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Down the Rabbit Hole
In “Against Purity Tests” [Nov. 19/26], Katha Pollitt briefly mentions the policy weaknesses of the leading Democratic presidential candidates. When she comes to Bernie Sanders, she frames his weaknesses in terms that are personal, not political (with the exception of his views on guns). According to Pollitt, Sanders is not only too old but has a “radical/hippie past” filled with “weird sex writings” and “no steady job until he was almost 40.”

Pollitt and mainstream Democrats should be reminded again before the next election that Sanders was unlike the candidate they strongly backed in 2016. Sanders, for example, never supported the Iraq War, never looked the other way when the Honduran military overthrew the country’s elected government, never suggested Edward Snowden was a possible Russian spy, never attacked the women who accused Bill Clinton of sexual abuse, and never counted as allies Goldman Sachs, Henry Kissinger, and even, for a time, the Trumps.

Sandy Miley
Sherrill, N.Y.

Bird Is the Word
Thank you for the brief article about the retirement of Sesame Street’s Caroll Spinney, who played Big Bird for nearly 50 years [“Big Bird Gets a Pension,” by Leah Rosenzweig, Nov. 19/26], and the comments about politicians who continually try to cut funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

I can attest to the value of Sesame Street and the many other offerings of the CPB. In 1973, my daughter started kindergarten, and on her first day at school, she picked up a book and began reading. When the amazed teacher asked her where she had learned to read, my daughter replied, “On Sesame Street.” Within a week, she was advanced to first grade.

I’m sure many others could tell similar stories. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting plays a vital part in learning, for children and adults.

Walter Everett
Lewisburg, Penn.

Forgotten Victory
I enjoyed The Nation’s pre-election edition [Nov. 12], but you missed a cataclysmic development in Michigan. What is progressives’ greatest nemesis, one that precipitates endless hand-wringing? Gerrymandering!
And what happened on November 6? Through initiative and petitioning, a grassroots movement in Michigan called Voters Not Politicians eliminated gerrymandering in the state.

What this victory means is that in the future, district lines will be drawn by a randomly selected Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission.

Walter Everett
Lewisburg, Penn.
The Costs of War

Just in time for next year’s Pentagon spending debate, a new report is calling for a huge increase in the Defense Department’s budget, which is already at one of the highest levels since World War II. The document was produced by the National Defense Strategy Commission, a congressionally mandated group charged with assessing the Trump administration’s new national-defense strategy.

The premise of the new report is that America faces a “national security emergency” that leaves its ability to defend “its allies, its partners, and its own vital interests” increasingly in doubt.

As its solution, the commission calls for an increase in Pentagon spending of 3 to 5 percent above inflation for at least the next five years. According to calculations by Taxpayers for Common Sense, the high end of this range would mean an annual Pentagon budget of an astonishing $972 billion by 2024—a potential boon for Lockheed Martin and its fellow weapons-makers, but a disaster for US taxpayers. It is unlikely that Congress will sign off on such a hefty increase, but the fact that it has been put forward at all will provide more rhetorical ammunition for the hawks on Capitol Hill, making it all the harder to rein in runaway Pentagon spending.

It’s not as if the Defense Department is starved for funds. The United States spends more on its military than the next seven countries in the world combined (five of which are US allies). The increase in Pentagon spending in the past two years alone is greater than the entire military budget of Russia. And that’s before the massive increases proposed by the strategy commission.

Perhaps this proposal shouldn’t come as a surprise, given the source. The commission was co-chaired by Eric Edelman, an Iraq War supporter and former top aide to Vice President Dick Cheney, and Gary Roughead, the former chief of US naval operations and a current board member of Northrop Grumman, the fourth-largest weapons contractor in the United States.

The members of the National Defense Strategy Commission followed a time-tested playbook. They start by enumerating a long list of potential threats, exaggerating them in scale and importance; then they assert that the best way to address these challenges is to double down on the military-first approach that has characterized US foreign policy throughout this century. Yet this argument ignores the fact that the greatest threats we face cannot be solved with military force, and that attempting to do so will have disastrous consequences, as America’s nonstop wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, and Somalia have demonstrated. The commission report gives lip service to diplomacy, but only as an adjunct to military power, not as a value in its own right.

We should be spending less time figuring out how to fight wars with Russia, China, Iran, or any other nation, and more on how to forge partnerships to address the biggest challenges to continued life on this planet: climate change and nuclear weapons. But the new report is silent on the first problem, while on the second, it has not one discouraging word for the Pentagon’s dangerous, counterproductive plan to spend $1.2 trillion on a new generation of nuclear weapons over the next three decades.

Thankfully, there was another study released last week that takes a more critical view of America’s policy of endless war and runaway military spending. Issued by the Costs of War Project at Brown University, it estimates the full price of the United States’ post-9/11 wars at $5.9 trillion—a stunning figure when you consider that the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond have caused far more harm than good. The study takes a comprehensive look at the War on Terror, from the direct costs of overseas military operations to current and future spending on the veterans of those conflicts, to the budget of the Department of Homeland Security, to the interest on the debt resulting from the fact that these
wars have been financed through deficit spending.

A companion report by the Costs of War Project tallies the immense human costs of the post-9/11 wars: over 240,000 civilian deaths, more than 21 million people displaced, widespread environmental devastation, and over 300,000 veterans suffering from traumatic brain injuries, to cite just a few examples. In the face of this catastrophe, the idea that a more militarized US policy is the answer to the world’s security challenges is absurd.

When the new Congress convenes in January, let’s hope it takes a fresh look at the consequences of our current policy of endless war and continuous preparation for war—and puts the report of the National Defense Strategy Commission back on the shelf, where it belongs.

William D. Hartung is the director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy.

The Fire This Time
California’s wildfires are a climate-change reckoning.

What I remember most strongly is the light: a soft reddish-gold color that felt more suited to a tropical sunset than a leisurely Sunday morning in the Bay Area. It was October 1991, and two friends and I had arrived the night before at the home of a family friend in the hills above Oakland. Over coffee, we noticed the acrid smell of smoke. I went outside and spotted flames crawling down the hillside opposite the house. By the time we got in the car, the fire had jumped several hundred yards. We tried to drive, but the brush was in flames on both sides and the road ahead obscured by smoke. Rather than take our chances driving through it, we abandoned the car and ran down the hill, fire licking at the tree trunks all around us.

I’ve thought about that moment a lot these last weeks while looking at the photographs of burned-out cars lining a highway 165 miles north of Oakland, the only open road leading out of a town called Paradise. That day in Oakland, 25 people died. It was, until this month’s Camp Fire, the second-deadliest wildfire in California’s recorded history. To an East Coast kid like me, it seemed a freakish bit of bad luck. Or good luck, for those of us who made it out.

Later, living in Los Angeles, I would almost get used to the eerie golden light of sunshine filtered through giant clouds of smoke. As sure as snow in a New England winter, the fires arrived in fall, when the hot Santa Ana winds began blowing in from the desert through hills that were dry after months without rain. Farther inland, the fires started earlier, as soon as it got hot. When they were close enough, ash fell like snow. But in October, or November at the latest, the rains would arrive. The sky would be wiped clear again and the danger pushed back until summer returned.

Those predictable cycles are over. In May 2009, 8,700 acres burned in the hills above Santa Barbara, before the summer had even started. That’s normal now, to whatever degree that word still pertains. The Thomas Fire, which tore through more than 280,000 acres across two Southern California counties, began early last December and wasn’t declared over until June—through the end of what should have been the rainy season. Since 2000, according to one 2016 study, hotter, drier weather has lengthened the fire season by nine days each year. It is no longer useful to think in terms of seasons. Throughout the West most of the time, some places are burning and others are not.

Early in November, the Woolsey Fire was burning through Malibu and Thousand Oaks, but it is Paradise that will bear the unwelcome honor of becoming the second town this year to be almost entirely incinerated. In August, only two homes were left standing in the northern hamlet of Keswick. The Camp Fire, which leveled Paradise, has so far wrecked more than 11,700 homes and killed 79 people, many of them while they were sitting in their cars. Nearly 700 are missing. It’s now the deadliest fire on record, and by far the most destructive. In its first 24 hours, it destroyed more property than any other California wildfire, beating a record set in Napa and Sonoma counties last October. It has already razed more than 151,000 acres, but it still has a ways to go before it takes the title for the most acreage burned—that honor went to a blaze that raged through Mendocino and three other northern counties this past July and August.

No one is boasting, but new records are broken every year. Sixteen of the largest fires in California history have occurred over the past 19 years, three of them since last December. Scientists tend to be cautious about linking individual disasters to human-induced climate change, but this year, with wildfires breaking out north of the Arctic Circle in Sweden—as well as in Norway, Finland, and Russia—few are hesitant to make the link. The evidence is piling up. One 2016 study found that since 1984, anthropogenic climate change has doubled the area over which forest fires burn in the West. Another study, published earlier this year, found that “human influences” had quintupled the risk of extreme aridity in the West, increasing the probability of catastrophic wildfires. Still another predicted that the acreage burned by wildfires in Southern California alone could jump by more than 60 percent by mid-century. As bad as things are, they will get worse.

This painful reality is getting harder to deny. Major media outlets are no longer covering wildfires merely as isolated weather events and human-interest stories. Grassroots momentum is building, from the 21 kids suing the federal government for its inaction on climate change to the activists facing prison for blocking the construction of the Bayou Bridge Pipeline in Louisiana. And state and local officials in California, from Governor Jerry Brown to Los Angeles County Fire Chief Daryl Osby, spent days shouting to counter the Trump administration’s insistence that the fires have nothing to do with climate change.

(continued on page 8)
Both plans miss an opportunity to help families in the easiest, most streamlined way: by just writing them checks.

Harris builds on the existing earned-income tax credit by offering up to an additional $3,000 a year for an individual or $6,000 for a couple, phasing it out once people with children start earning $100,000 a year. Families could get the money as a lump sum at tax time or in monthly payments.

Booker also wants to give families money, but his plan locks it away for later. At birth, every American child would get a savings account of $1,000, and the government would add up to $2,000 each year, depending on the family’s income. Once those kids turn 18, they could use it for allowable expenses, such as college or a mortgage down payment.

Both ideas attack economic inequality, particularly for black families, by putting government money directly into the hands of those who need it. Still, they are not as direct as they could be. Harris’s plan suffers from two problems. The first is who she leaves out. By matching only the income that poor families earn from work, it omits those who don’t earn anything. There are an increasing number of families who have neither income from work nor cash assistance from the government and who would miss out entirely despite living in deep destitution. At the same time, she excludes better-off families, even though the costs of raising a child are steep for them as well. Universal programs also tend to be more politically resilient thanks to the wide buy-in. The second problem with Harris’s plan is that she still relies on giving money to families through the tax code, an opaque and complicated way of doing it.

Booker gets around this by sending money straight to the people who need it, but not at the time when they need it most. Families suffer huge drops in their income when they welcome new children; a household with two adults loses, on average, $14,850 when they have a child, or about 14 percent of their income. That’s enough to throw a sizable share of families into poverty. Even after taxes and government benefits, one in five American children lives in poverty—a rate well above that in most other wealthy countries. Once children get older, that financial pressure eases. Booker’s proposal would erode the wealth gap between rich and poor and white and black, but it mistimes the assistance, providing it when most families are more economically stable.

The most straightforward answer is a child allowance, something that already exists in at least 12 other developed countries. Ten researchers at the Russell Sage Foundation proposed an approach that would give all families with children a monthly cash benefit. They would replace existing tax credits for parents with at least $250 a month for each child, paid out in a fashion similar to Social Security benefits. Under their most bare-bones proposal, child poverty would fall by 40 percent, with extreme poverty, or children living on just $2 a day, all but eliminated.

That plan may be simple, but it’s not cheap: Its proponents estimate that it would cost $190 billion a year. But that’s still less than what’s been estimated for Harris’s plan, and less than the recent Republican tax cuts are likely to cost over the next three years.

It would be money well spent. As Democrats start laying out their messages for 2020, many of them are thinking big. It would be useful, though, for them to think simple and direct, too.

Bryce Covert

Child Allowance: A Simple Anti-Poverty Fix

Developed countries with universal child benefits have lower poverty rates than the US.

A US universal child allowance plan would:

1. Replace tax credits with direct payments:
   - $250 a month per child

2. Reduce child poverty by 40%

3. Virtually eliminate extreme poverty:
   - 2017: 1.7%
   - 2017: 0.1%

Percentage of children living on less than $2 a day

Sources: OECD; Russell Sage Foundation
2018 infographic: Tracy Manue Loeffelholz
A Convert’s Zeal?

Why changing the minds of conservative white women is a losing game.

Why is it so hard to believe that Trump supporters really do support Trump? The New York Times is always checking in with folksy rural conservatives in search of cracks in the wall. Remember the article just a few weeks ago with the white evangelical woman who put a Beto O’Rourke sticker on her car and drove it to church—and there, in the parking lot, was another car with a sticker for Beto?

For almost three years now, reporters have been begging tired farmers and miners eating their pancakes at Josie’s Diner in Smallville, Nebraska, to say they’ve seen the light. They never do. White evangelical women sneaking away from the Republican Party make for a good story—but they didn’t stop Ted Cruz from getting 81 percent of the white evangelical vote in Texas.

After Trump took the White House, and even after political scientists and pollsters figured out that many Trump supporters were not out-of-work Rust Belters but just your basic well-off Republicans, there was an orgy of self-criticism among Democrats and progressives. Somehow, those voters were our fault; we had neglected them, disrespected them, not felt their pain. The important sociologist Arlie Hochschild wrote a whole book about right-wingers in the Louisiana bayous who rejected curbs on the oil and gas industry that was destroying their way of life and instead blamed them, not felt their pain. The important convictions is experience: something new and unusual that shakes their settled views.

One of the evangelical Beto fans profiled by the Times was moved by her time meeting with a family separated at the border; it could just as easily have been new friends, a religious experience, falling in love, a charismatic teacher, or being surrounded by people with different beliefs.

Of course, people do change their minds, but probably not after being proselytized by someone they barely know (or, in the case of family, know all too well). You won’t get far inviting your Trumpie co-worker out for coffee so you can politely suggest she’s a racist, or giving your Trumpie cousin a hard time about her Facebook posts at a baby shower.

So why is it so hard to believe that white women who voted for Trump are mostly as fixed in their views as you are? They voted for him for dozens of reasons: to fit in with their family and community, to preserve their own racism, say—is the problem.

