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Who Is Matt Duss and Can He Take On "The Blob"?

Bernie’s foreign-policy adviser is doing just that.

DAVID KLION
Populism Is Everywhere

Steven Hahn’s article “The Populist Specter” [Jan. 28/Feb. 4] provides a clear and much-needed analysis of this distressing phenomenon. One area that is barely mentioned, however, is the populist influence on the academic disciplines, especially science. The populists’ disdain for political and business elites also extends to scholarly “elites.”

The resulting movements include quack health faddists, anti-vaxxers, and climate deniers. The latter two are especially troubling, as they threaten public health and the global environment, respectively. Most of these science deniers have no training in, or knowledge of, the science that they reject but, under the populist doctrine, such ignorance is irrelevant.

Unfortunately, The Nation has not always been innocent in this regard. For example, in your November 5, 2007, issue, the late Alexander Cockburn asserted that the greenhouse effect could not exist because it would violate (his confused interpretation of) the second law of thermodynamics. Even though experts wrote letters to the editor pointing out the erroneous physics, I did not recall seeing them in The Nation.

Jonathan Allen
Titusville, N.J.

Hahn emphasizes right-wing populism and its history of repression and violence. Hence he laments that “the populist phenomena of the present day appear heir to these unsettling currents of illiberalism.” But what about left-wing populism? Why does he not mention, even once, Occupy Wall Street, Bernie Sanders, or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez?

Donald A. Smith
Bellevue, Wash.

A Worthy Subject

It was good to see Oregon Senator Jeff Merkley’s name appear twice in the Jan. 28/Feb. 4 issue: first in the sidebar titled “Merkley’s Fix for America,” and then (if only parenthetically) in Robert L. Borosage’s article on Democratic presidential contenders. Merkley’s “Blueprint for a ‘We the People’ Democracy” offers a thorough prescription for overhauling the way we vote, with an eye to reducing the role of big money and bringing all citizens and all sections of the country to full participation in the electoral process.

Merkley’s many-pronged activism in the Senate and in the field—he has been a hands-on presence at the border, opposing and exposing the cruelty and mendacity of Trump’s immigration policies—makes him one of the more impressive candidates in the quickly lengthening field of prospects for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination. His forthright positions on major issues, ranging from climate change to nuclear diplomacy to civil rights and economic justice, offer a thoroughly reasoned progressive platform. I congratulate The Nation for bringing him into play; his record of accomplishments and forward-looking stances on the issues would be well worth the further attention of your readers.

Joel Isaacson
Berkeley, Calif.

Après le Déluge

In “Expose the Predators’ Ball” [Dec. 31, 2018], Katrina vanden Heuvel writes that “activists accompanied by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez flooded [Nancy] Pelosi’s office to demand action on climate change.” What a great way to illustrate the danger of rising sea levels! All the same, I hope they helped to mop up the mess afterward.

Paul Kienker
White Plains, N.Y.
Time for a Wealth Tax!

The New York Times recently reported that hedge-fund billionaire and GOP megadonor Kenneth Griffin shelled out a record $238 million for a penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park. The news came just days after Oxfam International reported that 26 billionaires have the same combined net worth as the poorest 3.8 billion people on the planet. Meanwhile, many of America’s richest corporate executives spent the week hobnobbing in Davos, Switzerland, at the World Economic Forum, where they focused on the preposterous idea of “upskilling” as a potential answer to rising economic inequality.

It seems that each new day brings fresh reminders that the economy is rigged in favor of an out-of-touch elite gobbling up more and more of America’s—and the world’s—wealth. Yet until recently, politicians have, with few exceptions, failed to respond with the kind of bold policies required to make a dent in the problem. Senator Elizabeth Warren’s idea for a new wealth tax is the latest reason to believe that this sorry state of affairs may finally be changing.

Warren’s proposal would levy a modest annual tax on the 75,000 wealthiest households in the country—roughly the top 0.1 percent. The plan was formulated with the help of UC Berkeley economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, two of the world’s leading experts on income and wealth inequality, who estimate that it would raise $2.75 trillion over a decade. Warren is calling for a tax of 2 percent on the assets of those with a net worth above $50 million and a tax of 3 percent on billionaires. “By asking our top 75,000 households to pay their fair share,” she said, “my proposal will help address runaway wealth concentration and at the same time accelerate badly needed investments in rebuilding our middle class.”

