opposition from some white Democrats who didn’t believe that Georgia was ready for a black, female governor. “They had no idea of the reach and the groundwork Stacey had put in,” DuBose Porter says.

Sitting down with Abrams in her bare campaign office, her desk adorned with a Post-it note reminding her to eat, I am struck by her apparent calm in the eye of the storm. She is warm, greeting me with a hug. We met four years ago, when Emily’s List named her a “rising star,” but she’s nonetheless cautious, speaking slowly and in full paragraphs.

Abrams takes nothing for granted, believing the race is essentially tied despite internal polling showing her ahead. When I tell her that I’m surprised to have met white suburban ladies and Republican men who support her, Abrams replies that she isn’t. “Part of my approach to this campaign is to build on the work I’ve done the last decade, and I’m constantly engaging with communities that are not seen as natural supporters of mine…. It’s why I won so many counties in the primary; I won every major demographic,” she reminds me with pride.

What about my white progressive sisters, I ask: Are they finally starting to see the light and get behind the campaigns of black women? Abrams smiles and says, “There are anecdotal moments where women tell me they are surprised they’re supporting me. But I’m not surprised. The scenario for me for victory has always been multiple communities to engage and step up. And they are.”

Indeed, in the epicenter of white-lady wokeness—Georgia’s Sixth Congressional District in suburban Atlanta—the energy is behind African-American gun-sense activist Lucy McBath. The Moms Demand Action organizer is one of the Mothers of the Movement, a coalition of black women who have lost children to police or gun violence, many of whom traveled with Clinton in 2016. McBath is challenging freshman GOP Representative Karen Handel, who beat Jon Ossoff by only four points in 2017, and the same multiracial, women-led coalition that backed Ossoff is supporting her bid.

One veteran of the Ossoff campaign, Tracy Prescott, volunteered to host a canvassing launch for McBath, and she’s stunned by the turnout: 50 people on a hot Saturday afternoon have shown up to walk the precincts for McBath and the full slate of Democrats. “I’m just blown away,” Prescott tells me. She and her husband, Jeff Corkill, are active in their local Democratic Socialists of America chapter—Prescott wears a big red DSA button—as well as the Bernie Sanders–inspired Our Revolution, which endorsed Abrams. In a naked attempt to red-bait his opponent, Kemp has claimed that Abrams was also endorsed by the Metro Atlanta DSA chapter. But Corkill tells me plainly that that’s not true. “We endorse socialists,” he says. “We did encourage our members to participate….

But Stacey didn’t seek our endorsement, and we didn’t endorse her. If she was a socialist,” he adds, “we’d endorse her. But she’s not.” Even so, Prescott and Corkill describe themselves as hard-core Abrams supporters.

Later, when I ask Abrams about Kemp’s red-baiting, she takes it in stride, while welcoming voters to her left. “They support me; so do labor unions. So do some moderate Republicans. People of all stripes stand with me. The common trope to beating a candidate with my background is to try to vilify her. If you look at my record, I’m absolutely a progressive, but I’m a pragmatist who is able to get things done.”

This corner of the Sixth District, in DeKalb County, is diverse and heavily Democratic. In the opposite corner, Essence Johnson, the black Indivisible activist now campaigning for a seat in the Georgia House, is walking the rolling hills and steep driveways of Eastern Cobb County. It’s a much less diverse area (75 percent white and only 10 percent black), so Johnson likes to team up and knock on doors with white State Senate candidate Christine Triebsch, most of whose district she shares.

At every door, the two women leave their own literature, as well as a Democratic-candidate card with Abrams at the top of the ticket. (“Vote down ballot!” it reads.) And while they’re hoping to run and win on Abrams’s coattails, their hard work in this wealthy suburban district also helps Abrams, raising the possibility of a “reverse-coattails” effect in which an unprecedented number of female candidates, at all levels of the ballot, lifts Abrams to victory. “We’re all out here trying to help each other,” Triebsch says. “That’s how women do it.”

It’s not surprising to find such passion for Abrams among the activists in suburban Atlanta—but to win the state, she’s got to get votes beyond the metro area. In mid-September, I watched her address the Georgia Economic Developers Association convention in Savannah and saw how she put another aspect of her variegated biography to work. For a statewide, business-oriented gathering, it was a fairly diverse group. Whether they’re county staffers or local businessmen, these folks tend to be the do-gooders in their communities—but they are not necessarily liberals.

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"I do not remember meeting the governor. I just remember a
man telling me I don’t belong."

—Stacey Abrams

Dirty tricks: Brian Kemp (right), seen here with Vice
President Mike Pence, has refused to process thousands of
new voter-registration forms.

ter of ministers or a pioneering state legislator, but also
as a small-business owner—one business failed, another is
thriving—and a tax attorney. She immediately dives deep
into the weeds of so-called tax-allocation districts, which
funnel local tax revenue into economic development, and
describes one widely hailed project that she worked on in
the Atlanta mayor’s office back when she was deputy city
attorney. And in case they worry that she’ll look out only
for Atlanta, Abrams talks about her time in the State Leg-
siture working with rural colleagues on similar issues,
asking: “Why can’t Valdosta get the same tax flexibility
Atlanta does?” Representatives of rural counties in the
crowd nod in agreement.

Abrams also wows the group with her trademark com-
mand of Georgia facts. For example, the state has 64 coun-

tries without a pediatrician, and almost half of its counties
have no licensed psychiatrist. There are 5,000 4-year-olds
on a waiting list for pre-kindergarten, and 140,000 people
living with Alzheimer’s. Georgia is second only to Florida
in the number of retirees, and second to California in film
production. Abrams also tells virtually every crowd that a
main provider of mental-health services in Georgia is the
prison system. She knows this because that’s where her
brother Walter, whom she describes as “brilliant” and a
heroin addict, had his bipolar condition diagnosed.

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ised to sign it. One member of the association says that an
overwhelming majority of the group opposes such an
act, so Abrams is not taking a particularly brave stand
here, but she makes the most of the moment. “I’m the
daughter of two ministers. Protecting my faith by dis-
criminating against others is against my faith,” she tells
the crowd. She mentions a recent trip to California—
state Republicans had chastised her for this visit to Blue
America—and says, “Yes, I met with studio heads. They
will pull their films [over this]. The mere conversation is
toxic.” Later, Kemp would play down his support for the
act, promising to sign a state bill that simply mirrors the
language of the federal version.

After Abrams’s address, one economic-development
professional (speaking off the record because his agency
works closely with the state) says that he was impressed.
“Abrams was clear and had a plan,” he tells me. “She
wasn’t afraid to mention her failures in business as well as
her successes. The consensus from my group of peers is
that Abrams outperformed Kemp.”

From Savannah, I follow Abrams and her campaign
nachunta, in rural, red Brantley County, where members
of the Little Rock Baptist Church and others in the com-
nunity are waiting for her. It will prove to be a mile-
stone of sorts: As of this afternoon, Abrams will have of-
ically visited all 159 of Georgia’s counties. We take the
Clarence Thomas Interchange out of Savannah (the Supreme
Court justice was born in nearby Pin Point) and pass a
Confederate-soldiers park and a towering Confederate
flag near Waynesville. As we approach Nahunta, a smaller
Confederate flag waves at us, right next to a Kemp for
Governor sign. A little white church awaited, with about
30 people, mostly older black women, inside. Abrams has
traveled from a crowd of nearly 700 to a smaller gathering
of 30 because she knows that rural black women, so of-
ten ignored, were a cornerstone of Senator Doug Jones’s
victory in Alabama last year. Mayoral candidate Barbara
Mayfield introduces her as “a child of God,” and Abrams
tells the group that her parents sometimes pastored mul-
tiple small congregations at a time. “So I’m very familiar
with churches like this,” she adds. “You need a governor
who sees everybody!”

As Abrams drives away to her next event, the church
ladies mill about in the yard outside, looking at the pho-
tos on their phones and savoring the moment. One older
woman grumbles about Abrams arriving a few minutes
late; a younger church member—an avid Abrams volun-
teer—quickly comes over to tell me that her neighbor
doesn’t understand how campaigns work, because “we
don’t get too many candidates coming to see us.”

In Brunswick, about 45 minutes away, Glynn County
Democratic Party chair Audrey Gibbons knows exactly
how that feels. Democratic candidates rarely visited her
district in the past, but with four days’ notice, Gibbons got
about 250 folks to come out in the 90-degree heat on a
Friday afternoon to hear Abrams and a slate of local can-
didates. Gibbons is ecstatic: “We hit a home run today!”

Women are powering the Democratic revival in Glynn
County, Gibbons continues. The local Women’s Voices
group “started out with six ladies, and now we have 400,”
all of them working on issues of education, criminal jus-
tice, climate change—and yes, a lot of local campaigns. Many women in the crowd wear the group’s lavender T-shirts, along with campaign buttons for one (or all) of the local Democratic candidates. “When I took over in 2012, we had no more than two Democrats on the local ballot for five years,” Gibbons tells me. This year, eight of nine Glynn County ballots have a Democratic challenger, and five of the eight are women.