Another version of this idea is to call on progressive white women to convert other white women who support Trump. Nobody calls on white men to convert white men, because everyone assumes that’s impossible, but for some reason, white women who hate abortion and taxes because Mexico and China, to keep taxes low and bring back jobs stolen with their menfolk, to ally off the libtards, to ally with men, because men, because everyone assumes that’s impossible, but for some reason, white women who hate abortion and taxes because Mexico and China, to keep taxes low and bring back jobs stolen with their menfolk, to ally off the libtards, to ally with their menfolk, to keep MS-13 from killing their children, to bring back jobs stolen by Mexico and China, to keep taxes low and black children out of their schools, or because it’s what Jesus wants. You may think their beliefs are bigoted and ill-informed and illogical—which they are. You may marvel that women who think the polite and scandal-free Barack Obama is the Antichrist can believe that foul-mouthed, abusive Donald Trump is God’s instrument, like King David. What you are not going to do is make them see it differently by reminding them that at least 15

Nobody calls on white men to convert white men, because everyone assumes that’s impossible.
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women have accused Trump of a range of sexual offenses. Calling them out as racist, xenophobic foot soldiers of the patriarchy isn’t going to make a dent. Just as you don’t want to be the obedient wife of some porn-addicted Christian bully, they don’t want to be a slutty baby-killer like you. I’m not saying that, given enough time and a pleasing, patient personality—you’ve got one of those, don’t you?—you couldn’t eventually bring one or two around. But is this a good use of your energies? Richard Ojeda thought he could win as a Democrat in his West Virginia district by stressing his white working-class roots. He even acknowledged that he had voted for Trump himself. He lost.

You are unlikely to be more successful with your Aunt Vi, who thinks Melania and Ivanka are the epitome of female elegance and grace. Rather than devoting yourself to chipping away at Trump’s base, it makes more sense to forget about them and outvote them. Richard Ojeda thought he could win as a Democrat in his West Virginia district by stressing his white working-class roots. He even acknowledged that he had voted for Trump himself. He lost.

You are unlikely to be more successful with your Aunt Vi, who thinks Melania and Ivanka are the epitome of female elegance and grace. Rather than devoting yourself to chipping away at Trump’s base, it makes more sense to forget about them and outvote them. Stacey Abrams and her New Georgia Project registered hundreds of thousands of new voters and brought them to the polls. True, Brian Kemp was able to steal the election through disenfranchisement, voter suppression, and dirty tricks, but the people that Abrams brought in and energized may have made the difference for Lucy McBath, the newly elected progressive black congresswoman from GA-6, the district that Democratic white-moderate golden boy Jon Ossoff famously failed to win.

The great electoral opportunity of 2020 is not in the marginal number of repentant Trump voters you might be able to convert. It’s in the nearly 40 percent of eligible voters—many of them younger voters, rural residents, and people of color—who in 2016 did not vote at all.

(continued from page 4)

Still, in Washington, DC, Republican mendacity continues to conspire with Democratic silence. For all the lives that have been upended, climate change was not a defining issue for most of the country in the midterm elections. And with some notable exceptions—such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who recently joined a protest demanding a “Green New Deal” at Nancy Pelosi’s office—the emboldened Democrats have shown little interest in making it one. The party still has no unified approach to climate change, and no plan—except, apparently, to profit from the status quo: In August, as fires raged through Northern California, the Democratic National Committee passed a resolution to “welcome” donations from the fossil-fuel industry, reversing a ban it had voted in two months earlier. This would be corrupt and cynical in the best of circumstances, even if the status quo wasn’t literally in flames.

I made it out of the Oakland Hills fire because somebody helped me. We ran down the burning hillside until we hit a road and flagged down a ride. That driver soon kicked us off—we were sitting on his trunk, and he wanted to drive faster—but another car slowed and took us all the way to safety. No one is going to rescue us this time. Which means it’s up to us, as always. We have no choice but to learn to help each other, to tear down the systems that are killing us, to find new ways to live on and with the planet. The light is strange and the skies are getting darker, so we will have to do it fast.

Ben Ehrenreich

Ben Ehrenreich is a journalist and novelist. His most recent book, The Way to the Spring, is based on his reporting from the West Bank.
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The revocation, re-revocation, promised re-revocation of CNN reporter Jim Acosta's White House press credentials have brought back into the news the late Robert Sherrill, a famously cantankerous Nation contributor. Acosta's suspension was blamed, at least initially, on a phony assault—the Trump administration shared a video that had been sped up to make it appear that Acosta had "karate-chopped" a White House intern. In contrast, Sherrill's ban, unexplained at first, had its roots in 1964, when he punched the Florida governor's press secretary. Still, when the Secret Service denied Sherrill's press credentials two years later, no reason was given, and it took another four years and an ACLU challenge for the White House to produce a vague explanation: for reasons of "security."

In 1977, the DC Circuit Court, setting a legal precedent in CNN's favor, found Sherrill's exclusion unlawful. After Acosta's suspension, a federal judge issued a 14-day restraining order, temporarily restoring his credentials. The White House vowed to pull Acosta's press pass again as soon as the two weeks were up—then walked that threat back, prompting CNN to drop its lawsuit against the Trump administration. While Acosta's exile from the briefing room was short-lived, Sherrill never joined the White House press corps. As he told the Los Angeles Times in 1990, "I had been in Washington long enough to realize that was the last place to waste your time sitting around for some dumb [expletive] to give a press conference."

—Maia Hibbett

The Real Blue Victory

Finally, the Democratic Party has to face the whole electorate.

For Kattie Kendrick, the Georgia governor's race was personal. It was about her late brother.

"He never really complained. I think his biggest complaint was not having money," she tells me, sitting at her dining-room table the weekend before early voting would begin in Georgia. She’d already shrugged off her brother's money problems. She knew he had lots of doctors’ bills, but he’d always worked, always kept money in his pocket. So she just couldn’t see him as poor. "He would say, 'Y'all don’t believe it.' And we didn’t." She thought he was just talking. "It wasn’t until I was going through his papers that I realized how much he was paying in medical expenses."

Mrs. Kattie, as her people call her, does not want to talk to me about her brother's death. When she finds herself veering into his story, she stops and changes the subject to Medicaid expansion, her county’s sewage infrastructure, her plan for turning out early voters in the public-housing complex nearby. She wants me to understand her as a political organizer—as a woman who intends to sit on her county commission one day, and as a key part of Democratic gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams’s mobilization in Peach County. She doesn’t want to be a weepy septuagenarian. But her political and personal stories can’t be disentangled, so as she tries to explain her door-knocking strategy, she keeps tripping over her grief. "I wouldn’t have let my brother suffer like that, had I known."

Peach County is a small rural community about 100 miles south of Atlanta. There are not a lot of votes there. So black residents like Kattie, and the people she’s trying to mobilize, are used to being a political afterthought for Republicans and Democrats alike. That’s true for black people all over rural Georgia, and in many parts of the country, frankly. In all the places the Democratic Party has written off as permanently red, people are just not used to being part of the debate.

Abrams crafted a campaign strategy meant to change this—not so much to turn the state’s reddest counties blue, but to activate Democratic voters and organizers in every single county, no matter how small. "Clay County may have 15 people who haven’t voted before," Abrams told me during the campaign’s peak. "But if I can get them engaged and they decide they want to vote, they get added to 5,000 folks in Clayton County, who also haven’t voted before. And I add them to 15- to 20,000 Dekalb County voters. And over time, what we do is develop the 230,000 votes we need."

Abrams didn’t win the election with this strategy. But she won a greater share of the vote than any Democrat had since 1998, and more than that, she did something that will redound well past this one election cycle: She connected people like Kattie to a statewide political movement for the first time in their lives. That may be the lasting story of 2018. Not only in Georgia, but in similarly deep-red states around the South, this election became one big consciousness-raising campaign—for voters, and for the Democratic Party overall.

Kattie Kendrick spent her career working at the nearby military base, enjoying the security of public-sector benefits like medical coverage and paid leave—stuff her brother never had. When she got breast cancer, she had the resources to get it treated and recover. So she didn’t think much about politics. “Basically, my vote was based on whatever the Macon Telegraph said was the best candidate and best decision to make,” she tells me.

That changed when her brother died in poverty after a lifetime of working. Now she sees how many of her neighbors are struggling—and she sees the inequity of that struggle. “The median income in this part of Peach County is around $19,000,” she says, then points north, to the part of the county where white residents live. “That part is closer to $50,000.” She saw her work for Abrams as part of an ongoing local fight to change this disparity, to get a county commission that cares about all of Peach County. That’s how she plans to spend the rest of her retirement.
In the course of covering the midterms, I met people like Kattie all over the country. On *The United States of Anxiety*, a podcast I host, my colleague Amanda Aronczyk found a group of women in rural Texas whose political identity had changed so dramatically that they launched a secret organizing effort for Democrats. They live in a deeply conservative community, and they were so fearful of being alienated—from their employers, their fellow church congregants, even their families—that they concealed their identities. But they were so outraged by the state of today’s Republican Party that they came together clandestinely to work the phones for Beto O’Rourke. I got the sense listening to them that it was as much a support group as it was a canvassing operation. Either way, these women will never look at politics the same way again.

Hopefully, neither will the Democratic Party.

In the South, as Ed Kilgore pointed out in *New York* magazine, Democrats flipped at least nine House seats—and not by running blue-dog conservatives to narrowly target white suburban voters. Two of those nine Democratic winners were black, one was a Latina, one was Jewish. This is a new Democratic Party, built not just on changing demographics, but on actually mobilizing the whole electorate.

Progressives have been urging Democrats to make this change for years, to mobilize people who want to build a more just society in as many places as possible. Abrams nicely sums up the reason she chose to invest so deeply beyond Atlanta and its suburbs: “You miss people who were supporting you until they saw that you didn’t care about them.” With her unexpectedly strong showing, and that of O’Rourke in Texas, Laura Kelly in Kansas, and the victorious House winners in Republican exurbs all over country, that message may have finally broken through.
LESSONS FROM THE 2018 MIDTERMS

by D.D. GUTTENPLAN

Progressives made some real inroads—now they need to organize better, smarter, and bigger.

Long before the first votes were even counted in the 2018 midterm elections, the merry morticians of moderation were already declaring the results a defeat for the left. Back in August, after a wave of progressive candidates led by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York, Andrew Gillum in Florida, and Ayanna Pressley in Massachusetts scored a series of upset victories over establishment Democrats, Politico gleefully informed readers that “Bernie and his army are losing 2018.” In September, the Democratic centrist think tank Third Way contrasted the 95 percent win rate for candidates endorsed by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee with the far less impressive ratio achieved by Our Revolution (37 percent) or Justice Democrats (31 percent)—without ever mentioning how many of the DCCC-backed candidates were incumbents. On the day before the midterms, Vox claimed that “Democrats are relying on moderate candidates to carry them to victory.” Ken Harbaugh, the Democratic challenger in Ohio’s Seventh Congressional District (reassuringly described as “far from a lefty”), was drafted as the poster boy for the argument that “Democrats are trading ideological purity for electoral viability.”

The only problem is that when the votes were counted, the centrist Harbaugh, a former Navy pilot whose ads promised to “put country over party,” finished nearly 20 points behind Republican incumbent Bob Gibbs—a poorer showing by far than J.D. Scholten’s three-point loss to Iowa Republican Steve King, even though Scholten ran an unabashedly progressive campaign against an incumbent who had won by more than 20 points in all but one of his seven reelection bids. There will never be a shortage of voices in the media ready to bury the left.

Yet a sober assessment of the midterm results shows cause for concern as well as celebration. In the days leading up to the election, I asked a number of progressive activists about the races they were paying close attention to, both in their own states and nationally. The three names that recurred again and again were Gillum, Georgia’s Stacey Abrams, and Texas’s Beto O’Rourke, followed by Jess King running for Congress in Pennsylvania, Kara Eastman in Nebraska, and Randy Bryce in Wisconsin. A win in any of those races would have been a political earthquake, but as we go to press, the earth still hasn’t moved.

So if the results are genuinely mixed, what conclusions can be drawn about the political terrain as we move into 2019 and beyond? In reading what follows, bear in mind that election returns are like tea leaves—you can probably find any pattern you want if you look hard enough. However, in my exchanges with activists and organizers both before and after the election, a few common themes emerged.

1 The center of the Democratic party has moved left.

When Gretchen Whitmer defeated Abdul El-Sayed in Michigan’s Democratic gubernatorial primary, the result was seen as a defeat for Bernie Sanders, who headlined a pair of events for El-Sayed, as well as for Our Revolution, which had endorsed him. And when Whitmer claimed victory in the general election, The New York Times assured readers she was not a “fiery leftist” but rather a “shrewd politician” with a “pragmatic approach to policymaking.” All of which is true—but only if you allow for a pragmatism that embraces Medicaid expansion (Whitmer’s signal achievement as a state senator), the legalization of recreational marijuana, a $15 minimum wage, and a robust program to combat climate change.

2 Voters have sent the most progressive Democratic caucus to Washington in a generation.

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wage, support for same-sex adoptive parents, universal preschool, and a rock-solid commitment to reproductive choice. (By the way, Sanders campaigned for Whitmer in the general election, too.)

“Voters have sent the most progressive Democratic caucus to Washington in a generation,” said Charles Chamberlain, executive director of Democracy for America. “Rashida Tlaib in Michigan and Veronica Escobar from Texas ran against the Democratic establishment and won. Many of the other Democratic newcomers ran on multiracial, inclusive populism.”

Chamberlain’s excitement was echoed by Joe Dinkin of the Working Families Party. “In the primaries, progressives won a whole bunch of incredible victories, many on safe Democratic turf. But even many Democrats who won in competitive races are much more progressive than the normal Democratic baseline,” Dinkin said. “For a long time, Keith Ellison and Maxine Waters were some of the most progressive members of Congress. Now there are at least five new members more radical than that.”

2 Progressive ideas are popular, even in places where Democratic candidates are not.

When he wasn’t celebrating the election of Colin Allred, the former NFL player and civil-rights lawyer who upset Pete Sessions in Texas’s 32nd Congressional District, progressive activist Jim Hightower reminded me not to overlook the fate of “20 to 30 important ballot initiatives.” In addition to Florida’s historic Amendment 4, which will restore voting rights to more than 1 million people who have served their time for felony convictions, voters in Utah, Nebraska, and Idaho expanded Medicaid coverage. In Arkansas, a measure to raise the minimum wage passed by more than 2 to 1; in Missouri, the margin in favor of raising the minimum wage was 30 points. Utah voted to legalize medical marijuana. None of these states are blue-wave territory.

Meanwhile, polling data indicate that even ideas long deemed too radical to be taken seriously by the mainstream media—ending cash bail; having the government produce inexpensive generic drugs or guarantee employment for anyone genuinely unable to find work; and treating the Internet as a public utility, with publicly owned providers replacing private corporations—are actually favored by a majority of Americans.