Such a tax is a sensible response to the growing concentration of wealth among the superrich, which is fundamentally at odds with a functioning democracy. Today, the top 1 percent of US households own 40 percent of the country’s wealth—more than the bottom 90 percent combined. And regressive GOP policies, such as the party’s recent $1.5 trillion tax giveaway to corporations and the rich, are making the country even more unequal and less democratic. “Just as we have a climate crisis, we have an inequality crisis,” Saez and Zucman wrote recently, adding: “An extreme concentration of wealth means an extreme concentration of economic and political power.”

Warren’s idea is a potential game changer, and her status as a top 2020 presidential contender is forcing many in the media to pay attention to a problem they often ignore. Much like Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s suggestion that top earners should pay a marginal tax rate as high as 70 percent, Warren’s plan has already won support from voices typically aligned with the Democratic establishment. “The incidence of extreme wealth inequality—as well as the magnitude of never-taxed wealth—is just so obscene, at this point in our nation, that I think there is simply no choice but to explore a wealth tax like this,” said Gene Sperling, a top economic adviser to Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

Many on the right, as well as corporate centrists, have already lashed out at Warren’s proposal (both Fox News and former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, who is contemplating his own run for the 2020 Democratic nomination, have claimed it would usher in a Venezuela-style crisis). Others have argued that such a tax would be unconstitutional—a dubious claim that relies on a controversial 1895 Supreme Court ruling that, as the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy explains, “has been limited to the point of irrelevance by subsequent court opinions.”

The swift backlash from the right is not surprising, but polls have consistently shown that Americans favor increasing taxes on the wealthy. A January survey found that nearly 60 percent support much higher marginal tax rates, and a recent Pew Research Center survey showed that two-thirds of the public believe that the economic system is unfairly tilted in favor of
powerful interests. The need for more equitable taxes was even raised, wonder of wonders, at the recent gathering of the world’s wealthiest in Davos, where Dutch historian Rutger Bregman chastised his elite audience by pointing out: “Almost no one raises the real issue of tax avoidance, right? And of the rich just not paying their fair share.”

As the Democratic Party’s ideas primary ramps up, plans to take on economic inequality should continue to get more attention, especially if Senator Bernie Sanders enters the race; he has just proposed expanding the number of wealthy Americans who would be subject to the inheritance tax. What is clear is that the public is hungry for far bolder measures than the ones our political leaders have offered in the past. May the best ideas win.

KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

Black Culture Won’t Save Kamala Harris

Kamala Harris announced her presidential bid on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. She has breathlessly recounted how her parents met during the civil-rights movement. She’s played Tupac at her book signings, danced to Cardi B, and even joked about smoking joints with Stephen Colbert. But will her frequent cultural cues be enough to win over black voters?

In the past, the winks of wokeness worked well for national black candidates like Barack Obama. Through his command of popular African-American culture, Obama appealed to black voters without having to directly address antiracist public policy and alienate moderate whites. Obama’s black charm offensive ranged from a soulful rendition of Al Green’s “Let’s Stay Together” to a Denzel Washington-like impersonation of Malcolm X telling his audience that it had been “hood-winked” and “bamboozled.”

Yet despite his cultural competency, Obama presided over an economic recovery that left many black families behind, as well as a spike in highly visible police brutality. Today, after both a long honeymoon and a Hamptons fund-raiser. And whenever he needed to shore up his base, he could summon a sermon or Jay-Z quicker than you could say “Kwanzaa.”

Obama and Harris are cut from the same cloth. They were both born at the tail end of the civil-rights movement. They both belong to a generation of center-left black politicians once deemed “post-racial.” They both know how to comport themselves at a Howard homecoming and at a Hamptons fund-raiser.

Like Obama, Harris pulls from a deep well of wit, celebrity, and cultural relevance. A decade ago, a politician with this profile easily won the support of black voters, with none of their criticism. But times have changed. Today, Harris faces a mountain of criticism—some of it unfounded, but much of it legitimate.

Running as a former prosecutor, Harris gives many people legitimate pause because of her past as an instigator of mass incarceration. At the same time, running as a black woman, Harris has seen her very existence awaken the kind of gender resentment that Obama never faced. This is new territory for American politics, and where Harris’s campaign goes from here is unclear. But after eight years of Obama, as African-American studies scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has noted, having “black faces in high places” is no longer enough.