When Abrams comes to the stage, the crowd chants her name, waving blue cardboard fans adorned a picture of her smiling face. Here, she draws on another tale from her biography: the story of when she became her high school’s valedictorian. Invited to a reception at the governor’s mansion in Atlanta, Abrams and her parents arrived on a city bus, she recalls softly, only to have a guard at the gate tell them it was “a private event.” After much haggling, the guard found Abrams’s name on his list and let them in. “I do not remember meeting the governor or my fellow valedictorians,” she recalls. “I just remember a man telling me I don’t belong. On November 6, I’m gonna open those gates wide so everyone knows they belong.”

In his run against this potentially historic candidate, Brian Kemp isn’t trying to wow Georgians with either his résumé or his big ideas. Instead, he’s trying hard to counter Abrams’s pitch that “I’m one of you.” The tagline for his campaign commercials is dire: “Stacey Abrams: Too Extreme for Georgia.”

Kemp is also playing dirty, running a scurrilous ad claiming that Abrams supported legislation to let convicted sex offenders live near schools and even “take pictures of our children.” Local fact-checkers have called it bunk: Abrams voted no on a 2008 bill to create a new set of punitive restrictions on where convicted sex offenders could live and work, even though state law already prohibited them from being within 1,000 feet of schools and other places where children gather. But I saw the ad a dozen times in my two days in Atlanta.

Other campaign materials hit Abrams hard for owing $50,000 in back taxes and $170,000 in student-loan and credit-card debt. But Abrams has turned the issue around, explaining that she ran into tough financial times taking care of her parents, while making common cause with the many Georgians who also carry such a burden. “Paying the bills for two households has taken its toll,” she wrote in an op-ed for Fortune. “Nearly twenty years after graduating, I am still paying down student loans, and am on a payment plan to settle my debt to the IRS. I have made money mistakes, but I have never ignored my responsibilities…. I suspect my situation will sound familiar to others who are the first in their families to earn real money.”

The Kemp campaign has also skirted the edges of race-baiting. A Republican Governors Association ad about Abrams’s tax issues featured a giant-size Abrams clutching the State Capitol dome, reminding some of King Kong wrapped around the Empire State Building. When white supremacists who identified as Kemp supporters disrupted an Abrams event for female military veterans in Augusta, the Republican refused to explicitly denounce them. Under pressure, Kemp released a bland statement decrying “hatred, violence, and bigotry” but made no mention of the incident.

In the end, Abrams and her campaign know that her real opponent isn’t Kemp—it’s the isolation and alienation of many Georgia voters, especially the low-income voters of color she’s bet the race on. While she’s doing an extraordinary job, it’s still an uphill climb. At a campaign office that Abrams visits in Savannah, the mostly black women who turn out to volunteer there are on fire, many putting in seven days a week. One of them, Tammy Lawrence, has just
returned from registering voters at her grandson's high-school football game. “We’re gonna make her the next governor,” Lawrence says proudly.

But a couple of women admit to me that their day working the phones has drained them. “I made calls today and talked to so many people who tell me they don’t vote at all, they’ve never voted—they don’t think it matters,” says Olivia Ray, a retired social worker. “Even with a black woman running, it’s not really making a difference to them.” Another female volunteer jumps in. “If they’re not woke now, what will wake them?”

Abrams believes she can do this, despite the obstacles of race, class, gender, and a pervasive voter alienation that’s part fatalism, part deliberate disenfranchisement. In addition to the 53,000 voters whose registration forms he’s so far failed to process, Kemp is also being sued for purging almost 700,000 voters, many of them minorities, from the rolls in the past two years without notifying them. Activists are trying to make the list of purged voters public so people can see if they’re on it. The Abrams campaign is also spearheading an effort to help people make sure that they’re registered and to get them to vote early or use absentee ballots, which provide more security than the state’s traditional paper-free voting system. There’s no doubt that Democrats are concerned about ensuring that every vote is counted.

Then there’s the ineffable fact that Kemp is a white man running in a state that has always been governed by white men. At the Savannah economic-development conference, one attendee told me, “It seemed a little like he was laying on the Southern accent to prove his conservative street cred. I’ve met him a few times, and this thick accent seems new to me, almost like he is trying to ‘out-Bubba’ anyone.”

There’s always the chance that some of the white men and women who disdain Kemp now will go home to the Republican Party in November, as they did overwhelmingly for Trump in 2016.

Abrams knows what she’s up against, but she trusts her campaign and its plan for victory. Watching her in large crowds, in small groups, and with her staff, I can see how this quiet confidence might strike some as aloofness. “I’m naturally an introvert,” Abrams confesses. Her whole approach in this campaign—excavating her biography to make the case that “I’m one of you”—doesn’t come at all naturally, she says. “But being governor is one of the most personal jobs you can have. Because, done right, the governor of a state helps guide the future of your family: your access to education, to a job, to health care, to housing—all of these things. People should trust who that person is.”

Abrams also had to come to grips with the fact that her leadership style is very different from that of many other politicians—most of them white men, it goes without saying. “I had to learn that my introversion had to accommodate my job. We often learn how to expand who we are in order to get good done.”

But this introvert comes alive in a crowd of her people. At the Gwinnett Democratic Party dinner in suburban Duluth, I am able to meet some of the women (and men) who have been partners in Abrams’s project of turning red Georgia blue. In 1990, Gwinnett County was almost 90 percent white. By 2010, it had become majority-minority, and today it’s only 39 percent white. In 2010, a little over 17,000 Democrats voted in the primary—just a quarter of the total vote. This year, more than 40,500 voted—53 percent of the county total—for the largest Democratic increase in the entire state.

Among the people in attendance at the party dinner is Donna McLeod, who ran for a State House seat in 2016, lost by 200 votes, and decided to run again in 2018. She was just endorsed by Barack Obama. “Stacey’s gonna do this, I promise you,” she tells me. Local congressional candidate Carolyn Bourdeaux, an academic, comes over to talk about the tax bills she worked on with Abrams in the State Legislature. “She is just the smartest,” Bourdeaux kvells. I also meet “two white Stacey stalkers,” as Susan Clymer, chair of the Gwinnett County Democratic Party, describes herself and her close friend Sharon Wood, an Abrams volunteer. State party chair DuBose Porter is there as well. The former Georgia House leader tells me that he retired after Republicans took over his state—“I didn’t switch parties when so many others did, because I actually believed in my values”—but returned to politics when Abrams recruited him to be party chair, “to help get this place back to how it should be.”

When Abrams walks into the dinner, she’s quickly mobbed. She normally wears tailored dresses in solid colors, but here she’s wearing a flowing, black-and-white dress with wavy lines and bell sleeves. Her demeanor is drawn. “Don’t get me wrong—it’s gonna be a very tight race,” she says unapologetically. “She is such an authentic person. She’s raised up a crop of women, and she’s bringing us all along with her.”

“Don’t get me wrong—it’s gonna be a very tight race,” DuBose Porter tells me later. “But Stacey has the field operation and the broad appeal to do this.”
Morocco

APRIL 24–MAY 5, 2019 | Contemporary & Imperial Morocco

To travel in Morocco is to move from one era of history to another, experiencing a culture that fuses indigenous Berber traditions with Arab, Jewish, Andalusian, and other European influences.

THE HIGHLIGHTS

• **Attend** a briefing with Spanish journalist David Alvarado, who has covered North Africa for more than a decade as a correspondent for Spanish-language CNN, about the role of democracy in Morocco.

• **Meet** with Asma Lamrabet, a feminist leader who is part of a school of thought often referred to as “Islamic feminism.”

• **Hear** from Abdelmalek El Kadoussi, a communication professor who will discuss the complex role of the media in Morocco, including the practice of self-censorship.

• **Stop in** at the offices of Centre des Droits des Gens (CDG, or “Close to the People”) and learn about its work as one of the biggest human-rights organizations in Morocco.

• **Depart** in a 4×4 for an overnight at a camp in the highest dunes of Morocco—the towering Erg Chebbi—and experience the magic of a night in the Sahara desert.

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In January 2016, after nearly a decade of living in liberal cities on both coasts, Becca Rast returned home. Intuition told the 28-year-old organizer that it was time to kick-start a political renaissance in the small Pennsylvania city where she grew up.

“I felt increasingly annoyed at the sentiment that the place that I was from would always be conservative,” Rast says of Lancaster, her hometown. “I wanted to help redefine what politics looked like there.”

So along with her husband, Jonathan Smucker, the progressive organizer and author, Rast packed her bags, traveled for days, and finally rejoined her family and friends in so-called fly-over country.