3 Democrats now need to deliver results—including on the economy.

The outcome in New York’s 19th Congressional District, where Antonio Delgado defeated Republican incumbent John Faso, shows that health care remains a winning issue. Faso, a former lobbyist, tried to brand Delgado as a carpetbagger—a strategy that he used to devastating effect against Zephyr Teachout in 2016. But Delgado fought back with a laser-like focus on Faso’s vote to repeal the Affordable Care Act, contrasting that with his own support for allowing people to opt into Medicare. In view of Faso’s racist campaign, which described Delgado—a graduate of Harvard Law School and a former Rhodes scholar—as a “big-city rapper,” a friend who lives in the district said she thought health care might have “occupied the same position for the Delgado campaign as the economy did for the Obama 2008 campaign—i.e., white people were more concerned about losing access to health care than they were about the candidate’s race.”

But now that Democrats control the House, they will need to do much more than merely prevent the repeal of Obamacare or accuse the Republicans of planning to privatize Social Security. “Now we need elected officials to deliver,” said Derrick Osobase, the Texas political director for the Communications Workers of America, in a postelection conference call.

Democrats have countered President Trump’s claim that he’s brought about the “greatest economy” ever by pointing out that the current record-low unemployment rate and surging job growth doesn’t reflect the whole picture—and that it really began under Barack Obama anyway. That might work for economics nerds, especially since it’s true, but if you’re a steelworker watching local plants gear up thanks to Trump’s tariffs on foreign competition, or an unemployed miner hoping for a job in coal or fracking, those arguments won’t cut it. Nor will a return to the “America is already great” neoliberal globalism offered by Hillary Clinton—and still embraced by the Wall Street wing of the Democratic Party.

In the long term, Trump’s economic nationalism may well prove disastrous. But to have a hope of winning in 2020, Democrats need to see and then raise the Republicans on the economy—by making sure that wages outpace inflation, and by providing good, well-paying green jobs to replace those currently choking our cities and fouling our groundwater, as well as economic security through the kind of bold government action once associated with the party of the New Deal.

4 Information matters.

In the explosion of creative revulsion that greeted Trump’s inauguration, two very different kinds of groups emerged or gained traction. One was ideologically driven, policy-oriented, and focused on promoting either specific candidates (Our Revolution, Justice Democrats) or specific policies (Democratic Socialists of America, the Working Families Party, People’s Action). All of these groups can point to successes in the midterms, but none of them can plausibly claim to have come close to achieving their goals.

Swing Left can. Founded by three political amateurs in November 2016, Swing Left eschews taking policy positions or engaging in ideological battle, instead pointing progressives who want to “do something” in the direction
of their nearest flippable congressional district. “We raised $10 million from 70,000 donors,” said Ethan Todras-Whitehill, a former SAT-prep coach and freelance writer who co-founded the group. Swing Left started with districts where a Republican had won by 15 points or less. Then it added some Democratic incumbents, but “took them out when we realized they didn’t need our help.”

In addition to money, Swing Left also sent volunteers, making 2.5 million phone calls and knocking on 5 million doors. “I was surprised by how much everyone seems to love canvassing. It’s sort of retro-cool,” Todras-Whitehill observed. Adding districts that had been carried by Clinton got the attention of her Onward Together PAC, which made Swing Left one of its five partners. But as Todras-Whitehill noted, ideology isn’t their thing. “We’re kind of an apolitical political organization. It’s Swing relative Left, not Swing absolute Left. [It’s] left of where we were.”

“We don’t take positions in primaries,” he added—a stance that gives Swing Left a unique kind of authority. Its Texas branch used that cachet to hold a unity fundraiser before the primary that all seven Democratic contenders attended, raising a war chest that was then turned over to the winner, Colin Allred.

Now that the House has flipped, Swing Left has announced that it will “focus its efforts on winning an expanded slate of competitive races where grassroots volunteers can make the difference”—including for Congress, state offices, and the presidency. “Politics evolve,” said Todras-Whitehill. “We feel like we’re the home for people who just want to win.”

5 Candidate recruitment and training matter.

For Amanda Litman, the shock of Election Day 2016 hit especially hard. As the e-mail director of Clinton’s campaign, she went through all the phases of grief before founding Run for Something, a group that helps recruit and support young progressives running mostly in down-ballot races. “When we put out the call for candidates, 20,000 people raised their hands,” she told me. In the end, 1,500 candidates applied for the group’s endorsement. “You had to be pro-choice, pro-equality, and willing to work hard,” Litman said. “But one of the benefits of federalism is that a Democrat in Georgia or California is going to be different from a Democrat in New York.”

Out of 418 first-time candidates that the group guided onto the ballot, 150 won. “We flipped state-legislature seats in more than a dozen states,” Litman said. “And we won some long-shot races—defeating [Republican state senator and eight-term incumbent] Marty Golden in Brooklyn. We flipped a congressional seat in Oklahoma [Kendra Horn in the Fifth District]. That’s bananas! That race wasn’t on anyone’s pickup list.”

6 Good candidates matter—even when they lose.

Beto O’Rourke’s this-close defeat was heartbreaking, but without his charisma at the top of the ticket and the volunteers he mobilized campaigning in every one of Texas’s 254 counties, would Colin Allred or Lizzie Pannill Fletcher have won their congressional seats? Would Democrats have also flipped 12 seats in the Texas House?

In Florida, Andrew Gillum ultimately fell short, but the enthusiasm generated by his historic challenge carried Bill Nelson—who phoned in his own campaign (and has since conceded)—to a recount. And when I criticized progressives for overselling Randy Bryce’s chances in Wisconsin, the Working Families Party’s Joe Dinkin pushed back: “Scott Walker would still be governor if Randy hadn’t run. He stepped up to do something hard—and way outperformed the Democrats who ran in that district previously.”

7 Organization matters.

The ongoing resurrection of Texas populism is one of the great untold stories of American politics. O’Rourke’s campaign was smart enough to build on the work of the Texas Organizing Project, Our Revolution Texas, and the other groups who have spent years developing a “cities out” operation centered primarily on communities of color. Instead of chasing white, centrist swing voters, these organizers targeted the 3 million registered voters of color who rarely go to the polls. Using the “big data” technologies developed by Becky Bond and Zack Exley for Bernie Sanders’s 2016 presidential run, O’Rourke’s campaign focused on identifying and staying in touch with so-called “low propensity,” low-income voters and giving them concrete reasons to turn out.

It wasn’t enough to elect O’Rourke—this time. But Republican Senator John Cornyn’s seat comes up in 2020. A similarly focused effort going by the name Black Girl Magic just elected 17 African-American women as judges in Houston and surrounding Harris County. And while Stacey Abrams waged a brilliant campaign in Georgia, her battle might have been a little less uneven had the state legislature where Republicans ran unopposed. As my colleague Joan Walsh points out, coattails can work both ways.

8 Politics matter.

As long as our politics relies on wealthy donors and a professional consultant class that makes its real money representing corporations and lobbying former colleagues, there will always be loud voices urging Democrats to downplay racial or economic justice and tacitly toward the dead center. Which is why those of us who care about
more than just electing Democrats have to stay alert and engaged—especially now that the midterms are over.

One way to do that is to find a local group whose concerns align with your own, whether that’s a chapter of the Working Families Party or the Democratic Socialists of America, a union political-action committee, or groups organizing around immigrant rights, public-school funding, climate justice, access to health care, or ending police violence. Another is to pay attention to—and get involved in—the ongoing battle to make the Democratic Party more democratic and less in hock to corporate interests.

That also means building our own infrastructure (in some cases from the ground up), and realizing that relying on volunteers to do the work—and make the decisions—for state and local Democratic organizations means shutting out precisely those low-income voters whose interests the party is supposed to defend. Maybe if some of the celebrities who gave so generously of their time and money to groups like Swing Left diverted a small fraction to local parties, they could put the state chairs on salary—most serve without pay—and recruit full-time organizing staffs that better reflect the Democrats’ target electorate. (The Texas Organizing Project, for example, employs hundreds of paid organizers, most of them people of color.)

9 Because in the end, democracy matters.

Despite what we might prefer to believe, Donald Trump remains extremely popular—especially with his base. Simply wringing our hands, or dismissing him and his supporters as he turns the Republican Party into the engine of white-nationalist belligerence, is a recipe for disaster. As Cindy Axne showed in Iowa, where Trump campaigned hard for GOP incumbent David Young, he can be beaten.

The midterms weren’t all good news for progressives. But for every Lizzie Pannill Fletcher, a moderate who flipped Texas’s Seventh Congressional District after a hard-fought primary victory over a more progressive opponent, there was a Lucy McBath, an African-American progressive who flipped the Georgia Sixth seat that Jon Ossoff, the previous “pragmatist” pinup, couldn’t. McBath, a member of the Mothers of the Movement whose son, Jordan Davis, was murdered for playing loud music in a car in 2012, ran on a platform of gun control, Medicare for everyone over 55, and public funding for contraception and abortion.

Maybe the defeat of Joe Donnelly in Indiana and Claire McCaskill in Missouri will lead Democrats to stop backing candidates who run away from their party. Meanwhile, the elections of McBath, Delgado, Tlaib, Ocasio-Cortez, and Axne, as well as Abby Finkenauer in Iowa, Sharice Davids in Kansas, Ilhan Omar in Minnesota, Chuy García in Illinois, and Jahana Hayes in Connecticut, means this new class of Democrats is the most diverse and the most progressive in the party’s history. “The idea that Democrats can’t compete anywhere, or that people of color can’t compete, is absolutely shattered,” said Democracy for America’s Charles Chamberlain.

“What happened on November 6 was not a fluke—it’s a trend,” said Jose Garza of the Workers Defense Project in Texas. That may not be the case yet. But it isn’t a pipe dream either.

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“I loved the bright, endearing presence of kindred spirits to share the experience with! The trip was amazing in every way!”

—Mary, Phoenix, AZ (Cuba)
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After a surge of first-time democratic candidates flipped 15 seats in Virginia’s House of Delegates last year, the state quickly expanded Medicaid, extending coverage to 400,000 uninsured residents. And those 2017 state legislative victories kept paying off: On Election Day 2018, they helped three female candidates take Republican seats in the US House of Representatives, giving Democrats a majority of House districts—seven of 11—in gerrymandered Virginia.

One of those women, former CIA agent and first-time candidate Abigail Spanberger, beat Representative Dave Brat, the Tea Party candidate who scored a surprising win over House majority leader Eric Cantor in the 2014 Republican primary. Spanberger’s victory was a major upset, but it shouldn’t have come as a complete surprise. Last year, Democrats shocked the GOP by picking up three statehouse seats in Brat’s district; according to Justin Jones, Spanberger’s communications director, “That laid the groundwork for this campaign. They knocked on doors that hadn’t been knocked on in years; they identified voters that had never talked to Democrats before. It made a huge difference.”

Democrats lost 968 state legislative seats under President Obama, and in the wake of Donald Trump’s election, a roster of new groups sprang up to reverse the trend, recognizing that state governments have significant jurisdiction over voting rights, reproductive health, labor laws, and business regulation. Around the country, these newly formed groups took heart from last year’s results in Virginia and mounted major campaigns to find, train,
and support state candidates. Those efforts mostly paid off: Of the 6,066 legislative seats that were up for election on November 6, more than 5,300 had Democratic challengers or incumbents, according to the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee (DLCC)—a big jump over recent midterms.

So far (some votes are still being counted), Democrats have won a total of 2,908 seats, or more than half of those they contested; 1,173 of the winners are women, 842 are candidates of color, and 84 are LGBTQ. Democrats have now picked up 380 Republican seats—more than a third of the total lost in three national elections under Obama—in just one year. Add to that the 44 they’d already flipped from red to blue, in Virginia and in special elections, and they’re up 424 seats in the age of Donald Trump. With more strong challengers, more money, and better strategy, getting the rest of those 968 seats back in 2020 doesn’t seem out of reach.

Still, despite the new focus, there is no organized Democratic equivalent to the GOP’s REDMAP, a national plan developed by Republican operators and donors to control redistricting by ending Democratic majorities in state governments after Obama’s election in 2008. That investment paid off: In the 2010 election cycle, the Republicans flipped 20 legislative chambers and some 700 seats—more than twice the Democrats’ 2018 gains.

This year, the DLCC raised a record $35 million, to the Republicans’ approximately $50 million. But GOP incumbents in many states were sitting on big war chests from local business interests, and Democratic challengers needed more help to compete. The snafus and outright voter suppression that may have doomed several high-profile Democratic contenders—in Florida, where, after recounts, Andrew Gillum and Bill Nelson conceded their respective bids for governor and US senator; and in Georgia, where, in a heartbreaking speech acknowledging that she will not be her state’s next governor, Stacey Abrams decried the poll closures and other anti-democratic measures that her supporters faced—illustrate what happens when Republicans rig voting rules. “2016 showed us how much power state governments have over elections. And yet, this year, we’re having the same conversations about the Abrams, Gillum, and Nelson races—all while still underinvesting in state races,” says Catherine Vaughan, the co-founder of Flippable, one of the post-Trump groups focusing on statehouses.

Perhaps the most significant result of the 2018 state elections is that the groups who declared their intentions to work on them last year showed up and got results. That list includes the powerful Democratic women’s PAC Emily’s List; the fledgling Run for Something, which recruits millennials for state and local races; longtime player DailyKos and the upstart Data for Progress (both of which raised roughly $900,000 for state legislative candidates); Flippable and the People PAC, which made 200 videos for candidates in six states; the data-driven EveryDistrict; SisterDistrict, which matched blue-district volunteers and donors with promising but underfunded red-district challengers; and newcomers like Forward Majority and the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, both founded by Obama-administration alums to focus on states with redistricting implications. All told, the new groups put millions of dollars and dozens of staffers into flipping state races, alongside a beefed-up DLCC.

If those 382 Democratic legislative flips sound good, maybe even more important is that Democrats have gained control of eight chambers under Trump: the state senates in Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, New York, and New Hampshire (after winning control of Washington State’s upper chamber in a special election last year), and the House of Representatives in Minnesota (where they picked up an astonishing 18 seats) and New Hampshire. They cracked GOP supermajorities in five additional chambers, including both the House and Senate in North Carolina. Once Republicans lose a supermajority, Democratic governors can veto their extreme measures without fear of an override. Smashing the GOP supermajority in North Carolina will give Democratic Governor Roy Cooper more leverage, and it will also protect the Democratic majority on the state Supreme Court. Meanwhile, Democrats gained six supermajorities in another five states. Democrats also gained seven new governorships, giving the Republicans 25 to the Democrats’ 23.

They also shattered four Republican “trifectas” (that’s when one party holds both chambers of the state legislature as well as the governor’s seat) and added six trifectas of their own. Republicans now hold 61 state chambers to the Democrats’ 37. (Nebraska’s unicameral legislature is nonpartisan.) This is crucial, because Republicans made their trifecta states laboratories of extremism after 2008, passing new restrictions on voting rights, reproductive health, labor rights, and environmental regulations. Democrats can now begin to roll back some of those awful laws.