This new terrain perplexes white candidates as much as it does black ones. Long before Obama charmed the Oprah-hive, Bill Clinton jazzed Arsenio Hall’s viewers. For decades, Democrats force-fed this “symbols over substance” diet to black voters. Like political mimes, they relied on gestures, signals, and symbols to provide their most loyal supporters with the least solid promises. But now the jig is up.

After 2016’s low turnout among black voters and increasingly pointed questions from black activists, signs of a new life have sprouted throughout the Democratic Party. Elizabeth Warren launched her campaign with a video noting the racial wealth gap and addressed students at historically black colleges and universities on how “the government itself…has systematically discriminated against black people in this country,” Kirsten Gillibrand committed herself to “taking on institutional racism” two minutes into launching her own presidential bid. And Harris’s proposed “LIFT the Middle Class” Act has earned the endorsement of racial-stratification economist and reparations advocate William Darity. Indeed, many political analysts believe that addressing racial inequality may be the new litmus test for Democratic candidates.

The elevation of antiracism in the Democratic Party is heartening, though whether this new, more explicit message will be enough to win black voters over remains (continued on page 6)
Family Matters

The year is still relatively new, but paid family leave is already a hot topic. A bill to create a state program was prefilled in Kentucky for this legislative session, and since January 1, similar bills have been introduced in Maine, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Vermont, with Colorado likely close behind.

On the federal level, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand’s entrance into the 2020 presidential race ensures that paid family leave will be an important subject among the Democratic contenders, given that she sponsored a bill to create a national program. During the midterms, almost a third of competitive congressional candidates included it in their platforms.

All of this energy is incredibly exciting in a country that, unlike nearly all of our peers, doesn’t guarantee paid time off to welcome a new child, care for an elderly parent, or undergo a long-term recovery of one’s own. But given the enthusiasm and the likelihood that some laws will get passed this year, it’s worth raising our ambitions.

So far, the paid-leave programs that exist in six states and the District of Columbia fall short of what’s needed. While they’re certainly better than the zero weeks of paid leave in the rest of the country, the longest period that any of them guarantees is just 12 weeks; the rest offer between four and eight weeks. And all of them ensure that a worker receives merely a slice of her regular income, which is capped at a certain level; in 2018, the highest level was California’s, at $1,216 a week.

Twelve weeks may sound like a lot to someone who is currently assured nothing, but it’s not very effective.

In the absence of federal action, states are beginning to guarantee some paid time off, but no more than 12 weeks...

...and the most they offer is $1,216 a week. Why not 6 months with almost full pay?

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Given that the only federal law mandating leave is for 12 weeks of unpaid time off, it may seem absurd to argue that 12 weeks away from work with some pay isn’t sufficient. But the country is hungry for action to address the decades that we’ve remained outside the international norm. We shouldn’t take action on paid family leave just for the sake of doing something; we need to get it right.
Taking the Rap

On February 3, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement took the Grammy-nominated rapper 21 Savage into custody. ICE claims that the Atlanta-based artist is a British citizen unlawfully residing in the US after overstaying his non-immigrant visa. Savage, born She’kaya Bin Abraham-Joseph, now faces deportation.

Savage appears to have arrived in the country when he was just 7, and the rapper’s lyrics depict a violent upbringing. In the 2017 track “Nothin New,” he sings about his daily reality, with references to racial injustice, slavery, and the US carceral complex.

Savage’s lawyers said in a statement: “The Department of Homeland Security has known his address and his history since his filing for the U Visa in 2017, yet they took no action against him until this past weekend.”

U visas allow crime victims who cooperate with law enforcement to seek legal immigrant status. His lawyers said he was a victim of a shooting in 2013, when the rapper has said he was shot six times.

In a January performance on The Tonight Show, Savage broached the subject of immigration with an added verse to his new single, “a lot,” rapping: “Been through some things but I couldn’t imagine my kids stuck at the border / Flint still need water / People was innocent, couldn’t get lawyers.”

Savage’s attorney called him a “role model” for young people in Atlanta, where the rapper has developed several programs to help underprivileged youth.

—Noah Flora

Is Cuba Next?

Venezuela isn’t the only target on Trump’s list.