Lancaster is the name of both the county in which Rast and Smucker grew up and the city at its heart. The former is a collection of suburbs and agricultural settlements—most of them conservative and majority-white. The latter is a municipality of 60,000 people, a diverse Democratic hub whose population is nearly 40 percent Latino and 17 percent black. In the minds of pundits and pollsters, these two worlds are skew lines veering off in radically incompatible directions. But Rast and Smucker see kinship and commonality in these divergent spaces. Both have been
ill-served by the status quo. And while the city, with its blue majority, makes for the more logical organizing ground, it is just a starting point for Rast and Smucker, a gateway to the rural America that liberals and leftists have largely abandoned.

“I am from a working-class, rural, conservative background, and people like me who get out of these communities tend to not go back,” says Smucker, a 40-year-old Mennonite who grew up outside Lancaster and is a veteran of Occupy Wall Street and other social movements. “But if you don’t show up to organize, somebody else will.”

In 2016, that somebody else was named Donald Trump. As Rast and Smucker were settling into their new life, Trump’s right-wing movement swept through the Pennsylvania heartland. He won Lancaster County in both the primary and general election, helping him clinch the Republican nomination and, later, the presidency.

For Rast and Smucker, the swift rise of Trump’s reactionary politics in their corner of the world was a frightening but urgent opportunity. They sensed that they were living in a “populist moment,” one in which a critical number of Americans no longer trusted key institutions, including the federal government, the financial system, and the mainstream media. Not unlike Trump, they understood that the political establishment was suffering a crisis of legitimacy, fueled by the lingering political effects of the 2008 recession, the Iraq War, the opioid epidemic, and other elite-engineered catastrophes. But unlike Trump, they wanted to use that crisis to organize their community in the pursuit of egalitarian and progressive ends.

In the days following the election, Rast and Smucker set to work. With a cohort of childhood friends and neighbors, the pair called an emergency mass meeting in Lancaster to prevent fear and hatred from taking root in the community. More than 300 people showed up, eager to shatter their shared sense of political impotence. Eliza Booth, a longtime Lancastrian and passionate Bernie Sanders supporter, was among them. Heartbroken by Sanders’s loss—and worried for the well-being of her young son, who was frightened by Trump’s victory—she was itching to do something to push back against the president-elect. “I saw a flyer about that first meeting and was so thankful that there were other people in Lancaster who felt the same way I did,” Booth says. She helped the nascent group plan another meeting, and then many more after that, and quickly became one of its leaders.

Soon enough, Rast, Smucker, Booth, and other friends formalized their efforts by founding an independent political organization called Lancaster Stands Up, whose mission is to spread the gospel of civic engagement and take back politics from entrenched politicians. Led by a 12-person multiracial team of volunteers, LSU started holding monthly mass gatherings in early 2017. It organized rallies against the latest Trump outrages, including a 2,000-person demonstration against the president’s Muslim ban, the largest protest in Lancaster in decades. It trained its membership in the democratic arts of door-knocking, bird-dogging, and story-based persuasion. It spread a message of anti-elite populism, heavy on immigrants’ rights, racial justice, anti-monopolism, and universal health care. And its numbers multiplied.

Since then, Lancaster Stands Up has spawned a slew of spin-off groups and related political projects—some of its co-founders have left the LSU leadership team to run an insurgent congressional campaign that hopes
to topple local Republican Representative Lloyd Smucker and replace him with a Sanders-style Democrat named Jess King. LSU members have also backed a slate of progressive statehouse and school-board candidates and helped infuse a new anti-establishment energy into their local Democratic Party. Along the way, they have catalyzed the beginnings of a progressive resurgence in a region long dominated by conservatives.

Their work comes at a time when scores of grassroots movements—from the Democratic Socialists of America and the American Civil Liberties Union’s People Power to smaller, sui generis efforts—are attempting to figure out the alchemy that can turn millions of disaffected, depoliticized Americans into organizing gold. What sets Lancaster Stands Up apart, in some respects, is its leaders’ deep-rootedness in their local community as well as its rigorous populist political analysis, which dispenses with the insularity and jargon of many left-leaning organizations in order to overcome the mythical divisions—urban and rural, right and left—that define our political landscape. Its organizers want to build real power, and they aren’t afraid to say it—but they know they can’t achieve that goal by preaching to the choir.

“Our orientation is toward the people who are in the room for the first time,” Jonathan Smucker says. “Once you have the experience of bringing everyday working people into the political process and seeing them realize their own agency, it becomes the only thing that matters.”

Now the challenge is whether this homespun group—born out of the dreams and frustrations of a committed core of organizers, and stitched together with little beyond the bonds of local community—can become an enduring political force.

In the spring of 2017, when The Nation first reported on the rise of Lancaster Stands Up, the group had just launched its inaugural canvass, that mainstay campaign practice of going door-to-door to talk with people. It was a warm Sunday in April, a morning of rest for many in this region known above all for its Amish farms and Anabaptist churches. LSU volunteers, however, weren’t taking the day off. They were out on the streets and knocking on doors to better understand the concerns of their community and hone their recruitment tactics. It was an initial experiment in listening to one’s neighbors in order to incite political change.

Michelle Hines, an early LSU member and now a staffer at the organization, was there that morning. As she went door-to-door in downtown Lancaster, she didn’t ask residents whether they were liberal or conservative, left or right. Instead, she asked simply: “What do you think of the political establishment?”

Almost invariably, the people that Hines approached were disdainful of the governing elite. “It sucks!” said a woman named Judy, who had voted Republican in the past but sat out the 2016 election. “The rich keep getting richer, and the poor keep getting poorer.”

This exchange offers a concise glimpse into LSU’s approach to political change. The group doesn’t focus solely on liberal voters—although they form the bulk of its base—and it doesn’t frame debates along a left/right spectrum, because it doesn’t see “centrism” as some middle ground where reasonable people meet.

Instead, LSU views politics through a populist lens. Its organizers say they see the current political crisis as a grand realignment in which ordinary Americans are wrestling for control of their democracy with a 0.1 percent, whose names—Koch, DeVos, Bezos, Blankfein, Trump—you almost certainly know. It believes that both national parties, Republicans and Democrats alike, have betrayed working people in order to better serve Wall Street. It wants to draw Lancasterans into this political struggle by meeting them where they are.

Much of this vision can be found in Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals, Jonathan Smucker’s 2017 primer on how the American left can break free from its clubby insularity and appeal to a broad popular base. “Our struggle ahead,” he writes, “is a contest over popular morality and it is also a contest of political power. For the first part, we have to tell a compelling story; to articulate a broad and inclusive narrative with which many different kinds of people feel a sense of belonging. For the second part we need leadership and organization, and the intentional cultivation of both.”

Smucker insists that his book is not a “field guide” for LSU, but I couldn’t help hearing echoes of these ideas when I returned to Lancaster for a follow-up visit this September. During a weekend packed with door-knocking drives, Smucker and his organizing colleague Mariol Ocampo gathered roughly 20 new LSU recruits into a colorful Lancaster art space for a two-hour training session they called “Canvassing in the Populist Moment.”

“What is populism?” Smucker asked the group, which included elderly white women, young millennial men, and a small troupe of organizers who had traveled from Philadelphia.

“Fascism,” said one attendee.

“ Opportunists,” said another.

“It’s about the people,” said yet another. That last answer earned Smucker’s praise. “In its most basic form, [populism] is the people versus elites, the corrupt es-
establishment,” he said. “Bernie did a version of this, Trump did a version of this, Occupy Wall Street did a version of this, and the Tea Party did a version of this.”

Smucker argued to his audience that Trump’s type of populism is “reactionary”: It harvests anti-establishment discontent by pretending to punch up at a corrupt elite—the fake news media, “Hollywood liberals”—while actually punching down at people of color, immigrants, Muslims, queer communities, and other scapegoats. Meanwhile, he continued, Trump fails to take on the true power in American society: the ultra-wealthy, with their yachts, lobbyists, and many millions in dark-money donations.

LSU, on the other hand, seeks to create an “inclusionary populism,” Smucker explained, one that “punches up at the economic power at the very top and names the culprits,” including both the Democratic and Republican parties, while also calling out divide-and-conquer strategies that use racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and misogyny as tools to weaken solidarity among ordinary people. For LSU, Smucker concluded, “we the people’ includes all of us, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or country of origin.”

An hour later, after the recruits had practiced a script promoting Medicare for All, Smucker and his colleagues sent them back into the community as newly minted populist campaigners, armed with a compelling story that pits an expansive “we” against a corrupt and tiny elite.

And yet a good story only gets you so far. Winning real political power, Smucker writes in his book, requires building new organizations and recruiting new leaders to fill the void created by “a decades-long decline in bottom-up civic, labor and progressive political infrastructure.”

“This,” he argues, “is our challenge in the years ahead: to activate the unusual suspects. To do so, we have to develop leaders. They will emerge through concrete political struggles and campaigns that show everyday people that an organized collective force can win consequential battles.”