In New York, a new Democratic trifecta will mean more liberal voting laws and the passage of a reproductive-health act. Marijuana legalization is on the Democratic agenda in New York and Minnesota, as are tax hikes for infrastructure spending. With a new Democratic governor and state Senate, Colorado may fund universal kindergarten and pre-K. New Democratic governors in Maine and Kansas will likely be able to expand Medicaid in those states, and there’s now even a chance for it to happen in North Carolina. And with its new Democratic trifecta, Nevada could become the first state to introduce a Medicaid buy-in as a health-insurance public option (the legislature passed it last year, but the state’s outgoing GOP governor vetoed it).

Even where Democrats didn’t win chambers, they made inroads into GOP control in several key states. In Pennsylvania, they picked up at least 16 seats in the House and Senate. Democrats won at least eight seats in the Florida House and four in Michigan’s. In Texas, Democrats won 12 seats in the House; Forward Majority invested more than $2 million in Texas alone.

(continued on page 22)
The Nation.

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December 17/24, 2018

THE DOWN-BALLOT DEMOCRATIC TRIUMPHS OF 2018

by JOHN NICHOLS

When the 31-year-old community organizer took the stage in Madison, Wisconsin, around 2 am on election night, the moment was electric. A crowd of millennials, many drawn into urgent political activism via protests against Donald Trump’s assaults on women’s rights, immigrants, science, and access to health care, exploded with such energy that the historic theater in which they’d gathered shook with excitement. A final surge of votes from Milwaukee, the state’s largest urban center—where turnout had been boosted by a campaign that borrowed from the civil-rights and voting-rights legacies that the young African-American contender so ardently embraced—had just swept this first-time candidate for statewide office to a historic victory. “They said this day would never come,” he shouted above the wild applause, “but we all knew that it was time for a change in Wisconsin.”

Meet Mandela Barnes, the new lieutenant governor of the Badger State, a passionate progressive who has steeped himself in the new politics of going big on the issues and even bigger on the mobilization of an expanded electorate. He’s a rising star who is already being talked up as a contender for higher office. And meet Juliana Stratton, the criminal-justice reformer who will be the first black wom-

THE MEDIA MISSED THE BIG STORY OF THIS YEAR’S MIDTERMS.

“You know what happened in November? We got a bench.”

—Rebecca Katz, Democratic communications specialist
an to serve as lieutenant governor of Illinois. And meet Garlin Gilchrist II, the 36-year-old former national campaign director for MoveOn, who celebrated his election as the first black lieutenant governor of Michigan by announcing: “We stand on this stage upon the shoulders of giants who had a vision that went beyond generations. And it’s our generation’s responsibility to live up to that responsibility by having our imaginations exceed our expectations.”

They were not the big names of the 2018 elections, but a cadre of down-ballot candidates—people of color, women, and millennial newcomers—brought bold policies, genuine diversity, and essential energy to state tickets and stirred a blue wave that swept the nation this year. In Wisconsin, where the Democratic candidates for governor and lieutenant governor defeated Scott Walker’s GOP ticket by just 30,000 votes (out of almost 2.7 million cast), Governor-elect Tony Evers will be the first to tell you that Barnes played a crucial role in generating a voting spike in college towns and communities with large minority populations. Yet because the media tend to focus on a handful of high-profile races rather than the full picture, few Americans are aware of the extent to which these next-generation candidates and a rising electorate prevailed on November 6.

For those who focused on early election reports, it was easy to imagine 2018 as another year of dashed hopes, given the frustrating results for candidates who had brought an intersectional and inspirational politics to some of the hardest races in the country, especially Beto O’Rourke’s challenge to Republican Senator Ted Cruz in Texas and the gubernatorial candidacies of Stacey Abrams in Georgia and Andrew Gillum in Florida. But the closeness of those contests argues for the opposite conclusion. O’Rourke and Abrams brought red states that had been dismissed as unwinnable into play, while Gillum came closer to winning Florida’s governorship than any Democrat has in 24 years. These campaigns proved that a new politics that goes beyond the boundaries of traditional campaigning and generates energy to expand the electorate can remake the political landscape. The electoral map is in a constant process of evolution—just 30 years ago, GOP presidential nominee George H.W. Bush won California and lost West Virginia—and the O’Rourke, Abrams, and Gillum campaigns have sped up the evolution of their states. At the same time, other states were turning the page.

The potency of the new politics was most evident in the so-called swing states, especially in the Great Lakes region, where Democrats roared back after years of losing statehouses. In many of these states, the political landscape was transformed on November 6—and many of the candidates who made the change were themselves transformational.

“It’s happening, people,” says Rebecca Katz, a former adviser to New York Mayor Bill de Blasio who has championed efforts to diversify and embolden the Democratic Party by nominating and electing women and people of color. “The big story of November 6 is of all these remarkable people who no one was watching who got elected in the states. You know what happened on November 6? We got a bench.”

Katz is right: Down-ballot winners in the states from 2018 will be the big names of our future national politics. That can certainly be said of newly elected Minnesota Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan, a 39-year-old member of the White Earth Nation of Ojibwe, who is the first Native American elected to statewide office in Minnesota. And of John Fetterman, the fierce 49-year-old advocate for working-class solidarity, racial and environmental justice, and the renewal of forgotten communities, who beat Pennsylvania’s incumbent lieutenant governor in this year’s Democratic primary and will take office in January. Fetterman will join Vermont Lieutenant Governor David Zuckerman—a 47-year-old organic farmer who was reelected by an 18-point margin this year with support from the state’s Democratic and Progressive parties—as part of a rising generation of statewide officials who will be able to use their bully pulpits to force debates on criminal-justice reform, economic inequality, climate justice, and immigrant rights.

This big-idea, big-issue politics was front and center in the races run by a quartet of dynamic African-American lawyers who won some of the most powerful attorney-general posts in the country: Tish James in New York, Kwame Raoul in Illinois, Keith Ellison in Minnesota, and Aaron Ford in Nevada. These new AGs will not only boldly challenge the excesses of the Trump administration; some will eventually emerge as gubernatorial and senatorial prospects. And they are not the only barrier breakers. Xavier Becerra, who was appointed last year as California’s first Latino attorney general, secured a full term with 62 percent of the vote. LGBTQ advocate and civil-rights champion Dana Nessel was the first Democrat elected as Michigan’s attorney general since 1998. And Josh Kaul, who left a position as a federal prosecutor to fight for voting rights, was elected Wisconsin’s attorney general at the age of 37.

The individual stories of these down-ballot successes are compelling. As Katz says, “The most interesting winners on Election Day are the people you never heard of.” So why isn’t this story more central to the mainstream analysis of what happened on November 6? The answer has everything to do with the political moment.

The Trump era has created such a sense of urgency in our politics that people are desperate for instant analysis. Unfortunately, the quick takes rarely go deep or wide. Only by expanding our perspective do we get a full sense of the blue wave that swept across America on November 6. Federal politics should not be neglected, of course; there’s every reason to be excited that voters flipped control of the US House of Representatives from red to blue and swept in a new generation of progressive leaders like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna Pressley, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib. There will be new congressional checks and balances on an out-of-control president who waded into the 2018 midterms as an avowed nationalist. But there will also be checks and balances on Trump and Trumpism by the states, where governors can expand access to Medicaid, where attorneys general can join lawsuits to block the president’s assaults on immigrants, where secretaries of state can expand voting rights, and where legislators can upend gerrymandering abuses.

The blue wave of 2018 changed the political map radically. Democrats have elected seven new governors and replaced nefarious right-wing Republicans like Walker in Wisconsin, Rick Snyder in Michigan, and Paul LePage in Maine. Democratic Governors Association chair Jay Inslee noted on the day after the election: “After last night’s results, 38 million more Americans will have a
Democratic governors. That means that Democratic governors now represent a majority of Americans—more than 175 million people.” The governors will have an easier time managing because Democrats overcame big gerrymandering and big money to finish the 2018 election cycle with an overall gain of some 380 state legislative seats (for more, see Joan Walsh on page 18).

The swing to the Democrats was particularly pronounced in the Great Lakes states, where it can be argued that Trump won the White House in 2016. Although he lost the popular vote by almost 3 million ballots, Trump took the Electoral College on the basis of narrow victories in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. On November 6, Democrats won every important statewide constitutional and US Senate contest in every one of those states.

It is understandable that, to the extent that states get attention in the Trump era, the focus will be on governors. But if Democrats want to figure out how to win in 2020 and beyond, they also need to pay attention to how contests were won for positions like secretary of state (Michigan just elected 41-year-old voting-rights advocate Jocelyn Benson to the post), state treasurer (Wisconsin’s 37-year-old Sarah Godlewski is preparing to address everything from student debt to climate change), and lieutenant governor.

There really are new ways to win, as the stunning turnaround in Wisconsin illustrates. For eight long years, progressives there sought to displace Walker, the anti-labor zealot who became a poster boy for the extreme right-wing politics that overtook the state following the Republican wave election of 2010. When Trump won there in 2016, commentators peddled the idea that Wisconsin had abandoned its progressive heritage and swung into the Republican column. As a result, conservatives were quick to dismiss Democratic gubernatorial nominee Tony Evers, a 67-year-old educator and administrator who acknowledged that he might not be the party’s most dynamic speaker. Nothing about Evers shouted “new politics”—yet it embraced it with an enthusiasm that other senior Democrats would be wise to emulate. Instead of demanding the spotlight, as gubernatorial candidates frequently do, Evers shared it with Mandela Barnes, his millennial running mate. Yard signs highlighted the names of both nominees; the two appeared at campaign rallies together; and the notion that this was a genuine ticket took hold.

A social-media whiz—his Twitter handle is @TheOtherMandela—Barnes made the ticket edgier, poking at Walker, defending progressive policies, and reimagining the state’s No. 2 job as a link between grassroots activists and government. As the election approached, Evers and Barnes toured campuses and communities across the state on a school bus with Senator Tammy Baldwin, along with Josh Kaul and Sarah Godlewski, the party’s millennial candidates for attorney general and state treasurer. At every stop, they approached, Evers and Barnes toured campuses and communities across the state on a school bus with Senator Tammy Baldwin, along with Josh Kaul and Sarah Godlewski, the party’s millennial candidates for attorney general and state treasurer. At every stop, they encouraged voters to think not just of electing a governor but of electing a full slate that included two women and an African American, and gave young down-ballot candidates not just attention but a promise of power. Baldwin, the first out LGBTQ senator in the country’s history, was a strong contender on her own. But the rest of the candidates needed one another, and Evers addressed that need by embracing Barnes and the next-generation politics he represented. There’s a lesson here for the Democratic Party: Embracing the new politics and welcoming candidates who embody it, as Tony Evers welcomed Mandela Barnes, is a winning strategy.

But amid this flurry of wins were some big disappointments. Chief among them was Ohio, where Democrats were thrilled to field a full slate of candidates for the legislature for the first time since 2000. But the same rural red tide that defeated gubernatorial candidate Richard Cordray doomed most Ohio Democrats.

Virtually all of the new groups say that not enough Democratic donors invested in this crucial effort. “Democrats outraised Republicans two-to-one in congressional races, but were outraised up to five-to-one in state races,” says Flippable co-founder Catherine Vaughan, citing research by Forward Majority. One major player in the field told me that she approached several top Democratic donors, but couldn’t get much investment in the state races.

Forward Majority’s Ben Wexler-Waite notes that Democrats failed to pick up a single chamber that could have an impact on redistricting. But one big win on that front was defeating Scott Walker in Wisconsin; Governor-elect Tony Evers can now veto bad redistricting plans. GOP gerrymandering is part of the reason that Wisconsin Democrats couldn’t take the state House or Senate: They won a majority of the vote for the legislature, but roughly 40 percent of the seats. In Ohio, the GOP kept its statehouse supermajority despite winning only 50.3 percent of the vote.

The 2018 gains in Texas, Pennsylvania, Florida, Michigan, and North Carolina, however, will help lay the foundation for more 2020 wins in these crucial redistricting states. Flipping the Texas House, for instance, could force Republicans to develop fairer redistricting maps, which is crucial, since the state’s rapid population growth means it will add as many as three US House seats after the 2020 Census. But in some state races with similar concerns, Democrats couldn’t do much to move the needle.

The National Democratic Redistricting Committee also wants to see Democrats focus more on the states that matter in 2020. But the NDRC’s Patrick Rodenbush points out that Colorado, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, and possibly Utah (where votes are still being counted) passed redistricting reform measures that will create “a more fair process.” SisterDistrict just announced a new 2020 push focused on redistricting states, as did Run for Something. “We’re going to hustle hard to recruit candidates to run against every incumbent Republican, but especially in states where redistricting is a priority,” says co-founder Amanda Litman.

Despite the disappointments, DailyKos’s Carolyn Fiddler emphasizes that the 2018 statehouse gains will make life better for millions of people. “By flipping key state legislatures and governorships and stripping Republicans of total government control in key swing states, Democrats are rebuilding real power at all levels of the ballot,” she says.

Right now, many of these groups are gearing up again for the 2019 elections in Virginia, where Democrats need only one seat to flip the House of Delegates, while defending 16 brand-new incumbents. But will they have the resources in 2020 to complete the job? Presidential-year turnout is always higher for the party, but so is competition for funding.

The People PAC’s Chris Bachman notes that GOP-controlled statehouses can still thwart Democrats’ presidential hopes in crucial swing states like Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Florida, where new voter-ID and other laws no doubt suppressed turnout for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Here’s hoping the bad news of 2018 convinces more donors and Democratic leaders that even more resources must flow toward ousting the vote-suppressing Republican lawmakers who made victory in those states impossible.
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The highway into Coalinga, California, passes a large white billboard with a brightly colored rainbow and the words “Jesus is Lord of Coalinga.” The road briefly becomes the main street as it runs through the triangle-shaped town. Off this main street sits the First Presbyterian Church, which is a block or so away from the World of Faith Christian Center, St. Paul’s Catholic Church, and the Pleasant Valley Christian Center. There are some 19 churches in a town with a population of 13,000, which often votes—as it did in November 2016—for a Republican president in this overwhelmingly blue state.

Coalinga is the sort of place where people remember when the town got its three traffic lights. Hunters spend hours in the surrounding canyons stalking wild hogs and pheasants or catching horned toads, which are raced at the annual town fair. Situated in California’s Central Valley, Coalinga is surrounded by tomato, garlic, and almond fields, and by hills dotted with bobbing oil wells. But Coalinga’s lifeblood is represented by the barbed-wire-enclosed structures on either end of town. As with other places that form part of the Central Valley’s “prison alley,” a pair of penitentiaries—Pleasant Valley State Prison and Claremont Custody Center—had brought more than a thousand jobs and lucrative revenue to Coalinga.