Last November, just days before the midterm elections, National Security Adviser John Bolton traveled to the anti-Castro stronghold of Miami to give his “troika of tyranny” speech—a retrograde, Cold War-style assault on Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. “The troika will crumble,” Bolton predicted brashly. “We know their day of reckoning awaits. The United States now looks forward to watching each corner of the triangle fall: in Havana, in Caracas, in Managua.”

At the time, the speech was perceived as little more than posturing to turn out the right-wing vote in Florida. In retrospect, however, Bolton was signaling the administration’s determination to restore US hegemony in Latin America. Advancing Trump’s MAGA mantra, it is clear, now requires flexing interventionist muscle in Venezuela. The administration’s endgame, though, appears to be Cuba—the island nation that has challenged US hemispheric domination since the anti-imperialist triumph of the Castro-led revolution 60 years ago. Indeed, as Washington ratchets up its efforts to topple the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, we are witnessing what The Miami Herald has called “the Cubanization of Venezuela policy.”

The crisis in Venezuela has provided the “low-hanging fruit,” in the words of journalist Jon Lee Anderson, for the resurrection of a bygone era of gunboat diplomacy, when Washington could dictate the fate of regional governments. Maduro’s abuses of power have brought widespread misery to a once-prosperous nation that, under his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, seemed poised to supplant Washington’s economic and political influence in the region. The Venezuelan people have every reason—and every right—to demand an end to an incompetent government that has transformed their oil-rich nation into a failed state.

But from the start of his presidency, Trump has had regime change in Venezuela on his policy agenda—as a step toward fulfilling his campaign promise to “end the deal” that President Obama made with Raúl Castro for a historic peaceful coexistence with Cuba. On only his second day in the White House, Trump “asked for a Venezuela briefing,” one former administration official recently told The Wall Street Journal, “to explore how to reverse Obama-era policies toward Cuba.”

Options for getting rid of Maduro and ending Venezuela’s alliance with Cuba included cutting off the billions of dollars that the United States pays for Venezuelan oil imports—a major sanction that the administration has now imposed.

In his Miami speech, Bolton announced additional sanctions against Cuba, promising that “even more would come as well.” Indeed, as part of what US officials portray as a broader and more aggressive approach to the region, details are being leaked to the media on forthcoming measures to roll back the Obama-era policy of positive engagement with Havana. First among them is redesignating Cuba as a sponsor of international terrorism. In 1982, amid the bloody US counterinsurgency campaigns in Central America, the Reagan administration placed Cuba on the State Department’s list of “state sponsors of terrorism”—a flagrant effort to portray Havana’s support for revolution as support for international terrorism.

Despite the lack of any evidence that Cuba backed terrorism and the abundant evidence that it was, instead, a target of such activities, one administration after another kept Cuba on the list. Obama finally removed it as part of the negotiations to restore normal diplomatic ties in 2015.

In the coming weeks, the White House also plans to announce that Americans can sue in US courts to regain properties in Cuba expropriated after the Cuban Revolution—a punitive provision contained in the 1996 Helms-Burton Act that every president since Clinton has waived to avoid the chaos of litigation against companies from allied nations with investments in Cuba.

Both of these policy changes will eventually deter much-needed foreign investment in Cuba; more immediately, however, putting Cuba back on the list of terrorist states will scare off US tourists. At the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, which monitors and implements regulations on travel to Cuba, officials have strongly hinted that an announcement on travel restrictions is expected soon.

These sanctions and restrictions are designed to squeeze Cuba’s growing private sector, which caters to US travelers, and further destabilize the country’s already struggling economy. Of more immediate concern to Cubans, the regional community, and conscientious US citizens, however, is the administration’s threat of open intervention.
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According to former NSC staffer Benjamin Gedan, for John Bolton & Co., “Cuba is a foreign-policy white whale.”

In Venezuela, and the potential spillover effect it would have on Cuba policy. At a press briefing on January 28, Bolton held a yellow pad with the words “5000 troops to Colombia” visible for journalists to see—and report. In a subsequent CBS interview, Trump called military action against Venezuela an “option” still under consideration.