On the afternoon I arrived in Lancaster, LSU staff and members were busy trying to put this philosophy into practice. The group’s downtown office buzzed with energy as its young leaders prepared for a weekend packed with organizing activity.

Julia Berkman-Hill, LSU’s 23-year-old field director, was there that day, sitting at an overstuffed desk arranging canvassing scripts. On that weekend alone, she coordinated a voter-registration drive and nine canvassing shifts that hit more than 1,200 doors. “I have learned more in a year working here than I ever did in school,” she said. “Don’t tell my parents.”

Zak Gregg, a former cabinetmaker from nearby New Holland, was also in the office. A new LSU recruit from a conservative family, Gregg stood in the middle of the room getting coached by his colleagues on how to bird-dog, the tactic whereby people confront their political opponents publicly to ask tough questions or disrupt business as usual. As his coworkers played the role of potentially hostile onlookers, Gregg practiced infiltrating a GOP gathering and pressing Congressman Smucker about his right-wing stance on tax reform and poverty. The next day, along with two other LSU members, Gregg would put his new skills into action: He approached Smucker at a Republican barbecue and interrogated him about his economic policies.

“I told him that the people in my town are struggling, and their wages have stagnated, and the tax bill that you passed has given massive tax breaks to your donors—the Koch brothers—and they are trying to cut Social Security and Medicare,” Gregg says of their encounter. “And that’s when he cut me off and said, ‘Ninety percent of people got a tax break from this bill.’ And I said, ‘Well, nobody in New Holland is seeing it.’”

For LSU staffer Hines, meanwhile, one of her proudest moments over the last year of nonstop organizing was the rapid-response campaign that she helped lead last summer, which successfully blocked a bid by the private-prison company GEO Group to take over a reentry-services program for former prison inmates in Lancaster County. “We were able to get the entire community of Lancaster Stands Up, faith communities, and so many other people to pay attention,” she says. “The [county commission] ended up rejecting GEO’s bid. It worked.”

Hines, Gregg, and Berkman-Hill, along with others like them, have been the driving force behind LSU’s rapid growth. Since its founding in 2016, the group’s membership has ballooned to at least 800 people. It has nine full-time staffers, including Hines and founding member Booth, and 11 paid canvassers. It runs multiple door-knocking drives on a weekly basis to register voters
and persuade people to support progressive candidates in this election cycle. Some of its members and allies, including Booth and Rast, have recently been elected to the Lancaster City Democratic Committee. And it has extended its reach far beyond city limits: LSU now has spin-off groups in eight small towns and suburbs around the region, including the Trump-voting communities of Ephrata, New Holland, and Lititz.

And then there’s the big-ticket item, Jess King’s congressional campaign, which LSU is backing through its canvassing and voter-registration drives. A longtime Lancastrian and early LSU member, King is challenging Lloyd Smucker for his seat in the US House of Representatives, running on an explicitly progressive and populist platform against a man who is a favorite of the National Rifle Association and has received support from Koch Industries. (Lloyd Smucker, as it happens, is also a distant cousin of Jonathan Smucker.)

On a rainy September Sunday in the suburb of Lititz, I met King in the home of one of her campaign volunteers. Over coffee and homemade cookies, she told me about the origins of her run for office. Like Smucker, Rast, and Booth, she got involved in Lancaster Stands Up during the uncertain days after Trump clinched the presidency.

“After the election, I was really in this process of figuring out how to get louder in my leadership,” says King, who has had a long career as an executive in nonprofit economic development. “I was looking for ways to challenge the kind of policies getting passed by both Republican and Democratic politicians—these trickle-down economic policies that are about giving passes to the very wealthy at the expense of workers and working families.” She was tired, she says, of putting “Band-Aids on a broken system”—a phrase she often deploys in her stump speeches.

So King sat down with Rast as well as Nick Martin, another co-founder of LSU. She knew Rast and Martin from their high-school days, when the two were organizing local students against the Iraq War and attending a Mennonite church where King’s husband was a pastor. The three decided to team up and take the fight to Lloyd Smucker. It was a gutsy move; none of them had ever been involved in a congressional campaign before.

“It was like, ‘If not us, who? And if not now, when?’” King recalls. “I had these conversations with Nick and Becca, and it just became clear that, if I decided to jump in and do this, then they would have my back—and if they decided to get my back, I would jump in and do this.”

So in June 2017, the Jess King for Congress campaign was born. To comply with the law, the campaign severed its ties with LSU. Martin and Rast left their leadership roles, and staffers with both organizations say they are strict about not coordinating or communicating with members of the other group.

Still, the two groups clearly share a populist philosophy, as well as a commitment to canvassing, leadership development, and other grassroots strategies. And so, much like LSU, King’s congressional bid has the feel of a bona fide movement. It belongs alongside Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s surprising insurgency in New York City, or Beto O’Rourke’s sweaty sprint across Texas.

I felt this movement vibe as I marched through the rainy streets of a suburb called Mount Joy with King and a team of 15 volunteers. King was stomping past puddles in shin-high leather boots, knocking on the doors of registered Republicans in an effort to persuade them to vote for her. She talked about universal health care, her refusal to take corporate PAC money, and her desire to ensure debt-free higher education, and she criticized her opponent for failing to hold town-hall meetings with his constituents. But more than anything else, she was out in the rain, talking patiently with people, asking them about the issues that mattered most in their lives. She was showing up.

At one small suburban house, a 41-year-old Republican named Andrew answered the door. King asked him his thoughts on politics. He said he was “sick of career politicians.” She responded that she was born and raised in Lancaster, that this was her first run for office, that she wasn’t taking corporate money, that she would never become a lobbyist, and that she wasn’t a millionaire, unlike so many in Congress. Andrew was receptive; he took her campaign literature, told her he’d share it with his wife, and wished her luck.

At another door, a 51-year-old Republican woman dressed in a bathrobe emerged from her home. She seemed reluctant to talk at first, but King mentioned a friend she knew at the local hospital, where the woman worked, and they soon hit it off. They spoke about the need for more female representation in Congress; by the end of their chat, the woman clapped her hands and thanked King for having the courage to run for Congress.

In both cases, King and her team walked away from the encounters feeling pretty confident that they’d earned the support of former GOP voters.

This approach—asking questions, listening to people who might disagree with you—seems obvious, but with notable exceptions, it is not the norm in an era when congressional campaigns rely on fancy fund-raisers, consultants, and support from die-hard partisans. “The heart of our campaign,” says Rast, who is now King’s campaign manager, “is the people: What do they care about, why are they not interested in participating in politics, what would make them interested in participating?”

The dynamic is much the same with the campaign’s field program, a sprawling enterprise that Nick Martin oversees. A slender 29-year-old with a penchant for camouflage caps, Martin skipped college and instead spent his 20s honing his skills as an organizer in campaigns against fracking and mountaintop-removal mining in Appalachia, where I first met him. He was also a local field campaigner for Bernie Sanders’s 2016 primary run.

When we meet at campaign headquarters, Martin tells me, with barely repressed exuberance, about the scope of the campaign’s fieldwork. From the beginning, he says, he had an ambitious vision, because “the only way we can win is if we knock on a ton of doors and make a ton of phone calls.”

And so King’s team recruited a massive network of more than 1,000 volunteers,
with 20 or more teams running regular canvases across the district. It also trained 60 interns in the methods of field organizing, fund-raising, and voter persuasion. Altogether, these folks have made more than 400,000 phone calls, knocked on tens of thousands of doors, distributed as many as 6,000 yard signs, and organized more than 50 town-hall meetings with the candidate.

“I have seen campaigns that have a lot of hype online, but when you dig into their ground game, it isn’t there,” Martin says. “One thing we were always careful to do was spend a lot of time training and supporting, doing leadership development and building political analysis among all the staff and all the volunteers. If you don’t spend the time, especially in a district like this…then you can’t win.”

The question, though, is whether the volunteer enthusiasm, populist messaging, and robust field campaign will be enough. The district where King is running was scored R+14, or 14 points more Republican than the national average, by The Cook Political Report. Indeed, as of the latest poll, published in September, Smucker leads King by nine points, with 21 percent of respondents undecided.

“I think [the King campaign] is very good at organizing, and if a Democrat is going to be competitive in this district, she is the one,” says Stephen Medvic, a professor of government at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster. “Still, if I had to bet, I would say that they will lose, because it is such an uphill climb.”

Lloyd Smucker isn’t taking his advantages for granted, however. In recent weeks, perhaps sensing the energy behind King, he unveiled a new campaign ad attacking her as “royally out of touch.” And in a statement to The Nation, a Smucker spokesperson amplified that critique, writing: “Jess King moves around the district listening to her supporters and being propped up by special interests while Congressman Smucker delivers results to those he serves.”