But, also like many small towns, Coalinga is struggling. Severe drought and fluctuations in global oil prices hit the people here hard, and in 2011, the state closed Claremont Custody Center. About 100 people suddenly found themselves jobless, and by 2016, Coalinga was over $3 million in debt. City Council members and even some private citizens tried to market the now-abandoned prison facility to lure businesses and investors. Mike Voss, 50, was the assistant warden at Claremont when the prison shut

—Rozina Ali is a journalist based in New York City. She writes on globalization, Islamophobia, and the War on Terror.
down. He has lived in Coalinga his entire life, and he was unable to find another job in corrections. In the months after he lost his job, Voss spent hours on the phone to cities like Los Angeles, Fresno, Monterey, and San Luis Obispo, trying to convince them to use Claremont as a satellite jail. He even contacted Immigration and Customs Enforcement about using the facility as a detention center, but there was little interest.

But then, two years ago, the City Council found an unlikely buyer. Ocean Grown Extracts, a medical-marijuana company that included Damian Marley, the son of reggae legend Bob Marley, as an investor, offered to purchase the facility. The council, seeing no other relief from the debt, was forced to buck the town’s deep-seated conservative ethos and sold the vacant prison for $4.1 million. Fresno County, in which Coalinga is located, had repeatedly voted against legalization, defying the trend in California, which legalized recreational marijuana by referendum in the fall of 2016. (It was the first state to legalize medical marijuana, in 1996.) Ocean Grown Extracts touted the move as an expression of the changing times: “This is symbolic and a big middle finger to the drug war and to a broken system that hasn’t worked for a long time now,” Marley told The Guardian that year.

The proponents of legalizing cannabis have long argued that doing so would help end mass incarceration. But as marijuana enters the white market in state after state, advocates have made increasingly grander promises: that marijuana can create jobs, revive struggling economies, and even rejuvenate the American heartland. “The cannabis industry continues to prove that it has what it takes to breathe new life into towns ravaged by the fall of better times,” a Forbes contributor wrote earlier this year. For Voss and other residents, however, the real story about marijuana is what happens next: Would this be a welcome change for Coalinga? Or was the promise of marijuana to revive this town overblown?

Coalinga, as the story often goes, was once a booming town. Its name is said to come from the three main coaling stations in the area: “Coaling Station A” eventually became shortened to “Coalinga” in the local dialect. But it was the discovery of oil in the late 19th century that transformed the area into a city, where churches sprouted up as fast as bars. Over the years, Coalinga's small-town feel started to take shape. Voss recalls playing baseball late into the summer evenings and riding his bike to the creek. His father was a worker in the oil fields, his mother was secretary for the school transportation district, and he worked a paper route to earn spending money.

Another Coalinga resident, Roger Campbell, also remembers a friendlier town. “People sat on their porches and talked in the evenings,” said Campbell, a school-district board member who grew up in Coalinga and whose parents owned a liquor store. “You’d come home and find...
Nathan Vosburg had only lived in Coalinga for 20 years, but that was long enough to know of life before the downward spiral. He blamed the oligarchy of old families that had run the City Council for decades for mismanaging the town. Back in 2014, the council was offering two choices to manage Coalinga’s growing debt: decreased services or increased taxes. But Vosburg believed that taxes were burdening people and keeping businesses away. So that day.” There were problems: a current of racism, fights between white and Latino students, growing drug use. Still, Campbell and Voss are nostalgic for a different Coalinga, one with a bustling downtown. Patty’s Jewelry stood next to the Coalinga Inn restaurant; from May Drug Pharmacy, you could walk to Sears; and just down the street was McCabe’s ice-cream parlor.

Then, one Monday afternoon in 1983, a 6.7-magnitude earthquake struck the town. Miraculously, no one was killed immediately, but the downtown was leveled, and Coalinga was left with more than $10 million in damages. The natural disaster coincided with a devastating drought, depleted oil fields, and falling global oil prices. Most businesses in town never recovered after the earthquake—McCabe’s was the last old-fashioned ice-cream parlor in town.

Meanwhile, the federal government launched the War on Drugs, which led to an enormous number of arrests. In need of facilities to house the state’s growing inmate population, California looked to the struggling towns of the Central Valley. Before long, Coalinga became home to two prisons, making incarceration one of its biggest industries—and, with a heavily unionized workforce, one that offered steady employment and job protections.

Decades later, jobs at Pleasant Valley State Prison, the larger of the two, that were supposed to go to Coalinga residents were being filled by employees commuting from elsewhere. Then the other prison, Claremont, was shut down. With a dwindling customer base, retail stores and restaurants around town were forced to close. Today, many employees are busing in from surrounding cities. The city manager and even the police chief, for example, commute from up to an hour away.

“At one time, almost every teacher in the district lived in Coalinga,” said Campbell, who has worked in the school district for more than four decades. “Now, 50 percent of teachers live outside of Coalinga. Commuting has become a way of life.” Employers wanted to use Coalinga’s land, but no one wanted to stay.

Operators of marijuana dispensaries in California have ties to large-scale crime organizations,” the school-district superintendent claimed, before declaring that Coalinga’s schools were submitting a “no” resolution. “Now, 50 percent of teachers live outside of Coalinga. Commuting has become a way of life.” Employers wanted to use Coalinga’s land, but no one wanted to stay.}

In July 2016, the City Council passed an ordinance permitting medical-marijuana companies in Coalinga.

Our town: Coalinga Mayor Nathan Vosburg (above) and a view of the city after the 1983 earthquake.

YEAR, the 37-year-old IT analyst decided to run for City Council on an anti-tax platform, and he won. “They elected someone into office who said, ‘Let’s think outside the box,’” Vosburg recalled.

He took that victory as a mandate. California was then allowing every city and town in the state to take a position on whether to allow commercial marijuana operations, and Coalinga was drafting an ordinance banning cultivation. But when Ocean Grown Extracts approached the town about buying Claremont Custody Center, Vosburg saw it as a way to save Coalinga without raising taxes. He and another councilman, Patrick Keough, convinced the council to consider Ocean Grown’s proposal. They campaigned at the local Starbucks and on a “Coalinga Citizens” Facebook page, arguing that the marijuana industry could help save the town from bankruptcy. Marijuana wasn’t a so-called gateway drug, they told residents; instead, it was a medicine that Coalinga would help to produce.

On the evening of February 4, 2016, the City Council convened a town meeting to discuss the proposal, in what may have been the biggest assembly in Coalinga’s history. People spilled from City Hall onto the street. Mayors and sheriffs from other cities came to watch. In the chamber, Keough, usually a gregarious man, was tense as he opened the floor for public comments. For the next hour, people offered personal stories of how medical marijuana had saved family members, while others argued that Ocean Grown would destroy the moral fabric of the town.

“All you have to do is look at the marijuana company opening in Compton, in Los Angeles,” said an attorney representing Ocean Grown. “They are going to take our city, turn it into a commune that Coalinga would help to produce. “I have a position on whether to allow commercial marijuana operations, and Coalinga was drafting an ordinance banning cultivation. But when Ocean Grown Extracts approached the town about buying Claremont Custody Center, Vosburg saw it as a way to save Coalinga without raising taxes. He and another councilman, Patrick Keough, convinced the council to consider Ocean Grown’s proposal. They campaigned at the local Starbucks and on a “Coalinga Citizens” Facebook page, arguing that the marijuana industry could help save the town from bankruptcy. Marijuana wasn’t a so-called gateway drug, they told residents; instead, it was a medicine that Coalinga would help to produce.

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The effect on the business climate was immediate. “As soon as people found out Ocean Grown was coming in, it was like a green rush of people saying, ‘That’s not fair—you can’t just do it for them,’” Vosburg said. Coalinga sold 12 more licenses for cannabis companies to operate in the industrial lot at the opposite end of town. Delighted by the success, the City Council appointed Vosburg as the new mayor (standard procedure for selecting mayors in Coalinga, rather than by popular ballot). Even those who’d been lukewarm to the idea began to be more receptive.

Voss, the former assistant warden at Claremont, had been unemployed for a year and a half after he lost his job and hadn’t attended the heated town-hall meeting. But “sometimes,” he told me, “the writing is on the wall.”

In November 2016, on the heels of a massively funded push by George Soros, Sean Parker, and other wealthy philanthropists, voters across California legalized recreational marijuana. That same day, residents in Coalinga voted to allow a medical-marijuana dispensary in town (the dispensary opened this October in the downtown plaza, next to a nail salon and a Mexican restaurant and across the street from a smoke shop). When I met Keough a few months after the 2016 election, he told me the council’s commitment had paid off. “The grumblers, they need to take a chill pill,” he said. “They were given years to come up with an alternative plan before all this happened. Not one viable solution. At all.”

Excitement over legalization in the country’s most populous state led to speculation about an economic boom. One analysis by the cannabis-market-research firm ArcView projected that California sales would reach $7.6 billion by 2020. Yet many cities that have approved cannabis business operations have yet to develop regulations or issue permits. With Ocean Grown, Coalinga jumped ahead of the pack and worked with consultants and lawyers to follow the state’s guidelines for licensing, compliance, and safety regulations. In the vast area between Los Angeles and San Francisco, Coalinga was positioning itself to become a marijuana hub. (A recent study published by The Mercury News found that one-third of California cities allow recreational-cannabis businesses. The study rated Coalinga 95.9 out of 100 for its permissiveness, while nearby Fresno scored a mere 0.5.)

The town plans to attract companies by lowering the cost of doing business. This was one reason why Michael Jennings, a longtime marijuana grower, applied for several business licenses in Coalinga. It’s what attracted investors, who agreed to put almost $16 million into Jennings’s company, Next Green Wave. In early 2017, Coalinga approved its licenses for indoor cultivation, manufacturing, and distribution. “Labor is cheaper; insurance, land, water, electricity are all cheaper,” Jennings told me. “Cannabis doesn’t give a shit where it’s grown.”

RECENTLY, VOSBURG DROVE ME AROUND THE PERIMETER of the converted Claremont complex, which sits at the edge of town near West Hills College. It still retains the facade of the old prison. A steel fence crowned with barbed wire surrounds a windowless two-story concrete building. Cars fill the once-empty parking lot, and armed security guards stand at the entrance. (One of them used to work there as a guard when it was still a prison.) Inside, Ocean Grown is cultivating cannabis and has started distribution operations, but there is no sign or smell to indicate that fact.

Vosburg told me that Ocean Grown has about 60 employees working here, but admitted that he didn’t know how many were Coalinga residents. The company has limited interactions with the community: It hosted a shaved-ice stand at Coalingafest and it once donated blue light bulbs for National Police Week. It’s also given tours of the company to the City Council, police, and mayors of nearby towns. Though it insists it’s active in the community, Ocean Grown has largely adopted the attitude of an aloof proprietor. It requires employees to sign a nondisclosure agreement, and many of the people that I spoke with in town didn’t even realize it was operating.

These days, residents on the “Coalinga Citizens” Facebook page have stopped arguing about the morality of marijuana and instead inquire about how to get jobs at Ocean Grown. Although Campbell, the school-district board member, was an early vocal opponent, he conceded that if marijuana brought in money for the district, he would take it, even if it was “dirty money.” The $4.1 million from the sale of Claremont went toward wiping out Coalinga’s debt, and revenue from the sales of some canna-businesses will go to various entities, including the school district.

Last June, I visited the marijuana-business zone at the outer edge of town, a large empty plot of land for which the city has now sold some two dozen licenses. At the corner of Enterprise and Mercantile streets, a massive skeletal steel structure towered above the pistachio orchards across the road. Several construction workers in neon-green shirts and hard hats were drilling a hole, with piles of dirt and a tractor nearby. This was the beginning of the Coalinga branch of Next Green Wave, Jennings’s company. The whole lot—all 22 acres—is zoned for cannabis, but Next Green Wave is the only business that seems to be operating. Vosburg pointed to a plot of land where a portable office sat, but it was closed. Another plot was empty but for a sign bearing the name of a company. Vosburg suspects that the businesses did not have the funding to get up and running—or that the Trump administration’s anti-cannabis stance had spooked companies. “It’s been quiet,” Vosburg admitted.

Across the state, the cannabis industry is struggling to meet market projections. A sales tax on marijuana, imposed after legalization in 2016, has driven up prices, encouraging the persistence of an illicit market. Tax in-
come from cannabis sales and cultivation in
the first six months of 2018 was $40 million
less than the state had projected. On the
supply side, the industry is operating under
unclear and shifting licensing rules that have
forced some businesses to pause or go un
der. Those that are running do so under a
temporary license. “If you’re an undercapi
talized grassroots guy, this is a nightmare,
because a change in regulation that costs
you $40,000 can sink your entire project,”
Jennings noted.

With most of these expected marijuana
companies not yet in business, Coalinga
is losing millions of dollars in taxes and
licensing fees. “There was a firestorm of
people that came in and found out it was
a lot more money and rules in the legal
sphere,” one city official told me. “A lot of
people backed out in land acquisition.”

But even with the millions potentially
coming in from Ocean Grown, Coalinga
remains in the red. When Ocean Grown
bought Claremont, the city had one of the
most business-friendly tax rates in the state.
It taxed Ocean Grown’s cultivation at a mere
$25 per square foot for the first 3,000 square
feet, and $10 per square foot thereafter.
But once California voted to legalize pot in
2016, other towns in the state and the Cen
tral Valley started to reach out to the new
industry. City councils in nearby towns, in
spired by Coalinga’s example, have allowed
limited operations or have launched efforts
to convince their residents of the new op
portunity.

“When we first started this, our tax rate
at the time was a decent tax rate,” Vosburg
told me. “We thought definitely people
would come and they’d want to pay that
rate—and they wanted to. But as soon as it
opened up in California for everyone, that
tax rate is no longer a competitive tax rate.
So we’re going to have to change it.”

At a meeting this spring, City Council
members discussed slashing taxes to lure
companies. Among those present was a
woman from Sacramento who said she’d
worked on Wall Street for almost two
decades and now served as a consultant
for cannabis businesses and cities. Coalinga
would need to offer greater incen
tives, she told the council, and suggested
lowering the tax rate and negotiating for
longer-term development agreements. The
council agreed; the city cut the tax rate
for cultivation from $25 to $7 per square
foot, and for nurseries from $25 to $2 per
square foot. “They’ve kept their end of the
bargain,” Casey Dalton, CEO of Ocean
Grown, told me. “They were family, and
kept themselves flexible and competitive.”
Far from being a miracle economic cure,
the cannabis industry was proving to be like
every other industry in America: in search
of cheap labor and low taxes.

Even as Coalinga courted canna
businesses with sweetheart tax deals, it was
still running out of money—so the coun
cil leaned on residents to generate revenue
while the city waited for the businesses to
come flocking. Last fall, it proposed a sales
tax. Voters refused. This past January the
city, running dangerously low on funds, cut
nine police and three firefighter positions.
Faced with the possibility of more cuts to
public services, voters agreed in Novem
ber to a sales tax. “Now that I’m in city
government, I don’t understand how these
people think they deserve things but are
not willing to pay,” said Vosburg, who had
campaigned on an anti-tax platform back in
2015. “There is no revenue stream.”