Such threats could be a bluff. But behind a president who prides himself on being a bully is a team of committed regime-changers: Senator Marco Rubio, who is now acting as a shadow secretary of state for Latin America and for whom rolling back the Cuban Revolution is a top priority; Mauricio Claver-Carone, the leading hard-line Cuban-American lobbyist against Obama’s policy of engagement, who is now a special assistant to the president and senior director at the National Security Council’s Western Hemisphere Affairs division; Elliott Abrams, the former assistant secretary of state during the Reagan years who became infamous for enabling and covering up crimes against humanity in El Salvador and Guatemala, and who was convicted (but pardoned) for crimes relating to the Iran-contra scandal; and Bolton, who, as George W. Bush’s UN ambassador, spread the canard that Cuba’s medical-research programs was a cover for biological-weapons production. This formidable group has a Captain Ahab–like obsession with regime change in Cuba, according to former NSC staffer Benjamin Gedan. For Bolton et al., “Cuba is a foreign-policy white whale.”

“I’ve made it clear that the United States has neither the capacity nor the intention to impose change on Cuba,” President Obama stated during his history-making speech at the Alicia Alonso Grand Theater in Havana in March 2016. “I want you to know,” he reiterated, looking across the auditorium at then-President Raúl Castro, that “my visit here demonstrates that you do not need to fear a threat from the United States.” Three short years later, those assurances are no longer valid.

Peter Kornbluh directs the Cuba Documentation Project at the National Security Archive in Washington, DC.

Nuclear Madness

Trump is launching a new, terrifying arms race.

Ostensibly, President Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, announced on February 1, is intended to coerce Russia into admitting that it has violated the accord and then to destroy any weapons so identified. But the closer one looks, the more obvious it becomes that administration hawks, led by National Security Adviser John Bolton, have no interest in preserving the arms-control agreement but rather seek to embark on an arms race with Russia and China—a dynamic that will take us into dangerous territory not visited since the Cold War.

According to the INF Treaty, “intermediate-range nuclear forces” are nuclear-capable ballistic or cruise missiles with a range of between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, or approximately 310 to 3,400 miles. These can be fired from ships, submarines, planes, or ground-based launchers; the treaty, however, covers the land-based variants only. When it was signed in 1987, the United States and the Soviet Union had deployed some 1,293 of these weapons, mostly in Europe.

In the early 1980s, when these weapons were first deployed, both sides feared the outbreak of a ground war in Europe involving thousands of tanks and possibly millions of soldiers. Rather than risk defeat in such an epic encounter, both the United States and the Soviet Union planned for the early use of so-called “tactical” or “theater” nuclear weapons to wipe out their opponents’ conventional forces. Almost everyone assumed, however, that any use of nuclear arms would instantly trigger the use of “strategic” nukes targeted at the two superpowers’ homelands, resulting, inevitably, in mutual annihilation. As this nightmarish reality sank in, massive antinuclear protests erupted across Europe and the United States, including one in New York’s Central Park attended by nearly 1 million people.

With antinuclear fervor rising, US and Soviet leaders began negotiations to reduce the risks of escalation. Ultimately, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev reached (continued on page 26)
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(SOUND FAMILIAR?)

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Himalayan Meltdown?

In 2015, the Paris climate accord set a goal of limiting global warming to 2°C above pre-industrial levels. But even this ambitious target won’t be enough to prevent fully a third of the glaciers in the Himalayas from melting by the end of the century, according to an alarming new report.

The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment lists 210 authors and took five years to produce, and it has an even more dire warning if current emissions are not cut: The region will warm up by 5°C and lose two-thirds of its glaciers by 2100—disrupting water sources, like the Ganges, Indus, and Mekong rivers, upon which 1.65 billion people depend.

The region spans eight countries, from Myanmar to Afghanistan, and is home to some 240 million people. There is no question that the region will change dramatically in the coming decades—the process has already begun—so the real question is how to manage it.

The report makes policy recommendations for the transition to a green economy, but given the political tensions among many of these countries, that will be no easy task.

“This is a climate crisis you have not heard of,” says Philippus Wester of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, one of the report’s lead authors. “Impacts on people in the region, already one of the world’s most fragile and hazard-prone mountain regions, will range from worsened air pollution to an increase in extreme weather events.”

—Liz Boyd

She’s With Stupid

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s gaffes have nothing on the Republicans.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is not just the youngest woman elected to Congress; she’s also a brown, insanely charismatic leftist. That means she must be an idiot—or “a little girl” (GOP campaign consultant Ed Rollins), “not ready for Congress” (American Enterprise Institute scholar in residence Norman Ornstein), “this girl Ocasio-Cortez or whatever she is” (Florida Governor Ron DeSantis), even “a shiny object” (former Democratic senator Claire McCaskill.) Google her name along with “ignorant” and “dumb,” and you get over 1 million hits.