The state GOP, meanwhile, has recently filed a pair of campaign-finance complaints against both LSU and the King campaign, using the close personal ties between the two camps as fodder. The first complaint alleges that LSU failed to report its independent expenditures on behalf of King. Shortly thereafter, LSU amended two of its Federal Election Commission filings to more fully detail its spending. The second complaint alleges that LSU and the King campaign have engaged in “intentional coordination” with one another, a claim that a King spokesperson called a “baseless and cynical attempt to muddy the waters.”

Ultimately, the civic revival taking place in south-central Pennsylvania is about much more than a single campaign. Even if King loses in November, the inclusionary populists of Lancaster County have seeded the ground with a new generation of smart local organizers who understand that democracy is a practice that must be pursued constantly and as part of a community.

“It will take time to rebuild the emaciated progressive infrastructure we have inherited,” Jonathan Smucker writes in his book’s conclusion. “It will take time to build our political analysis, leadership and on-the-ground skills. But so many of us...are ready to resume the project of building a society that is based on social justice; a society that is for all of us.”

You can count Ahmed Ahmed among the architects of that new progressive infrastructure. A 24-year-old who came to Lancaster with his family in the 1990s after political violence forced them to flee their home in Chad, Ahmed says he has always been interested in politics. Indeed, he went to Howard University to study it. But Ahmed was forced to drop out of school for financial reasons a few years ago, and he came back to Lancaster in a depressed, apolitical state. “I got so disengaged from politics because I thought I had failed,” he says. “I didn’t even vote in the last election.”

Then, last summer, he was walking through a street fair in the city when a volunteer with LSU randomly approached him, asked him his thoughts on the political process, and invited him to go to the group’s next meeting.

“It was the first time a stranger had ever asked me how I felt about politics,” Ahmed recalls. “It was this great opportunity for someone who wanted to be an organizer but thought the door was closed on them.”

And so Ahmed started organizing with LSU, registering students to vote and knocking on doors when he wasn’t working his day job at Lancaster’s Marriott Hotel. A few weeks ago, he took a part-time gig as a canvasser with LSU, and on the afternoon we spoke, he was preparing to head out into the rain for an eight-hour shift. He does it, he says, because he wants to build lasting independent political power in the place where he was raised. He does it because his neighbors deserve better than the parties and politicians currently in power.

“This is my way of repaying the place that took me and my family in as political refugees,” he says. “I owe this city a lot, and now I can give back.”
Holding Banks to Account

Re “Is the World Bank Group Above the Law?” [Oct. 22]: Barry Yeoman provides a great overview of the history of the International Finance Corporation and what’s at stake for small communities around the globe. If big money is allowed to run roughshod over people and the environment without ever taking responsibility for the results of their actions, we will all pay a high price as we watch our environment and food supplies slowly collapse all over the world. Our leaders must act to bridge the world finance system, which seems to operate without legal, moral, or ethical constraints. What is happening to this Indian community will one day happen here if our courts do not rule for the welfare of all.

DENNIS HOHMAN

A Radical Cure

I agree wholeheartedly with Bryce Covert’s conclusion in “All Work and No Play” [Oct. 22] that Americans work way too much. But I disagree with Covert’s resistance to allowing employers to drop health insurance from their compensation packages. Employers should be encouraged to drop health insurance for all workers, full- and part-time. This would force everyone into the open market and under the auspices of the Affordable Care Act. At that point, one of two things would happen: Either the ACA would be amended and become more efficient, or—my preference—the Medicare for All movement would gain unstoppable momentum.

JOHN CREA
ST. PAUL

The 40-hour workweek is an artifact and relic of the Industrial Revolution, key to the social, economic, and civic needs of that time. Unfortunately, we don’t live in the Industrial Age anymore; we inhabit the Digital Age. The social, economic, and civic requirements of our citizens are vastly different from those of our great-grandparents. The state demands much more of us and our time, as do employers, leaving us short-changed on the amount of time available to raise children, understand and address the needs of our communities and nation, get enough sleep, and just enjoy life.

What is required is an acknowledgment that the full-time workweek needs to shrink. We need a new labor law setting the full-time workweek at 30 hours, with overtime after that, and requiring employers to pay a living wage based on this new framework.

MICHAEL PIOTROWSKI

Time for Amazonian Outrage

It is evident that deforestation is an issue that is already having an effect on Brazil—and the globe (“A Climate Tipping Point in the Amazon,” Sept. 24/ Oct. 1). Radical change can be complicated, but when it’s something worth fighting for, it overrides the possibility of financial and procedural difficulty. I challenge The Nation’s readers to take a stand against big corporations like Cargill and say “Enough is enough,” to show that we care about the land as much as the people of Brazil do. It’s time to make a difference.

MICHELE G. BORSARI
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The left, as a rule, has been sharply critical of US foreign policy. Ask anyone who supports free universal health care and abolishing ICE about America’s role in the world, and they’ll probably recite a long list of coups (Iran, Chile), wars (Vietnam, Iraq), and trade policies (NAFTA, TPP) that amount to a global imperial project with an appalling body count. Every US president since at least the Second World War has been complicit in this project, and the next one will be, too.

And yet, if that president is a Democrat, she or he will have pledged to enact a substantial part of the left’s policy demands. This will require the left to formulate not only a domestic agenda, around which there is an emerging progressive consensus, but a foreign policy as well. The next Democratic administration will also likely include a cohort of millennials who have never served in government before—and whatever their feelings about the American empire, they will suddenly be charged with managing and shaping it, with surprisingly few checks on their ability to do so. They may question their right as Americans to wield such power or seek...
to mitigate its effects. But, nonetheless, they will have to wield it.

The last young idealist to gain so much influence so quickly over international affairs was Ben Rhodes, who joined Barack Obama’s first presidential campaign as a speechwriter at age 29 and closely advised the 44th president throughout his two terms in office, serving as deputy national-security adviser and playing a key role in the crafting of Obama’s foreign policy. Before that, Rhodes’s foreign-policy experience had been limited to writing speeches and reports for former longtime congressman Lee Hamilton, the director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a Washington think tank; before that, Rhodes had published one piece of fiction and had just completed an MFA in creative writing at New York University.

If you have a liberal-arts education and have spent any time in DC, you’re familiar with this guy, and maybe you even identify with him. If so, Rhodes’s story, recounted in his new memoir, _The World as It Is, _will lead you to consider what you might do if you suddenly had the opportunity to help remake the world every day for eight years. What long-suppressed progressive foreign-policy goals would you try to advance? What imperial wars would you try to prevent or end? Where might you succeed and where might you fail, and how would it weigh on you?

Anyone who has followed international news over the past decade is familiar with Rhodes’s work. His unique position as speechwriter and adviser allowed him to function as a kind of translator between the president, the foreign-policy establishment, the media, and the public at home and abroad. When Obama, in Cairo, announced a new era of engagement with the Muslim world, it was Rhodes who drafted the speech. When Obama opted not to launch air strikes against the Assad regime in Syria, Rhodes was his most vocal defender against an enraged chorus of Beltway hacks. Rhodes was also instrumental in selling Obama’s nuclear deal with Iran to Congress, led the secret negotiations to restore US-Cuba relations, and played a significant role in normalizing relations with Burma.

It was also Rhodes who was primarily responsible for the messaging debacle that allowed the attacks on the US embassy in Benghazi to be turned into a right-wing conspiracy theory; Rhodes who was called upon to defend drone strikes to the public; Rhodes who championed the pro-democracy protesters of the Arab Spring and then watched helplessly as the popularly elected president of Egypt was overthrown in a military coup backed by US allies; and Rhodes who was the frequent implied target of derisive, typically anonymous media leaks chastising the Obama administration for an incoherent and naive approach to foreign policy.

The criticism directed toward him was in part the result of Rhodes’s own tendency to put himself forward as the avatar of Obama’s foreign policy. Perhaps the most infamous example was when he granted extensive access to the journalist David Samuels, an editor at _Tablet_ and an outspoken critic of the Iran deal, who then wrote a profile of Rhodes for _The New York Times Magazine_ in 2016. Samuels portrayed the youthful aide, with a mixture of admiration and contempt, as a Holden Caulfield-esque prep-school brat and a dark mastermind manipulating the press into appeasing Tehran and allowing Syrians to be slaughtered.

“The aftermath of the Samuels piece was basically a two-year information campaign against me,” Rhodes told me in a phone interview, adding: “And yeah, I do think Samuels intended that.” Rhodes regretted his cooperation, and most in the Beltway agreed that Samuels did not make him look good. In _Foreign Policy_, for example, Thomas Ricks wrote a piece headlined “A stunning profile of Ben Rhodes, the asshole who is the president’s foreign policy guru.”

However, at least to some of us on the left, Rhodes didn’t come off so bad. “The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama’s Foreign-Policy Guru”—the title of the _Times_ piece—sounded like a pretty cool gig.