Earlier this year, a scandal at the town’s
medical center involving mismanagement
of funds had forced the center to shut
down. The nearest hospital is now at least
40-minute drive away. Only two ambu
lances operate at a time in Coalinga, and
they would now be occupied by the com
mute for hours at a time. Recently, a major

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—Duncan Kennedy, Carter Professor
of General Jurisprudence Emeritus,
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re-sacralized dimension, evocative of a new future.”
—Fania E. Davis, activist, civil rights lawyer,
and restorative justice scholar and practitioner
The grocery store shut down, the summer farmers’ market was discontinued, and the staff of Coalinga’s only newspaper was reduced to a single reporter, who writes and produces the paper by herself. “People use the phrase around here, ‘We’re a dying town,’” one resident said. “When you lose a newspaper, you lose a bloodstream.”

Last year, Kmart started emptying its shelves as it closed several stores in the area. Coalinga lost the $82,000 a year it made in county sales taxes from the retail chain. There isn’t anywhere else in Coalinga to buy clothes or toys, said Hilda Crawford of the town’s library. Crawford is the daughter of migrant fieldworkers and has lived in the area her entire life. When she saw Vosburg, she told him, “You fought really hard and worked your ass off to get that marijuana facility. Are you going to work hard to get a replacement for Kmart—or do I make my chonies out of hemp?”

Clearly, California’s cannabis businesses, investors, and consumers are still adjusting to the new reality of legal marijuana. It’s possible that, once the compliance rules are firmly in place, Coalinga will be able to capitalize on a lucrative market. But the cannabis industry, in the end, is a business, and the jobs that the City Council once thought these companies would bring to Coalinga still depend on the needs of that business. Jennings, the owner of Next Green Wave, told me that he would much rather hire people who have experience farming and have never touched cannabis over people who grow marijuana in their basement. But many other jobs in the industry, like those of technician and researcher, require particular skills. “From a fiduciary standpoint, I can’t commit to employ 80 percent of local residents if we only get 20 percent who are qualified,” he said.

Coalinga’s local community college, West Hills, which has long trained students to enter industries in the surrounding area, has a large agricultural program, but it currently has no curriculum to train students in marijuana cultivation. Vosburg’s own enthusiasm about the marijuana industry seems to have been tempered. One company recently made a pitch to Coalinga, estimating that it would bring in over $1 million in tax revenues. “Those are just numbers, because we’ve heard all kinds of companies tell us they’re going to bring in all kinds of things,” Vosburg said. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

The biggest employers in town remain those that Coalinga has long relied on: oil, prisons, agriculture, and the school districts. Ever since he graduated from high school, Voss has moved among all of them except agriculture. Currently, he teaches a course in crime-scene investigation at the high school, training kids for jobs in corrections, an industry that’s already established in Coalinga. As the school district faced cuts, Voss was at risk of losing this job, too, but his wife, who is also a teacher, and the teachers’ union fought on his behalf and saved it. In the prisons, oil fields, and schools, unions have helped save the limited number of jobs in a dying town. There is little promise that marijuana companies, looking for incentives in a competitive market, will do likewise. So far, Ocean Grown, the only company currently up and running, doesn’t offer union jobs.

As I spoke with Voss in his home, he and his wife named the old families who no longer live in Coalinga and the businesses that were leaving town. “I worry about Coalinga right now,” he told me. “We’re in a big downturn.” For now, it seems, the promise of legalized cannabis has failed to deliver. And yet there is no other promise on the horizon. “There’s no industry that’s coming in,” Voss said, “other than marijuana.”

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“Because of Colombia’s tragic past, I signed up for this trip with some trepidation. I am so thankful that I did. Our group was expertly guided as we engaged with the beauty of this country, its history, art, and culture, its diverse people and ecosystems, and, most importantly, with local leaders who are guiding the movement for peace and justice.”

—Josh S., Colorado

“The trip was a remarkable introduction to a fascinating and astonishingly beautiful country. Flawlessly organized from start to finish, it took me to places I would not have visited on my own, in the company of well-informed, energetic, and interesting people—guides, lecturers, and fellow travelers alike.”

—Judith K., New Hampshire

“After looking at our Nation itinerary in Colombia, our friend in Bogotá smiled and said, ‘Oh, good. You’re going to see the real Colombia.’ He was so right. Insightful speakers, numerous off-the-grid experiences, opportunities to meet Colombians from many strata of the country’s complex population, and tremendous ambition in constructing the itinerary add up to a lot of meaning and fun.”

—Marilyn S., Ohio

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Letters
(continued from page 2)
Moreover, no politicians can reverse this democratic triumph, since only another vote by the electorate could do so.
Other states would do well to study and replicate what just happened in Michigan. Once citizens of goodwill understand what gerrymandering is and how it perverts our democracy, thousands (including many who were never politically involved previously) rush forward to support the cause.

Michael D. Stanton
Flushing, Mich.

Dump the Hump
Re “The Dual Defeat: Hubert Humphrey and the Unmaking of Cold War Liberalism,” by Michael Kazin [Nov. 12]: During the late 1960s and early 1970s, one of the most damning insults among our politically active group was to call someone “a Hubert Humphrey liberal.”
I have seen no overwhelming evidence since that we were wrong in this regard.

Harry E. Antoniou
Redondo Beach, Calif.

Road Map for Change
Re Jimmy Tobias’s “Destination, Lancaster”: I’ve been keeping some distant tabs on Lancaster Stands Up since The Nation’s first article on the group, in May 2017, to see how it perverts our democracy, thousands of people, vitally important farmland, and some of the most beautiful natural settings in the country? It makes the magazine look ignorant and conceited and certainly does nothing to build bridges with people who might be considered natural allies. Granted, as long as the magazine takes this attitude, people might just as soon you did fly over, but it’s personally and politically stupid and surely unworthy of a magazine called The Nation.

Katharine W. Klyaardsam
Baltimore

Fly in the Ointment
In “The Wave Hits a Wall” [Dec. 3/10], D.D. Guttenplan writes, “Although he may be anathema on the coasts, Trump’s support in flyover country remains a powerful asset.” That illustrates our problem as progressives: That’s not flyover country, that’s the United States. The sooner we stop disparaging our fellow citizens living beyond urban centers and college campuses and take seriously their concerns, the sooner we’ll reclaim the White House and Senate.

Nathan M. Appel
Kensington, Md.

History Repeats Itself
In 1935, The Nation published a series of articles on the forerunners of American fascism. Any chance you could put some of them into upcoming issues? I think it would be most enlightening.

Clare A. Lake
Hartford, Conn.
The subtitle of this effusively admiring biography of Zbigniew Brzezinski, *America’s Grand Strategist*, does not reflect its true purpose. A more accurate one might be this: “Just as Smart as the Other Guy.” The other guy, of course, is Henry Kissinger. The implicit purpose of Justin Vaïsse’s book is to argue that in his mastery of strategic thought and practice, Brzezinski ranks as Kissinger’s equal.

Underlying that purpose are at least two implicit assumptions. The first is that, when it comes to statecraft, grand strategy actually exists, not simply as an aspiration but as a discrete and identifiable element. The second is that, in his writings and contributions to US policy, Kissinger himself qualifies as a strategic virtuoso. For all sorts of reasons, we should treat both of these assumptions with considerable skepticism.

That Brzezinski, who died last year at age 89, lived a life that deserves to be recounted and appraised is certainly the case. Born in Warsaw in 1928 to parents with ties to Polish nobility, Brzezinski had a peripatetic childhood. His father

Andrew J. Bacevich is professor emeritus of history and international relations at Boston University. His new book, *Twilight of the American Century*, will be published this fall.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE CIARDIELLO
was a diplomat whose family accompanied him on postings to France, Germany, and eventually to Canada. The Nazi invasion of 1939, which extinguished Polish independence, also effectively ended his father's diplomatic career. With war engulfing nearly all of Europe, Brzezinski would not set foot on Polish soil again for nearly two decades.

Although the young Brzezinski quickly adapted to life in Canada, the well-being of Poles and Poland remained an abiding preoccupation. After the war, he studied economics and political science at McGill University, focusing in particular on the Soviet Union, which by then had replaced Germany as the power that dominated the country of his birth. Brzezinski was a brilliant student with a particular interest in international affairs, a field increasingly centered on questions related to America's role in presiding over the postwar global order.

After graduating from McGill, Brzezinski set his sights on Harvard, which at the time was the very archetype of a "Cold War university." Senior faculty and young scholars on the make were volunteering to advise the national-security apparatus just then forming in Washington. For many of them, the Soviet threat appeared to eclipse all other questions and fields of inquiry. In this setting, Brzezinski flourished. Even before becoming an American citizen, he was thoroughly Americanized, imbued with the mind-set that prevailed in circles where members of the power elite mixed and mingled. Partially funded by the CIA, the Russian Research Center, Brzezinski's home at Harvard, was one of those places.

From his time in Cambridge, he emerged committed, in his own words, to "nothing less than formulating a coherent strategy for the United States, so that we could eventually dismantle the Soviet bloc" and, not so incidentally, thereby liberate Poland. To this cause, the young Brzezinski devoted himself with single-minded energy.

As a scholar and author of works intended for a general audience, Zbig, as he was widely known, was nothing if not prolific. Churning out a steady stream of well-regarded books and essays, he demonstrated a particular knack for "summarizing things in a concise and striking way." Clarity took precedence over nuance. And with his gift for skillful packaging—crafting neologisms ("technatonics") and high-sounding phrases ("Histrionics as History in Transition")—his analyses had the appearance of novelty, even if they often lacked real substance. Whether writing for his fellow scholars or addressing a wider audience, Brzezinski had one big idea when it came to Cold War strategy: He promoted the concept of "peaceful engagement" as a basis for US policy. Convinced that the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc were internally fragile, he believed that economic and cultural interaction with the West would ultimately lead to their collapse. The idea was to project strength without provoking confrontation, while patiently exerting indirect influence. Yet little of the Brzezinski oeuvre has stood the test of time. The American canon of essential readings in international relations and strategy, beginning with George Washington's farewell address and continuing on through works by John Quincy Adams, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Hans Morgenthau, and a handful of others (the list is not especially long), does not include anything penned by Brzezinski. Although Vaïsse, a senior official with the French foreign ministry, appears to have read and pondered just about every word his subject wrote or uttered, he identifies nothing of Brzezinski's that qualifies as must-reading for today's aspiring strategist.

This limited academic influence probably did not bother Zbig; he never saw himself as a mere scholar. He was a classic in-and-outter, rotating effortlessly from university campuses to political campaigns, and from government service to plummy think-tank billets. According to Vaïsse, Brzezinski never courted the media. Even so, he demonstrated a pronounced talent for getting himself in front of TV cameras, becoming a frequent guest on programs like Meet the Press. He knew how to self-promote.

Toward the end of his life, Brzezinski even had a Twitter account. His last tweet, from May 2017, both summarizes the essence of his worldview and expresses his dismay regarding the presidency of Donald Trump: "Sophisticated US leadership is the sine qua non of a stable world order. However, we lack the former while the latter is getting worse."

F rom the time Brzezinski left Harvard in 1960 to accept a tenured position at Columbia, he made it his mission to nurture and facilitate that sophistication. For Zbig, New York offered a specific advantage over Cambridge: It provided a portal into elite political circles. As it had for Kissinger, the then-still-influential Council on Foreign Relations provided a venue that enabled Brzezinski to curry favor with the rich and powerful, and to establish his bona fides as a statesman to watch. Henry's patron was Nelson Rockefeller; Zbig's was Nelson's brother David.

Although not an ideologue, Brzezinski was a liberal Democrat of a consistently hawkish persuasion. Committed to social justice at home, he was also committed to toughness abroad. In the 1960s, he supported US intervention in Vietnam, treated the domino theory as self-evidently true, and argued that, with American credibility on the line, the United States had no alternative but to continue prosecuting the war. Even after the war ended, Vaïsse writes, Brzezinski "did not view Vietnam as a mistake."

Yet Vietnam did nudge Brzezinski to reconsider some of his own assumptions. In the early 1970s, with an eye toward forging a new foreign policy that might take into account some of the trauma caused by Vietnam, he organized the Trilateral Commission. Apart from expending copious amounts of Rockefeller money, the organization produced little of substance. For Brzezinski, however, it proved a smashing success. It was there that he became acquainted with Jimmy Carter, a Georgia governor then contemplating a run for the presidency in 1976.

Zbig and Jimmy hit it off. Soon enough, Brzezinski signed on as the candidate's principal foreign-policy adviser. When Carter won, he rewarded Brzezinski by appointing him national-security adviser, the job that had vaulted Kissinger to the upper ranks of global celebrity.

Zbig held this post throughout Carter's one-term presidency, from 1977 to 1981. It would be his first and last time in government. After 1981, Brzezinski went back to writing, continued to opine, and was occasionally consulted by Carter's successors, both Democratic and Republican. Yet despite having ascended to the rank of elder statesman, never again did Brzezinski occupy a position where he could directly affect US policy.
Becase of Brzezinski’s limited influence on foreign policy after Carter, Vaïsse’s case for installing him in the pantheon of master strategists therefore rests on the claim that on matters related to foreign policy, the Carter presidency was something less than a bust. Vaïsse devotes the core of his book to arguing just that. Although valiant, the effort falls well short of success.

From the outset of his administration, Carter accorded his national-security adviser remarkable deference. Brzezinski was not co-equal with the president; yet neither was he a mere subordinate. He was, Vaïsse writes, “the architect of Carter’s foreign policy,” while also exercising “an exceptional degree of control” over its articulation and implementation.

In a characteristic display of self-assurance and bureaucratic shrewdness, as the new president took office, Brzezinski gave him a 43-page briefing book prescribing basic administration policy. Under the overarching theme of “constructive global engagement,” Brzezinski identified 10 specific goals. The first proposed to “create more active and solid cooperation with Europe and Japan,” the 10th to “maintain a defense posture designed to dissuade the Soviet Union from committing hostile acts.” In between were less-than-modest aspirations to promote human rights, reduce the size of nuclear arsenals, curb international arms sales, end apartheid in South Africa, normalize Sino-American relations, terminate US control of the Panama Canal, and achieve an “overall solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem.”

While Brzezinski’s agenda was as bold as it was comprehensive, it nonetheless hewed to the Soviet-centric assumptions that had formed the basis of US policy since the end of World War II. Zbig recognized that the world had changed considerably in the ensuing years, but he also believed that any future changes would still occur in the context of a continuing Soviet-American rivalry. His strategic perspective, therefore, did not include the possibility that the international order might center on something other than the binaries imposed by the Cold War. The disintegration of the Soviet bloc and eventually of the Soviet Union itself was, in his view, a nominal goal of American foreign policy, but not an immediate prospect.