I don’t deny that Ocasio-Cortez has made some slips: The Washington Post’s Fact Checker column has given her four Pinocchios, and CNN’s Chris Cillizza has lectured her for erroneously claiming that Pentagon accounting errors could pay for two-thirds of Medicare for All. Politifact said she was wrong, too, when she claimed that today’s low unemployment rate was due to people working multiple jobs; that Lucy McBath was outspent five to one in her Georgia congressional race; and that the Pentagon received $700 billion it didn’t even ask for.

Whether it’s carelessness or simply reaching too quickly for numbers to validate what are essentially moral arguments—things most of us have done at one time or another—Ocasio-Cortez needs to be extra precise, since being a leftist and a woman of color invites special scrutiny. Even Whoopi Goldberg, who has been known to shoot off her mouth, advises her to “sit still for a minute and learn the job.”

Meanwhile, plenty of Republican officials make her hazy math look positively Newtonian. Can we talk about the ridiculous things they’ve asserted that barely raise eyebrows? Let’s leave the president aside, since I only have a thousand words; according to the Center for American Progress, a full 60 percent of Republicans in the current Congress deny global warming is due to human activity. That includes Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, Ted Cruz, and Jim Inhofe, author of The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future.

How come the people busy mocking Ocasio-Cortez for her support for a Green New Deal take this crazy stuff in stride? How come nobody asks them about the connections between their global-warming denialism and campaign donations from the oil and gas industries?

The government boasts several creationists as well: Rep. Mark Green, who also has suggested that vaccines cause autism; Greg Gianforte, who once beat up a journalist; Steve Daines; Dan Webster; HUD Secretary Ben Carson, and Vice President Mike Pence. If Mark Harris, the fundamentalist pastor who thinks God wants women in the kitchen, wins his race in North Carolina, you can add him to the list. Men like them should be challenged about their weird anti-science beliefs. But that will never happen, because you can say any old nonsense as long as you call it Christianity.

Imagine for a moment that the foolish, careless, deceitful, ignorant, bigoted, or simply false claims of Ocasio-Cortez’s fellow lawmakers were subject to the same level of scrutiny as her occasional mistakes. “Tell us more, Senator John Kennedy, about your statement that our climate is ‘just a continuation of the warming up from the Little Ice Age.’” “Congressman Mo Brooks, you’ve claimed rising sea levels are due to the erosion of the white cliffs of Dover and the California coastline. Where did you get that preposterous idea?”

Why stop with global warming? “Representative Gohmert, can you back up your belief that Al Qaeda has camps on the Mexican border? What about your claim that gay soldiers undermine the military because ‘if you’re sitting around getting massages all day…then you’re not going to last very long?’” Iowa Congressman Steve King lost his committee seats after explicitly defending white supremacy—but he’s expressed racist and bigoted views for 16 years. Why did it take so long?

Ocasio-Cortez gets grief when she’s a decimal point off. But when she called for a 70 percent top marginal tax rate, former Wisconsin governor Scott Walker tweeted the following to illustrate
the policy’s appalling injustice: “Explaining tax rates before Reagan to 5th graders: ‘Imagine if you did chores for your grandma and she gave you $10. When you got home, your parents took $7 from you.’ The students said: ‘That’s not fair!’ Even 5th graders get it.”

Does Walker really not know that a marginal tax rate is levied only on the portion of your income above a certain level—which, for Ocasio-Cortez, is $10 million? More likely, he thinks he can get away with it. This was a man who thought he could be president, and was taken seriously by serious people for years.

Ocasio-Cortez, for her part, tweeted the perfect response: “Explaining marginal taxes to a far-right former Governor: Imagine if you did chores for abuela & she gave you $10. When you got home, you got to keep it, because it’s only $10. Then we taxed the billionaire in town because he’s making tons of money underpaying the townspeople.”

Imagine if Republican freshman Dan Crenshaw, the former Navy SEAL who wears an eye patch due to a battle injury, got a fraction of Ocasio-Cortez’s scrutiny. Crenshaw was lauded for graciously accepting an apology when Saturday Night Live’s Pete Davidson made a joke about his appearance, but when Crenshaw recently recommended that his Facebook followers read a book put out by the climate-denying Heartland Institute, and tweeted that there would have been no government shutdown if the Republicans were in charge (spoiler alert: They were), there was no pushback—just crickets.