In a capital defined by blinkered groupthink and reflexive military interventionism, Rhodes seemed refreshingly independent and thoughtful. He wasn’t a leftist, and he didn’t categorically object to the use of American power abroad, but he appeared to genuinely want to work toward a more peaceful world, and he also seemed to have internalized Obama’s “Don’t do stupid shit” maxim—both of which distinguished him from many of his peers.

The Samuels profile was also where Rhodes introduced the term “the Blob” to describe the permanent DC foreign-policy establishment that he and Obama saw themselves as challenging, which was largely committed to perpetuating its own power and reinforcing the status quo. It was a memorable and apt phrase: If people like former CIA director and defense secretary Robert Gates and Senator John McCain were complaining about Rhodes to their many friends in the press, and if Samuels was attempting to warn pro-Israel hawks not to trust him, then—again, at least to some of us—that spoke well of Rhodes. While many on the left would have preferred a more radical vision for US foreign policy, what could be more aspirational than going from writing fiction in Brooklyn to personally helping to reopen relations with Castro’s Cuba and pissing off the Blob along the way?

One surprising thing about Rhodes’s book, however, is that Rhodes himself is much more representative of the Blob than Samuels’s profile had implied. Samuels wrote that, for Rhodes, “the Iraq war was proof, in black and white, not of the complexity of international affairs or the many perils attendant on political decision-making but of the fact that the decision-makers were morons.” He neglected to mention, however, that Rhodes had originally supported the war. Samuels did note, in a memorable opening paragraph referencing Don DeLillo’s _Underworld_, that Rhodes’s life was changed the day he watched the Twin Towers fall from the Williamsburg waterfront, but he skipped over the part where Rhodes briefly considered enlisting in the military. Likewise, Samuels asserted that Rhodes wanted to “create the space for America to disentangle itself from its established system of alliances with countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and Turkey,” but did not mention that Rhodes had once been a member of AIPAC, the powerful pro-Israel lobbying group.

Samuels, in other words, made Rhodes sound a lot edgier in his _Times_ piece than Rhodes makes himself sound in his memoir. In fairness, the world has changed a lot in the past two years, and Rhodes is no longer in the White House personally advising the president. Instead, he’s yet another former Obama staffer reduced to rhetorically defending the liberal order as Donald Trump casually annihilates it. Two years
ago, Rhodes derided the Blob, but today he doesn’t totally dispute that he was—and is—a part of it.

“You know what that New York Times story got wrong?” Obama told Rhodes after the Samuel’s profile appeared. “The notion that there’s something wrong with storytelling—I mean, that’s our job. To tell a really good story about who we are.”

Rhodes, like Obama, always wanted to be a storyteller, and The World as It Is is not a typical Washington memoir. For one thing, it’s good: Rhodes really is a gifted writer, equally talented at capturing mundane late nights in his windowless West Wing office, chaotic mass demonstrations around the world, and tense meetings with international power brokers. He makes sharp observations about other government officials, especially the president himself. Few, if any, White House staffers had a closer personal relationship with Obama, one that was commonly described as a “mind meld.”

Obama emerges as a nuanced character here, not an object of blind worship, even though Rhodes clearly has a deep love and admiration for his boss. As captured by Rhodes, Obama is frequently more candid about the role that race played in shaping his political identity. Obama is frequently more candid about the things he or Obama could have done to fundamentally change it.

According to The World as It Is, Rhodes’s close relationship with Obama was cemented by his own criticisms of the Beltway worldview. The two met in May 2007, when then-Senator Obama had announced his presidential campaign but had yet to catch fire. Holding a debate-prep meeting in Washington, Obama solicited opinions from a group of experts as to whether he should vote for additional funds for US troops in Iraq; Rhodes was the only person who urged him to vote no. Obama followed this advice, and thus began a long partnership in which Rhodes’s consistent purpose was to hold Obama to the high ideals he had campaigned on.

This proved to be far more difficult than either Obama or Rhodes had anticipated. From deploying more troops in Afghanistan to failing to close the prison camp at Guantanamo, at almost every turn Obama and Rhodes would find themselves submitting to the Blob’s consensus. Often, though not always, they would be persuaded that the consensus was correct.


Day in and day out, it’s a trillion-dollar annual enterprise that plows forward like an ocean liner, shaping the lives of people in its wake whether they know it or not. The embassy in New Delhi tries to help U.S. businesses get into the Indian market. The USAID mission in Nairobi meets with the Kenyan Ministry of Health to help the fight against HIV/AIDS. A scholarship student from Indonesia boards a plane bound for an American university. The U.S. military conducts a joint exercise with the South Koreans to deter North Korea. Our intelligence community shares information about a terrorist plot with Europeans. A Special Operator leaves a Baghdad trailer at dawn to capture or kill a terrorist. A taxpayer-funded F-16 fighter aircraft is delivered to the Egyptian military.

What Rhodes is really saying with this panorama can be stated more succinctly: “We Didn’t Start the Fire.” No one president, much less an adviser, can single-handedly right the course of this ocean liner, and this president and this adviser certainly didn’t. It’s both an accurate statement and something of a dodge: While it’s true that Obama and Rhodes faced resistance at every stage, it’s not necessarily true that they did everything they could have done under the circumstances.

Rhodes implies something similar in a more mournful passage in the book’s final pages, as he confronts the infuriating reality that Obama is being replaced by Trump.

I closed my eyes. Somewhere out there, in the vast expanse of darkness, was the story of the last eight years, the world as it is. Markets once crippled by crisis teemed with optimistic forecasts on computer screens. Iranian centrifuges sat idle in a storage warehouse with electronic seals. Yazidi women and children who had escaped from Mount Sinjar waited a new life in Turkish refugee camps. A team of women in Laos scoured the rough grass for unexploded bombs. Syrian prisons were filled with human beings suffering untold horror. A refugee went looking for a job in Berlin. An aging survivor of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima went about her day in a tidy apartment. Vladimir Putin presided over a revanchist and rotting Russian regime. Angela Merkel prepared her run for another term as German chancellor. NATO patrolled the skies over Estonia. Mohamed Morsi sat in an Egyptian prison cell….

Rhodes goes on like that for another handful of sentences, concluding with “My own daughters lay sleeping in my small apartment, unaware of the convulsions in the world around them.” I cite these lengthy passages, which resemble cinematic montages, because they capture something essential about Rhodes’s, and Obama’s, worldview after eight years in the White House.

Obama and Rhodes were always conscious of the fact that they were making history, but they also often seemed to view themselves as passive observers, detaching their own agency from the world they were observing. They yielded unmatched global might, but they understood that they had only a finite ability to shape how it was employed. “The world is what it is,” as the late V.S. Naipaul wrote; there is, in Rhodes’s view, little that he or Obama could have done to fundamentally change it.
Part of the problem here is that, for all their perspicuity and self-awareness, their view of American power was missing a critical component. Although it’s not a term that either Rhodes or Obama would typically use, their vision of a more peaceful world order was constantly stymied by the contradictions of American empire. They had been granted all this power that, they believed, they could use to do something good, yet it rarely occurred to them to ask whether they or any other American had any right to that power, and whether it could be exercised in a way that was not an expression of American domination.

While Rhodes and Obama were fully cognizant of the many atrocities and strategic mistakes committed by the United States, especially in Iraq, they still saw America as a necessary counterweight to rival powers like China and Russia, and they believed that far greater evils would result from an American retreat. By maintaining American supremacy, they also, in the end, were compelled to turn the empire over to people who clearly should not hold any power at all.

Like many other Obama staffers, Rhodes probably imagined that he would write a very different memoir, one that confronted the administration’s failures and disappointments but ultimately had a triumphant narrative. Instead, the book’s prologue conveys his profound disillusionment. Rhodes begins by describing his final world tour with Obama, in the weeks after Trump’s victory but before the inauguration, during which the outgoing president reflects on his own suddenly endangered legacy. “Maybe we pushed too far,” Obama muses to Rhodes in Lima. “Maybe people just want to fall back into their tribe.” When Rhodes tries to reassure him, Obama pushes back: “Sometimes I wonder whether I was ten or twenty years too early.”

The memoir’s title, The World as It Is, captures Rhodes’s growing pessimism. When he entered the White House, the Blob essentially comprised three schools of thought: the liberal internationalists, who championed humanitarian intervention as long as it was backed by multilateral institutions; the neo-conservatives, who preferred the go-it-alone approach to American empire exemplified by the Iraq War; and the realists, who urged restraint in the use of force but also valued stable relationships with often illiberal regimes. Like his colleague Samantha Power, Rhodes was initially more concerned with the world as it ought to be and sympathetic to the liberal interventionism that had prevailed among many Democratic foreign-policy elites. But over the course of his time in office, Rhodes moved closer and closer to the realist camp and came to take a much more instrumentalist view of American power abroad. One reason was that, as Rhodes grew closer to Obama, he began to embrace the president’s more skeptical view of American power. Contemplating a missile strike against Syria that he ultimately rejected, Obama told Rhodes: “It is too easy for a president to go to war.” Not long after, Obama challenged the conventional wisdom that the United States should have intervened to stop the 1994 Rwandan genocide. “You can’t stop people from killing each other like that,” the president explained.