Using Brzezinski’s 10 policy objectives as a basis for evaluating his performance, Vaïsse gives the national-security adviser high marks. “Few administrations have known so many tangible successes in only four years,” he writes, citing the Panama Canal Treaty, the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement, and improved relations with China. Yet while Panama remains an under-appreciated achievement, the other two quality as ambiguous at best. The Camp David accords did nothing to resolve the Palestinian issue that underlay much of Israeli-Arab enmity; it produced a dead-end peace that left Palestinians without a state and Israel with no end of problems. And the Brzezinski-engineered embrace of China, enhancing Chinese access to American technology and markets, accelerated that country’s emergence as a peer competitor.

More troubling still was Brzezinski’s failure to anticipate or to grasp the implications of the two developments that all but doomed the Carter presidency: the 1978 Iranian Revolution and the 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Vaïsse does his best to cast a positive light on Brzezinski’s role in these twin embarrassments. But there’s no way around it: Brzezinski misread both—with consequences that still haunt us today.

The Iranian Revolution, which Brzezinski sought to forestall by instigating a military coup in Tehran, offered a warning against imagining that Washington could shape events in the Islamic world. Brzezinski missed that warning entirely, although he would by no means be the last US official to do so. As for the Kremlin’s plunge into Afghanistan, widely interpreted as evidence of the Soviet Union’s naked aggression, it actually testified to the weakness and fragility of the Soviet empire, already in an advanced state of decay. Again, Brzezinski—along with many other observers—misread the issue. When clarity of vision was most needed, he failed to provide it.

Together, these two developments ought to have induced a wily strategist to reassess the premises of US policy. Instead, they resulted in decisions to deepen—and to overtly militarize—US involvement in and around the Persian Gulf. While this commitment is commonly referred to as the Carter Doctrine, Vaïsse insists that it was “really a Brzezinski doctrine.”

Regardless of who gets the credit, the militarization of US policy across what Brzezinski termed an “arc of crisis” encompassing much of the Islamic world laid the basis for a series of wars and upheavals that continue to this day. If, as national-security adviser, Brzezinski wielded as much influence as Vaïsse contends, then this too forms part of his legacy. When it mattered most,
the master strategist failed to understand the implications of the crisis that occurred on his watch.

The most glaring problem anyone faces in trying to assert Brzezinski’s mastery of world affairs, however, rests not in Iran or Afghanistan, but in how the Cold War came to an end. Indeed, Brzezinski viewed it as essentially endless. As late as 1987, just two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, he was still insisting that “the American-Soviet conflict is an historical rivalry that will endure for as long as we live.”

Brzezinski was certainly smart, flexible, and pragmatic, but he was also a prisoner of the Cold War paradigm. So too were virtually all other members of the foreign-policy establishment of his day. Indeed, subscribing to that paradigm was a prerequisite of membership. Yet this adherence amounted to donning a pair of strategic blinders: It meant seeing only those things that it was convenient to see.

Which brings us back to Zbig’s last tweet, with its paean to American leadership as the sine qua non of global stability. The tweet neatly captures the mind-set that the foreign-policy establishment has embraced with something like unanimity since the Cold War surprised that establishment by coming to an end. This mind-set gets expressed in myriad ways in a thousand speeches and op-eds: The United States must lead. There is no alternative; history itself summons the country to do so. Should it fail in that responsibility, darkness will cover the earth.

This is why Trump so infuriates the foreign-policy elite: He appears oblivious to the providential call that others in Washington take to be self-evident. Yet adhering to this post-Cold War paradigm is also the equivalent of donning blinders. Whatever the issue—especially when the issue is ourselves—it means seeing only those things that we find it convenient to see.

The post-Cold War paradigm of American moral and political hegemony prevents us from appreciating the way that the world is actually changing—rapidly, radically, and right before our very eyes. Today, with the planet continuing to heat up, the nexus of global geopolitics shifting eastward, and Americans pondering security threats for which our pricey and far-flung military establishment is all but useless, the art of strategy as practiced by members of Brzezinski’s generation has become irrelevant. So too has Zbig himself.

On June 2015, Donald Trump glided down a gilded escalator in Trump Tower to announce that he was running for president. Rattling off a litany of dire crises confronting the country, from the Mexican immigrants he characterized as rapists and drug smugglers to the Islamic terrorists he portrayed as an existential threat, Trump ended on a surprisingly sanguine note. “The American dream is dead,” he intoned. “But if I get elected president, I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before, and we will make America great again.”

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they provide a convenient shorthand for his practical agenda and his larger aims. The “American dream,” as Trump and his audiences understand it, means nothing less than a chance at financial success for all Americans—or at least all those who count as “American” in his narrow understanding of the term. “America First,” meanwhile, signals a similar kind of selfishness, but this time on a national scale: abandoning long-standing military alliances and economic partnerships; stemming immigration with literal walls and free trade with figurative ones; and sounding a general retreat from the global stage.

Trump has invoked the “American dream” and “America First” repeatedly in his addresses, often citing both in the same speech. From the floor of a tool factory in Kenosha, Wisconsin, to the stage of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Trump has deployed these phrases and, more important, linked them together for his audiences. Pushing the country inward, he has suggested, would pull its citizens upward.

In Behold, America: The Entangled History of “America First” and “the American Dream,” Sarah Churchwell traces the origins and evolution of both of these expressions. “There is great power in loaded phrases, as anyone willing to pull the trigger knows,” she observes in her introduction. For Trump and his allies, these two phrases combine in a simple and simplistic formula for success: The American dream is dead, but Trump will make America great again by putting America first. This mantra not only echoes the patriotic chorus of an arena chanting “USA! USA! USA!” but it also carries the same underlying appeal. Audiences seem to understand these phrases instinctively and reward their use with an almost reflexive response. Yet as Churchwell makes clear, neither expression is as straightforward as it seems, and both come with a long and complex past:

The evolution of these two sayings—both their myths and their truths—has shaped reality in ways not fully understood. We cannot understand the subtexts of our own slogans if we do not understand their contexts; we risk misreading our own moment if we don’t know the historical meanings of expressions we resuscitate, or perpetuate.

Behold, America is the author’s effort to offer this context and to map out both phrases’ multifarious meanings. Moving back in time from the early 21st century to the early 20th, Churchwell shows that these expressions were originally used in ways that are significantly different from our current understanding of them.

Churchwell has cast a wide net in her research, drawing into account not only politicians and pundits, but also journalists, novelists, ministers, and ordinary Americans. The result, appropriately enough, is a bit messy. Readers hoping for a tidy etymology will doubtless find themselves frustrated at times. But that messiness illustrates the ways in which these phrases have always been, as the historian Daniel Rodgers memorably put it, “contested truths.” They stand at the heart of the American experience, and as a result, the struggle over their meaning has, in many ways, represented a struggle over the meaning of the United States itself.

Consider the “American dream.” First and foremost, Churchwell points out, the phrase is largely an invention of the 20th century. Founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton never mentioned an “American dream” in their extensive writings on the new nation, while outside observers who articulated the particulars of the curious American identity, such as Alexis de Tocqueville and Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, never invoked it either. The same holds true for famous 19th-century American novelists like Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain, Churchwell reports. Most surprising, not even Horatio Alger—whose rags-to-riches tales have routinely been used to illustrate the American dream—ever put the words together.

The phrase began to appear in the American lexicon by the end of the 19th century, but only in fits and starts. The idea that there could be a single American dream—one collective, generalized national ideal—was an innovation in and of itself. Much as historians have long noted that Americans’ sense of national identity can be traced in the gradual shift from speaking about “these United States” to “the United States,” Churchwell explains that, originally, there was no such thing as the “American dream,” but rather an array of dreams: of westward expansion, of naval supremacy, of “beautiful womanhood.” By the 20th century, Americans began to winnow their worldview down to the point where it was possible to talk about a single—and singular—American dream.

As originally understood, the American dream was in many ways defined as the opposite of its popular meaning today. “In the first twenty years of the existence of the phrase ‘American dream,’” Churchwell writes, “it was usually employed to describe a political ideal, not an economic one; and when it was used to describe an economic aspiration, it was with the pejorative meaning of ‘dream’ as illusion, not ideal. Never in its earliest years was the ‘American dream’ cited to celebrate the freedom of markets.” Indeed, populist and progressive voices denounced the concentration of wealth as a violation of the nation’s democratic values and claimed that those who aspired to such avarice were guilty of an “un-American dream.” In the early decades of the 20th century, these voices on the left articulated the first coherent vision of the “American dream”—a vision that insisted that self-interest and material ambition had to be checked by the collective desire for equality and equal opportunity. “The American dream was about how to stop bad millionaires,” Churchwell observes, “not how to become one.”

The shift to the phrase’s more familiar meaning began in the 1920s, when business was placed atop the highest pedestal and the American dream was increasingly understood as one of material success and self-sufficiency. In a national poll, college students named Henry Ford as the third-greatest man in world history; he was edged out only by Napoleon and Jesus, and many, in fact, saw little difference between Jesus and Ford. These college students were not alone: Calvin Coolidge, then president, also made the case for viewing the titans of industry as gods. “The man who builds a factory builds a temple,” Coolidge insisted. “The man who works there, worships there. And to each is due, not scorn and blame, but reverence and praise.”

While Coolidge and many other Americans described business as a religion, the 1920s were also a period when many came to view religion as a business. Advertising legend Bruce Barton, in his best-selling book The Man Nobody Knows, portrayed Jesus as the most successful executive of all time, someone who “picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world!”

As market mania swept the nation, the American dream became closely linked to it. In 1925, at the peak of the Florida real-estate bubble, one article described the boom in Miami as “the minting of America, in
one fine, shining piece, of the substantial compound of that very American dream of freedom—opportunity and achievement.” The materialism of the decade was not without its critics, of course. As Churchwell writes, both Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* mocked the suggestion that the American dream revolved around making and maintaining concentrated wealth. But such warnings were largely ignored at the time, and as long as promises that one could get rich quick still seemed plausible, Americans were more than ready to dream that they, too, would find their fortune.

When the 1920s-boom years went bust, this new vision of the American dream nearly collapsed as well. In 1931, as the Great Depression deepened, historian James Truslow Adams set a new tone with his best-selling *The Epic of America*. “He had fought to use ‘The American Dream’ as his title,” Churchwell writes, “but his publishers were adamant that readers ‘would never pay $3 for a dream,’ and insisted he change it.”

Despite that change, the book remained focused on trying to give new meaning to the idea of the American dream. The country, Adams argued, had to reject its worship of cutthroat capitalism and return to the older Progressive movement’s vision of “the American Dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank.” Throughout the nation’s history, he added, “each generation has seen an uprising of the ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming and dispelling it.” Wealthy elites were not the embodiment of the American dream, Adams insisted; they were its enemies.

This vision of an American dream rooted in collective security, not rugged individualism, became manifest in the New Deal. Taking stock of the first few weeks of Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency in early 1933, a columnist with *The Boston Globe* marveled at the administration’s quick success in “reawakening our faith in ourselves and our institutions, renewing our American dream.” Even the president himself embraced that framing: The federal government, Roosevelt promised in 1937, would work to provide security for farmers and thereby restore “the American dream of the family-sized farm,” which had been jeopardized by the Depression.

In the 1930s, the American dream was taken up as well by figures with more authoritarian tendencies. Huey Long, the Louisiana governor and then senator, avowed a materialist vision of the American dream that in many ways was similar to that of the New Deal. “His promise of a house, a car, a radio, as well as $5,000 a year for all families, with education for deserving young people thrown in, sounded in the ears of many like a new version of the American Dream,” an observer wrote. Yet Long proposed achieving that dream through drastic measures, including the forced confiscation of concentrated wealth and its broad redistribution among the people. His goals attracted many, but Long’s methods—stilling democracy and firing state officials who opposed him, silencing critics through threats and even violence, stirring up the passions of the mob to get his way—alienated many more. For this reason, many Americans feared that Long would use the allure of the American dream to bring about a nightmare: fascism.

While Long shrewdly used the American dream to drum up support for his brand of reactionary populism, the rising threat of fascism at home was more commonly associated with the second expression at the center of Churchwell’s book: “America First.”

Whenever Trump and his allies rally around that phrase, pundits have been quick to point out that it originated in the isolationist movement before the Second World War. To be sure, the America First Committee popularized the saying in its campaign to keep the United States out of another “European war,” with celebrity pilot Charles Lindbergh serving as its spokesman and conservative publisher William Randolph Hearst throwing his weight behind it: The slogan “America First Should Be Every American’s Motto” soon ran across the masthead of every newspaper he owned. But as Churchwell writes, the isolationists’ campaign represented not the birth of “America First,” as many have claimed, but its death. (Or, at least, its death until Trump resurrected it.)

The phrase had appeared more than half a century before World War II to assert American independence and isolationism. By the mid-1890s, the Republican Party had adopted it as a campaign slogan: “America first; the rest of the world afterward.” The term appeared sporadically over the next few decades before emerging as a national catchphrase during the First World War, beginning with President Woodrow Wilson’s 1915 declaration that “our whole duty, for the present, at any rate, is summed up in the motto: ‘America First.’” Indeed, the phrase proved so popular that both parties’ candidates claimed it in 1916. Republican nominee Charles Evans Hughes ran on a slogan of “America First and America Efficient,” while Wilson stuck with the more efficient “America First.”

While the slogan called for isolationism in foreign affairs (a policy that Wilson would soon abandon in 1917), it also signaled a similar retreat from cosmopolitan politics at home. As the United States drifted into the First World War, nativists increasingly became concerned over the “hyphenates” in their midst: those who called themselves German-American, Irish-American, Italian-American, and the like. It was time, Wilson insisted in 1915, for every immigrant “to declare himself, where he stands. Is it America first or is it not?” Less than a decade later, the United States embraced drastic restrictions on immigration through the National Origins Act of 1924. As a Republican supporter in Congress explained, the policy simply reflected “the doctrine of America first for Americans.”

Not surprisingly, the Ku Klux Klan employed “America First” in much the same way, using it to demand nothing less than “100% Americanism”—which for the group meant 100 percent white Americanism. In 1921, a circular listed the “ABCs” of the KKK: “America first, benevolence, claimlessness.” While the Klan was often called the “American Fascisti” during this era, the same arguments were advanced by more openly fascist organizations like William Pelley’s Silver Shirts, an American counterpart to Mussolini’s blackshirts and Hitler’s brownshirts. “The various colored shirt orders—the whole haberdashery brigade who play upon sectional prejudice—are sowing the seeds of fascism,” the writer James Waterman Wise warned. “It may come wrapped in a flag or a Hearst news-
paper,” he added, with “America First” on the masthead.

The use of the two phrases came to a head with the advent of World War II. As Churchwell writes, the America First Committee used the exceptionalism of the American dream to argue for isolation from the rest of the world. “Americans! Wake Up!” one of the group’s ads implored. “In 1776, three million Americans dared to sign a Declaration of Independence, unsupported by any foreign navy, unafraid of any foreign economy. And the ‘American Dream’ was born.”