Then, just after the Super Bowl, Crenshaw revealed himself as ignorant as Scott Walker: “Should someone propose a 70% tax on the Patriots so that NFL competition is more fair and equal? Asking for a friend,” he tweeted. He needs to drop in on Alexandria; I’m sure she’d be glad to explain.
Who Is Matt Duss and Can He Take On "THE BLOB"?

Bernie’s foreign-policy adviser is doing just that.

DAVID KLION
Forty-five years after Congress passed the War Powers Resolution over Richard Nixon’s veto, the Senate finally invoked its power to end a war. This past December, 56 senators voted to cut off all US support for Saudi Arabia’s horrific military campaign in Yemen, which began in the final years of the Obama administration, sharply escalated under Donald Trump, and has led to the deaths of an estimated 85,000 children due to starvation.

The morning of the vote, Bernie Sanders addressed his Senate colleagues next to a photo of an emaciated Yemeni child and urged them to pass the resolution, which he’d introduced along with co-sponsors Mike Lee, a Republican, and Chris Murphy, a Democrat. “We have been providing the bombs the Saudi-led coalition is using, refueling their planes before they drop those bombs, and assisting with intelligence,” Sanders said. “In too many cases, our weapons are being used to kill civilians.”

As the Vermont senator spoke, a 6-foot-5, bespectacled bear of a man sat quietly beside him. Matt Duss, 46, has recently become one of the most significant figures reshaping progressive foreign policy in the Trump era. Since February 2017, when Sanders hired him as his foreign-policy adviser, Duss has played a key role in advancing the Yemen resolution and has deeply informed Sanders’s growing emphasis on international affairs.

“I give Matt an extraordinary amount of credit on Yemen,” says Representative Ro Khanna, who introduced the joint resolution in the House. “He’s the principal reason that Sanders took this huge risk in introducing the War Powers Resolution in the Senate and agreeing to [support] what we had introduced in the House.”

Sanders is reportedly about to announce a second presidential run, and attention is already turning to his foreign-policy views. In his 2016 campaign, Sanders’s primary focus was on domestic economic issues, and many critics regarded him as a lightweight on foreign policy. This time around, Sanders has won over skeptics in the foreign-policy establishment with substantive speeches in 2017 and 2018, laying out a comprehensive vision for America’s role in the world. Beyond wanting to end or prevent wars in the Middle East, Sanders has also linked the global rise of authoritarian populism to wealth inequality, and has called for an international progressive movement to combat authoritarian leaders and kleptocrats from Russia to Brazil. And while Duss doesn’t want to take credit for what he says is his boss’s deeply held views, he has had a hand in all of this.

To the extent that Sanders is raising new ideas and challenging the interventionist consensus that has long dominated Washington, it makes sense that he’s relying on the advice of a relative outsider. The nation’s capital is infamously a town of straight-A students who hustled their way through the most elite schools and prestigious internships in pursuit of power. Duss took a more meandering path, playing in bands and working odd jobs for years before finishing college in his early 30s. He then spent the next decade influencing the public debate, mainly as a blogger, before finally emerging as a Senate staffer.

Duss is now gaining prominence at a pivotal moment for progressive foreign policy. Since the end of the Cold War, leading Democrats have broadly subscribed to the liberal-internationalist doctrine, with its emphasis on free-trade pacts, military coalitions to overthrow dictators and prevent atrocities, and, since 9/11, ruthless prosecution of the War on Terror; any differences with their Republican colleagues have often been more of degree than kind. Foreign-policy critics on the left, meanwhile, have generally been relegated to academia and the alternative media, and have focused mainly on challenging the excesses of empire, not on articulating a more positive and ambitious global vision.

More than most policy-makers, Duss is a product of that left-leaning tradition. His ascension was in many ways made possible by the political earthquake of 2016—not just Trump’s election, but the defeat of Hillary Clinton, the enduring influence of Sanders, and the emergence of a new generation of progressives who have grown up amid endless wars. The open question is whether Duss and others like him are capable of taking on the foreign-policy world’s entrenched status quo.

from Van Halen to indie groups like the Replacements, the Pixies, and Dinosaur Jr. It was through playing in bands that he found his peer group, which included an Iraqi-American singer who helped personalize the first Gulf War for him. “I just was uncomfortable with America sending troops around the world,” Duss says.