Yet while Obama and Rhodes both grasped the failure of neoconservatism from their first days in the White House and came to recognize the dangers of the kind of interventionism espoused by figures like Power, the Obama administration repeatedly intervened anyway, deploying military force in ad hoc ways that in themselves were troubling. Obama toppled Gadhafi in Libya and called for Assad to step down in Syria, in both cases without any real plans for how to establish stable regimes after the ouster of these dictators. He surged US troops in Afghanistan even as he and Rhodes openly questioned the wisdom of doing so, withdrew them from Iraq, and then resumed military operations there after the rise of ISIS. Obama and Rhodes insisted on the legitimacy of international law and institutions, and yet, under their tenure, the United States carried out an extrajudicial, legally dubious campaign of assassinations against terror suspects in multiple countries. Both had sincere doubts about exercising American power, but they proved to be no match for the relentless pressure from the Blob to exercise it anyway.

With the rise of a more left-wing and egalitarian domestic politics, it is becoming clear that we need an alternative approach to the liberal-internationalist, realist, and neo-conservative thinking that has long dominated the Blob. This alternative approach, while it may exist in embryonic form in the ideals of some in Washington, has never found a name, much less the institutions that would support and nurture it. Where do those of us whose instincts are progressive and humanitarian, anti-war and anti-empire, find a home? Could such viewpoints ever flourish in a capital where seemingly everyone pledges fealty to the American “national interest”? What, in short, would it mean to be a leftist in foreign policy?

In Rhodes’s memoir, we see occasional glimmers of what a left approach to foreign policy might look like. He describes in great detail the personal relationship that he developed with Alejandro Castro Espín (the son of Raúl and nephew of Fidel) while negotiating to restore relations with Cuba, offering a heartening glimpse of what US foreign policy might look like if it were entirely predicated on good-faith efforts to create a more peaceful, just, and open world. And everywhere Rhodes goes, he makes sure the president meets with people from all walks of life. He also tries to make amends for past US crimes; for instance, inspired by an episode of the late Anthony Bourdain’s Parts Unknown, he convinces Obama to pledge $100 million to cleaning up unexploded ordnance in Laos.

But it’s impossible to read The World as It Is without thinking about how everything that Obama and Rhodes worked to achieve is now in mortal jeopardy. The mere fact of Trump’s presidency undermines whatever claim the American empire might have made to moral authority, and while Rhodes understands this, he has yet to absorb the full implications. Rhodes’s own post-White
House efforts feel like a stopgap. In February, he and his friend Jake Sullivan, who served as Hillary Clinton's chief policy adviser, launched National Security Action, a group intended to revitalize liberal foreign policy in the age of Trump. Putting aside its unfortunate initials, the new group’s advisory board is a who’s who of liberal internationalists. According to its website, it is primarily “dedicated to advancing American global leadership and opposing the reckless policies of the Trump administration that endanger our national security and undermine U.S. strength in the world.”

While National Security Action has some new and potentially laudable ideas for addressing issues ranging from the global refugee crisis to government corruption, there is little reason to think that it will stray far from the Beltway’s conventional wisdom. In our phone interview, Rhodes acknowledged that much of what NSA is doing can offer only a short-term remedy. The group, he admitted, “has an emergency function and is not trying to be a long-term solution.” Its main purpose is to brief and prep Democratic candidates to respond to the immediate crisis posed by Trump.

Looking ahead, however, the left will need to think beyond both the old and new NSAs. The American public will need to develop a better understanding of the costs of American empire. We need more politicians, backed by an army of pundits and experts whose voices echo through the mainstream news outlets, who can unambiguously denounce the US alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel, the atrocities in Yemen and Palestine, the damaging environmental and labor effects of our trade deals, and the virulent spread of corruption and kleptocracy around the world, much of which has been facilitated by America’s promotion of neoliberal economic policies abroad.

Rhodes himself seems to recognize this. “The left is good at holding people like me and my feet to the fire,” he noted in our interview. But to do that effectively, the left needs a more detailed and durable agenda for changing Washington’s approach to the world and challenging the basic premise of US hegemony. The next Democratic administration will have an easier time resisting the Blob if more legislators, bureaucrats, pundits, policy wonks, and voters demand that it do so. It is urgently necessary to institutionalize the left’s demands and to make all of these disparate voices an acknowledged part of our foreign-policy debates, before the next Ben Rhodes is given a chance to advise the next president. 

used to hate Hubert Humphrey. Fifty years ago, the only part of this once-renowned liberal’s career that mattered to me was his unflinching support for the despicable war in Vietnam. In late August of 1968, I traveled to the Democratic Convention in Chicago to protest his nomination for president. That fall, with other radicals, I organized a demonstration urging everyone to boycott the election. “Vote with your feet, vote in the streets!” we shouted as we marched up to the State House in Boston.

In my small, disruptive fashion, I prob-
ably helped elect a president who made American politics a whole lot worse. Under Richard Nixon, the nation began to move rightward, a shift from which we are still struggling to recover. And Mr. Watergate took four years to withdraw our troops from Vietnam, after another 20,000 US soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians had died. So I struggle with the question of whether leftists like myself, and antiwar liberals as well, should have stopped chanting “Dump the Hump” and did what we could to defeat that greater evil and perhaps manage to preserve the New Deal order for at least a few more years.

Arnold Offner’s new biography, Hubert Humphrey: The Conscience of the Country, helps to clarify why that question remains a devilishly challenging one. The author, whose previous books concerned diplomatic history, supplies all the evidence one could want to prove that Humphrey played a major role in leading his party—and, to a degree, his country—to reject Jim Crow and embrace a number of social-democratic policies. Yet Humphrey’s decision to become the most prominent Democratic cheerleader for the US atrocity in Indochina also turned his life of liberal achievement into a tragedy. Not everything he did in politics before the 1960s was virtuous. But when Humphrey devoted himself to selling President Lyndon Johnson’s war, he suffered a dual defeat: He failed to convince the public, and he sabotaged his chance to become president—the ambition that had, for the most part, spurred his hawking in the first place. Far more significant, however, was what his defeat represented: the end of an era when liberal Democrats were the dominant force in US politics.

Humphrey’s second act began in Washington and lacked the heroism of the first. He first served in the Senate for 16 years, maneuvering consistently, if not effectively, to enhance his own presidential prospects. Often, both his ambition and his principles led him to take positions that backed up his 1957 statement that he was “a liberal without apology.” Humphrey tried to scrap the prevailing immigration law that discriminated against anyone not from Western Europe. In 1954, he initiated what became the Food for Peace program and kept fighting for civil-rights legislation throughout that decade. Outside the South, most Democratic activists were hungry for candidates who could bring back the kinds of passion and programs that had energized the New Deal, and the senator from Minnesota was eager to lead the revival.

But when it came to the Cold War, Humphrey took pains to show that he could be as unbending in his belligerence as any right-wing Republican. In 1954, adding a red-hunter line to his résumé, he sponsored a nasty piece of legislation that outlawed membership in the Communist Party. Civil libertarians condemned it, as did many liberal lawmakers in both parties. “We do not have to abdicate the Constitution to catch Communists,” remarked Estes Kefauver, an influential Democratic senator from Tennessee. The act passed that year but was rarely invoked or tested in court. Ominously, that same year, Humphrey also denounced the State Department for giving away “half of Vietnam” to the communists after Ho Chi Minh’s forces defeated the French.

His well-publicized record as a Cold War liberal was not enough to win him the presidential nomination in 1960. Humphrey’s race against John F. Kennedy, who had money to burn and glamour to spare, was like a sturdy plow horse attempting to best a thoroughbred in the Kentucky Derby. That May, JFK
I won a crushing victory in the West Virginia primary—where pundits thought his Catholicism would work against him—and the race, Humphrey returned to the Senate, where he took the lead in making the Peace Corps permanent and ratifying the treaty to ban nuclear testing in the atmosphere.

In 1964, after Kennedy's assassination, Humphrey took a different path to the White House, and the third, climactic act of his life began. He reasoned, writes Offner, that "as a poor man from a small state and without rich friends," he would first have to be elected vice president. So, throughout that spring and summer, Humphrey worked relentlessly to gain Johnson's favor.

Together with GOP Senate leader Everett Dirksen, he led the effort to kill a Southern filibuster against LBJ's landmark Civil Rights Act, which passed in July 1964. To prove his fealty to Johnson, who feared losing the entire South, Humphrey then squelched an attempt by the biracial Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to be seated at that year's national convention instead of the racists who made up the state's official delegation. Fannie Lou Hamer, the charismatic MFDP activist, scolded Humphrey for worrying about his own future instead of the rights of black Americans. "I'm going to pray to Jesus for you," she told him.