But even as the two phrases came together, they were soon riven apart. Weeks after Pearl Harbor, the America First Committee folded, with Lindbergh and its other leaders promising support for the coming conflict. While some Americans, a newspaper noted, were “still America Firsting” during the war, the phrase and the isolationist policies it represented quickly fell out of favor. By the end of the war, both had been largely discredited. Meanwhile, the concept of the American dream—now popularly understood as one of material gain and upward mobility—became stronger than ever, especially in the midcentury years, when the United States experienced a period of pronounced economic growth.

Throughout America’s postwar era of relative peace and prosperity, this balance remained. “America First” was the relic of a discredited cause, while the “American dream” appeared to soar higher and higher. When economic security and prosperity began to falter, first in the stagnant economy of the late 1970s, and again after the housing bubble burst and the stock market crashed in the late 2000s, this dream appeared to be more and more of a mirage. By the end of the 20th century, things seemed to have gone back to where they were at its start.

The end of the Cold War also prompted a reconsideration of America’s place in the world, bringing the impulses of “America First” back into vogue just as the decades of economic decline forced many Americans to rethink their views of the American dream at home.

New thoughts are still formed with old words, of course. Once again, “America First” and the “American dream” have been revived and put to use in the current moment. But as Churchwell reminds us, these are loaded phrases. Even if the man pulling the trigger today doesn’t fully understand them, the rest of us surely should.

Last year, the artist James Case-Leal, teaching at Guttman Community College in New York City, enlisted his class in a research project. Under his direction, students logged the demographic information—age, race, nationality, gender, and education—for 1,300 artists represented by the top 45 commercial galleries in the city. They then analyzed the data to come up with a set of statistics: 80.5 percent of the artists were white; 70 percent were male; 46.9 percent had MFAs or MAs; and Yale was the most frequently attended school.

Case-Leal’s study had clear limitations: Not only was it geographically narrow, but determining which galleries are the “top” ones is subjective and tricky. What criteria do you use in a notoriously opaque field? The study’s website (now defunct) said only that each of the galleries chosen had a brick-and-mortar space and participated in either major art fairs or the primary market. Also, the students never interviewed the artists, which means that the demographic information listed for them could have been wrong. Yet the findings are not surprising. Even an imperfect study helps demonstrate how much the liberal-minded art world reflects the larger one to which it belongs.

Nell Painter was well versed in racism and sexism long before she went to art school. A historian whose research focused on the American South and the social construction of race, she garnered popular attention with her 2010 book, The History of White People. That was right around the time that she was getting her BFA and MFA in painting, having retired from academia and decided to become an artist. Painter drew constantly as a teenager and studied art for a time at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960s. Decades later, her historical research slowly brought her back to working with images, until she made the decision to attempt a second career.

For Painter, that meant getting a second
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ILLUSTRATED BY YORAN CAZAC
EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY NICHOLAS BOGGS AND JENNIFER DEVERE BRODY
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—Judith Pallot, University of Oxford

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education, a journey that she chronicles in her new book, *Old in Art School: A Memoir of Starting Over*. She knew going into the experience how entrenched oppression can be, yet she also knew the importance of institutional connections and support. As she writes in a particularly insightful passage:

How do you get a gallery? You make work that counts as interesting in the eyes of an Artist with a gallery. Who are artists with galleries? Your teachers, your peers, your friends. They persuade the gallery director to visit your studio and concur that your work is interesting. How do you tell what art is “interesting”? It looks like art. What is art? Art is what’s in galleries. Now you know.

Still, Painter was a romantic. She saw the promise of art as a way to set herself free: “I wanted to create images, to make art that expressed my own mixed-up character, to forge a truer me than one confined by existing categories of sex-race and circulating widely as necessarily true,” she writes. This tension—between the private, idyllic state of making art and the social and political realities of being an artist—is central to *Old in Art School*. It’s very much to Painter’s credit that she refuses to become cynical.

This is especially true given what she endures. First and foremost, there’s “the crucial fact” of her age: Painter is 64 when she starts at Rutgers University’s Mason Gross School of the Arts, surrounded by students who are, for the most part, just out of high school. Although she’s used to standing out as a black woman, the obsession with her age takes her by surprise. “It was as though being old summed me up, not all the things I had done to become a historian,” she laments. By contrast, her peers are almost caricatures of undergraduate art students: They drink lots of alcohol and dress in a perfectly calculated way (“Art students: They drink lots of alcohol and dress in a perfectly calculated way (“Art stu
dents buy their clothes at Goodwill, or they are raceless and genderless and innocent of ideological content. Which it isn’t.”

Another challenge of being old in art school is that life is more likely to intervene. During Painter’s third year at Mason Gross, her mother falls ill and dies. The loss is not only devastating but exhausting: Painter’s parents live in Oak-

land, California, so she’s forced to make multiple cross-country trips. She responds in a way that workaholic readers will recognize—by throwing herself harder into her pursuits. She applies to various graduate schools and gets in, albeit not to her first choice—Yale—but to the Rhode Island School of Design.

*RISD* is consistently ranked as one of the top art schools in the country, but it doesn’t come out of *Old in Art School* looking good. The book’s prologue tells the story of a teacher there named Henry, who informs Painter that she’ll “never be an artist” because she lacks “an essential component, some ineffable inner quality.” According to Henry’s theory, you either are an artist or you’re not; you can’t learn how to become one. This is the myth of the white-male genius rearing its head, and Painter rightly identifies it as “complete, unalloyed bullshit,” even as it stokes her insecurities.

Later on in the book, we get a clearer picture of the hostile environment in which Henry’s comments played out. At RISD, Painter is surrounded once again by younger students, almost all of them white. One refuses to read an assigned piece by bell hooks, saying “he couldn’t relate to it, because the author was black.” Painter herself is “dismissed as aggressive.” Her peers and teachers stand in silence before her work during “crits”—group-critique sessions that are supposed to be “the quintessence of art school.” After Painter graduates, she discovers that the seven other students in her MFA class—including a man who continually made big, sexist paintings based on an ad for pantyhose— received honors; she was the only one who didn’t.

Painter knows and acknowledges that graduate school isn’t meant to be easy—the artist Emma Amos describes it to her as “one long tearing down”—and that critics especially have a reputation for being emotional ordeals. Nonetheless, it becomes clear that some of these aggressions are not solely aberrations or questions of Painter’s artistic skills. By the end of her first year in the program, the apathy of her peers has destroyed what’s left of her self-confidence, and she turns to her outside network to arrange a series of “alternative crits” with friends and artists, some of whom are black. They engage with her work honestly and help her understand the reactions of her RISD cohort in a broader context, as “a common reluctance of non-black viewers to engage with black figuration.”

Painter also mentions a student she befriends named Duhirwe, a black printmaker who, like her, isn’t offered the same opportunities as the white students. Both are shut out of a “patronage system” that’s born from a blend of favoritism and racism, though Painter notes that this is not exclusive to art school; she saw a lesser version of it as an academic. The rejection is particularly notable because Duhirwe has a presidential fellowship, which according to Painter is meant to help minorities. Yet in the painting department, the presidential fellow is “a white male artist who knew how to draw.”

This simple matter-of-factness is one of Painter’s strongest forms of indictment. She writes about her experiences with grace and style and doesn’t complain; instead, she chronicles the roadblocks she faced and the frustrations she felt, all while allowing her descriptions to carry the weight of their meaning.
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In fact, Painter reserves her harshest judgments for herself. She’s remarkably honest about her own insecurities and shortcomings, noting early on that her “twentieth-century eyes” are her “major handicap as an artist.” As she explains:

My lying twentieth-century eyes favored craft, clarity, skill, narrative, and meaning. My twenty-first-century classmates and teachers preferred everyday subject matter, the do-it-yourself (DIY) aesthetic, appropriation, and the visible marks of facture: drips, smudges, and what in the twentieth century would have been considered mistakes needing to be cleaned up.

In order to become a real artist, not just a Sunday painter, she needs to push her eyes into the 21st century; she has to let go of her “reverence for coherence.” Fittingly, she learns to do so with the help of the computer, specifically pixels, which “don’t have any narrative sense; they don’t care what’s next to them or whether proximity makes meaning.” And this discovery comes not while she’s at school, but over the summer break between her first and second years at RISD. Alone in her studio, away from pressure-filled crits and disinterested peers, she finds her way to a process that involves working both manually and digitally: drawing and painting by hand, scanning that work and chopping it up in Photoshop, projecting it, and then working by hand once more. This new process represents a difficult and impressive transition, especially for someone in her 60s. Painter enters art school wanting to learn how to draw and paint better. Instead, she learns that art isn’t about mastering skills, but about putting them in service to something else: the investigation of ideas or the expression of a personal vision. At one point, she reflects on a woman she had admired in a BFA class, writing: “I should have been, like Mary, painting what my hand was seeing. I was trying to paint as I thought I was supposed to in order to improve my skills.”

Painter faced a quandary. The system tells her to use art to express something within herself; at the same time, it rejects her efforts on the basis of her identity. “My definition of personal, my sense of myself as an individual, was too tied up in notions of blackness for the others to care,” she observes. Part of Painter’s journey, then, is separating the lessons about art-making that she finds valuable from the racism in which they’re wrapped.

Painter’s background of writing history for a general audience serves her well in this regard; she’s able not only to narrate but also to analyze her trajectory in clear, accessible language, without relying on theory. The book moves easily between experiences and analysis, explanations of research and process, and is mixed with brief history lessons on the artists whose work she admires and even some snippets of information from her previous book, The History of White People.

Her writing is consistently readable, with the occasional striking line jumping off the page, often when she uses color as a form of description. “Her pleasure gave me pleasure, though my pleasure was burnt-umber sadness in the darkness of earth tones,” Painter writes. Her style can be overly colloquial, with phrases rendered in all-caps for emphasis and words like “Har-rumph” appended to the ends of paragraphs. These Internet-inflected tics are arguably the wrong elements of the 21st century to bring into her memoir.

Images of Painter’s artwork are interspersed throughout the book: Drawings she made while living in Ghana in her 20s give way to early art-school efforts, then to her MFA-thesis work and postgraduate pieces. The reproductions are mostly too small to give the reader a strong sense of how these pieces work as art objects, but they do offer an important additional way of following her development as an artist.

And an artist she is, despite Henry’s ontological myth, which Painter is well poised to deconstruct due to her status as an outsider. In a late chapter called “You’ll Never Be an Artist,” she explores the different ways to measure being an artist—having confidence, or a gallery, or collectors—and concludes that the term “has little stable meaning, and its definition and the criteria you use to define it depend, as with race, on who’s speaking to whom, when, where, and for what purpose.” This is a crucial insight coming from a scholar of race: Being an artist is a social construct, too.

Although Painter enrolls in art school partly for professional reasons, the transformation she undergoes is deeply personal and ultimately has less to do with sales or gallery representation than with introspection and community. Toward the end of the book, she sums up how her thinking has changed. “Now, with images in my eyes, I wanted to ask questions even when I knew I could not answer them,” she writes. That, by my bet, is one of the most essential things an artist can do.
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Puzzle No. 3483
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS
1 God rested by vessel (6)
4 Something you might eat at the shore: gruesome, macabre bit of turtle (8)
9 Appear in a stream, when moving from last to first place (6)
10 A piece of underwear is back on, with evidence of being worn (8)
12 Rocker, say, clutching tattered lamé fabric (5,4)
13 Bette loses head for layabout (5)
14 Motor, knockin’, contains pebble by error (8,6)
18 Onset of financial bubbles involves rent strike at first for people who have claimed, improbably, that their ideas are gaining support around the globe (4-8)
21 Germanic language has metallic sound (5)
22 Death is yonder, with impressionist (6,6)
24 Place ointment around middle of scar (8)
25 Retiring child outwardly into drilling apparatus (3,3)
26 Heaven is seen in exhibit (8)
27 Burns vote against returning African (6)

DOWN
1 Engineer sees a cap in maritime artwork (8)
2 Atrium is befouled with dessert (8)
3 Lift handle with delight (5)
4 What a ghoul does outside a hospital area: start to taunt poet and novelist (6,6)
5 Snack and case of beer uplifted Minnelli fan (6,3)
6 Guide to having great sex with many screaming fits? (6)
7 Belied treatment as safe, in a way (6)
8 Moans from dudes in Louisiana station with second delay (12)
9 What comes after I behead a big cat: the beginning of your peril (8)
10 Something most women have: no egrets (oops, typo) (8)
11 Performer and doctor grabbing walking cane (6)
12 Forced to remove labels, getting up after I lob explosive (9)
13 Pancake to accommodate debut of chanteuse in drag (6)
15 Omit something from barrel I’d emptied (5)
16 Onset of financial bubbles involves rent strike at first for people who have claimed, improbably, that their ideas are gaining support around the globe (4-8)
17 Germanic language has metallic sound (5)
18 Death is yonder, with impressionist (6,6)
19 Place ointment around middle of scar (8)
20 Retiring child outwardly into drilling apparatus (3,3)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3482

ACROSS: VACILLATION
7 & 27 PAN + TRY + W + TRUMP + H
10 SHALLOW 11 LLAMAS (rev)
12 aug: 14 GREATW (aug) + ALL
15 aug: 16 [I-W] + PED 18 aug.
20 TWITCHED 22 FIJULY
25 aug: 26 W + HITMAN
28 PARENTHESES

DOWN: 1 VITAL 2 GILMATE (rev)
3 LAMBIANTED 4 A + SHE
5 DN + SMARTING + NEATO
7 PAL + A DIN 8 [I]NEW + L + YVED + S (rev)
13 DA + TAC (rev) + ENTER
14 [I]WOLETHOUT (I ought to aug.)
15 SQUARE + AMISH 17 PRIVACY
19 [I]ColeilUMENS 21 GH + IMP
23 YANKEES (dy rev) 24 T + WIN

The Nation (ISSN 0027-8378) is published 34 times a year (four issues in March, April, and October; three issues in January, February, July, and November; and two issues in May, June, August, September, and December) by The Nation Company, LLC © 2018 in the USA by The Nation Company, LLC, 520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018; (212) 209-5400. Washington Bureau: Suite 308, 110 Maryland Avenue NE, Washington, DC 20002; (202) 546-2239. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Subscription orders, changes of address, and all subscription inquiries: The Nation, PO Box 8505, Big Sandy, TX 75755; or call 1-800-333-8536. Return undeliverable Canadian ad addresses to Bleuchip International, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2. Canada Post: Publications Mail Agreement No. 40612608. When ordering a subscription, please allow four to six weeks for receipt of first issue and for all subscription transactions. Basic annual subscription price: $69 for one year. Back issues, $6 prepaid ($8 foreign) from: The Nation, 520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018. If the Post Office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. The Nation is available on microfilm from: University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Member, Alliance for Audited Media. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Nation, PO Box 8505, Big Sandy, TX 75755. Printed in the USA.
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