By thwarting the MFDP's challenge, Humphrey managed to get his own prayers answered: LBJ chose him as his running mate. Privately, Johnson let it be known that any man he picked for the job would have to abandon the last shred of independence—or, in his vivid vernacular, "I want his pecker to be in my pocket." By the time Humphrey took the oath of office, he had performed the metaphorical excision required.

Offner's lengthy account of his subject's years as vice president will make many readers cringe. Although Humphrey first doubted the wisdom of LBJ's escalation of the war, he soon became its most ardent promoter. The vice president delayed issuing his own peace plan until it was too late to have an effect on the race. "You know," Humphrey confessed to an aide, "I've eaten so much of Johnson's shit in this job that I've grown to like the taste of it." His nearly four years of unprincipled groveling at the most critical time of his career almost made me wonder whether Offner meant the subtitle of his book—"The Conscience of the Country"—as a joke.

In his fourth and final act, Humphrey attempted to rebuild the progressive reputation he had squandered as LBJ's lackey and as a Cold War hawk. After being reflected to the Senate in 1970, he introduced a bill to extend health insurance to every citizen. He also co-wrote, with Augustus Hawkins, a black congressman from Los Angeles, an act that guaranteed a job at a decent wage to every American able to work. The health bill failed to pass, and the Humphrey-Hawkins Act got watered down into a promise with no plan or resources to carry it out. But it did mark Humphrey's return to his earlier passion for social and economic change.

In 1972, the erstwhile hero, having turned against the war, ran for president again. However, most liberal Democrats understandably preferred George McGovern, the South Dakota senator who had once been Humphrey's protégé yet had strongly opposed the war in Vietnam when the vice president was defending it. With labor support, Humphrey battled for the party's nomination all the way to the convention, but McGovern won on the first ballot. After this defeat, Humphrey spent the rest of his life in the Senate, returning to the domestic liberalism that had made him both famous and popular.

Besides the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, he crusaded for full employment and a higher minimum wage and introduced a bill to guarantee every American child the right to nutritious food. Early in 1976, Gallup reported that most Democrats again wanted the Minnesota senator to be their nominee for president. But after agonizing for months, Humphrey decided that he had neither the funds nor the passion to go through the ordeal again. He told New York Times columnist James Reston that he would look "ridiculous" if he ran a fourth campaign that managed only to divide his party and hand the election to the incumbent, Gerald Ford.

Humphrey's personal tragedy was also a key episode in the very public tragedy of American liberalism. Liberals could not have avoided engaging in the Cold War. Stalin and his successors were enemies of democracy and individual freedom, and they also posed a threat to American interests abroad, competing for the allegiance of peoples and governments around the world. But in creating a vast empire of American bases and allies that spanned the globe, liberals like Humphrey didn't help matters, falling prey to their own delusions about American beneficence. They also came to believe that any inhabitant of a poor, exploited land who opposed the Cold War. Stalin and his successors were enemies of democracy and individual freedom, and they also posed a threat to American interests abroad, competing for the allegiance of peoples and governments around the world. But in creating a vast empire of American bases and allies that spanned the globe, liberals like Humphrey didn't help matters, falling prey to their own delusions about American beneficence. They also came to believe that any inhabitant of a poor, exploited land who opposed the Cold War depicted our presence in other lands not as a coercion, but a protection. It allows us even to say that the napalm in Vietnam is only another aspect
Try to keep up with Noname’s voice: The 27-year-old rapper, born Fatimah Warner, can make it do vocal gymnastics. She can tighten it to a conspiratorial whisper, bend it into singsong irony, soften it until it’s a cushion. For her newest album, Room 25, she stretches it into a rhetorical taunt (“And y’all still thought a bitch couldn’t rap, huh?”), then snaps it back to attention (“Maybe this your answer for that”) in the same breath. All this is held at the same volume, a controlled stage murmur—as though you’d caught her talking to herself, just under her breath.

This agility—one twitch of her voice, and she’s gone from a verbal eye-roll to a dreamy, far-off stare—points to Noname’s background as a slam poet. At 18, she placed third in the largest youth slam in the world, Louder Than a Bomb. Her sharp delivery and breezy syncopations are all reminiscent of spoken word. Her dense and roving lyrics also flash her literary prowess, her lines nimbly jumping from character to character, capturing competing perspectives almost as quickly as they move among different tones and registers. In “Prayer Song,” she swirls through sev-
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eral points of view in a diorama sweep of a city, until she settles on a police officer at the scene of a shooting: “I seen a cell phone on the dash, could’ve sworn it’s a gun / I ain’t seen a toddler in the back after firing seven shots / A demon ’bout to get me, he watching me kill his mom.”

This perspectival approach to songwriting was a technique that Noname used frequently in her 2016 debut, Téléphone, where she ventriloquized everyone from a woman getting an abortion to a group of children in a Chicago playground. She could cunningly draw her listeners away from herself by a sheer command of language and, through it, observation: The personas she adopted were so absorbing, and her sketches and memories so compelling, that we almost forget how little we actually learn about Noname—which, of course, is part of the point. In Room 25, however, Noname turns inward, exploring everything from a stormy romance to the experience of black womanhood, to the guilt of leaving her family behind when she moves to a new city, to the problems of gentrification. And while the result is a survey of Noname’s interior world, we’re also left with a better understanding of the world that acts upon her—the one she must navigate.

Noname’s albums are best read as narratives of self-discovery. In Téléphone, we came to know Chicago’s South Side—or at least her experience and memories of it—through cinematic shifts in perspective in which she would zoom in on a character or memory, then zoom out to capture its context. Room 25 uses this same technique, although this time in the service of better understanding Noname. It’s a rewarding shift: She’s a complicated and engrossing subject, and her understanding of herself and the world she occupies constantly flips, then doubles back. Noname can first examine a problem as laden with political ambiguities and then excavate its emotional core; she can mine her own personal experiences, then reveal what they mean for the world around her. In “Blaxploitation,” one of Room 25’s most striking tracks, Noname explores the image of a black woman through the eyes of gentrifiers—“Your mamma stay on the South Side / She paid to clean your house, power of Pine-Sol, baby / She the scrub tub lady / She that naked bitch in videos, that drunk club lady / Immortalized all ‘80s and then she real, real nasty.”

But she can just as quickly examine her own mixed feelings about having moved from Chicago to Los Angeles, having previously recorded Téléphone there in rooms rented through the notorious gentrifying machine Airbnb to do so. “Traded hoodie for hipster,” she raps on “Blaxploitation.”

Noname tracks her own evolution with self-deprecating scrutiny, but she also helps bring to the surface the bleak gaze of others. The effect is not just an open condemnation of the racist tropes imposed on her and other black women, but an exploration of how it feels to constantly confront the insult of these presumptions. “Everybody think they know me,” she sings in “Window,” letting her voice trail off. “Don’t nobody really know me.”

Room 25’s standout track, “Don’t Forget About Me,” weaves her various themes together: In it, Noname explores the worry a mother or father has for their black child living in America, and the pain that any black child feels about their parents’ worrying about them. “I know everybody goes someday,” she sings. “I know my body’s fragile, I know it’s made from clay.” Then she confronts her own experience, which is more acute and specific, zeroing in on the pain she worries she has caused her mother to feel as a result of her moving away from home. “Let’s get down to the nitty-gritty, changed my city…” she raps. “All I am is everything and nothing at all.”

True to an album that asserts her multiplicity, Noname never stays in one place—she can’t. This is as true for her vocally as it is for her lyrically: She swings vertiginously between registers and tones. For Noname, this movement is both a freedom and a burden, illuminating and exhausting. In the opening lines of “Self,” she worries that her album could mean too many things: “Maybe this is the album you listen to in your car / When you driving home late at night / Really questioning every god, religion, Kanye, bitches. / Maybe this your wifey just wanting a clean divorce / The baby ain’t really yours.” But then she pauses and moves on. “Nah, actually, this is for me.”

The Reverend Elijah P. Lovejoy, editor of the Alton Observer, Dies at the Hands of a Pro-Slavery Mob, Alton, Illinois (1837)

Christ’s editor becomes Christ’s martyr: band the newspaper columns black for Elijah P. Lovejoy, who fired back. They threw his first three presses into the river. They came with guns, stones, hatchets, hammers; they came with whiskey and a mind to attack something as they felt attacked, to break Lovejoy’s words before they got to paper. No one was arrested; it wasn’t a riot.

At the wharf, the smashed-up pieces of his fourth press. Although he signed his letters till death or victory, the movement hadn’t thought it could happen to a journalist. Somebody had to be the first.

MELISSA RANGE
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AS TOLD TO SUSAN KLONSKY
EDITED BY BART SCHULTZ

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