After two and a half years at a small Christian college in Massachusetts, Duss found himself unmotivated and returned home to Nyack, where he worked in a variety of menial jobs while pursuing his true passions: playing guitar and writing fiction. In 1994, he moved to Seattle, where he met his wife, and where he first became involved in politics via anti-globalization activism and Ralph Nader’s 2000 presidential campaign.

Duss became fascinated with the Muslim world on a trip to Istanbul for a friend’s wedding in 2000. He found the experience of being awakened by the morning call to prayer transformative, and began reading obsessively about Islamic history and politics. The 9/11 attacks the following year left him frustrated and concerned about the way the US media portrayed Muslims and the Middle East, and for the first time in his life he felt a sense of political mission. At a time when many US policy-makers were encouraging open-ended war across the Muslim world, Duss dedicated himself to understanding the societies that would bear the brunt of such a policy.

In 2002, Duss transferred from community college to the University of Washington, where he finally earned his bachelor’s degree at 31 and his master’s at 34 while studying Arabic and raising a newborn. He wrote his thesis on Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shiite cleric who had become the political and spiritual leader of the insurgency against the US-led coalition occupying Iraq.

After finishing his academic work, Duss and his family moved back east and settled in Alexandria, Virginia. Duss quickly took to the Beltway blogosphere and started several websites, including one dedicated to monitoring the Islamophobic writings of Marty Peretz, then publisher of The New Republic. He began receiving wider recognition writing about the Middle East for The American Prospect. That eventually earned him a staff job at the Center for American Progress, where in early 2008 he became editor of the national-security team for the liberal think tank’s affiliated blog, ThinkProgress. “If TAP was like getting signed to Sub Pop,” says Duss, referring to the indie label that launched bands like Nirvana and Sleater-Kinney, “going to CAP was like a major label.”

“His success is an argument for all kinds of diversity in the foreign-policy community,” says Heather Hurlburt, a former State Department official during Bill Clinton’s presidency. “Perhaps ironically, it’s also a vindication of [CAP founder] John Podesta, of all people, whose early vision for the Center for American Progress was that it would hire and pay talented young people who didn’t come from super-privileged traditional backgrounds.”

At the same time that Duss was starting at CAP, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were engaged in a heated presidential primary. During a January 2008 debate, Obama contrasted his opposition to the Iraq War with Clinton’s initial support for it. “I don’t want to just end the war,” Obama said. “I want to end the mind-set that got us into war in the first place.” For Duss, this line “was like hearing [Jimi Hendrix’s] ‘Voodoo Child (Slight Return)’ for the first time. It’s like, ‘That is rock and roll.’”

“Matt has always been willing to challenge underlying assumptions about the conduct of American foreign policy,” says Ben Rhodes, one of Obama’s closest national-security advisers. “He rightly seized on President Obama’s statement…and he held us to that standard for eight years.”

He Obama administration often struggled to hold itself to that same standard. The idealism that appealed to Duss and many others produced some significant achievements, notably the Iran nuclear deal, the reestablishment of relations with Cuba, and the Paris climate accord. But Obama didn’t end US military operations in Iraq or Afghanistan, and he launched new, undeclared wars in several other countries in the Muslim world. He authorized record sums of military aid to Israel and Saudi Arabia despite the atrocities they committed in the Gaza Strip and Yemen. He championed the Arab Spring, then stood by the Gulf monarchies and the Egyptian military junta as they snuffed it out.

Obama’s foreign-policy record disappointed many activists and writers on the left. But inside the Beltway and among key Democratic institutions, it had plenty of defenders, including some who would clash directly with Duss once he’d entered the think-tank world.

Duss worked at CAP until 2014 and blogged prolifically for ThinkProgress, where he was an outspoken voice against military interventionism, a critic of Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories, and an advocate of diplomacy with Iran. He co-authored a report on Islamophobia in the world of conservative donor networks and think tanks, making his share of enemies in the process. He also helped identify and recruit like-minded writers to the site, including Ali Gharib (now an editor at The Intercept) and Eli Clifton (now a fellow at Type Media Center).

Initially, Duss had a significant degree of freedom to express his opinions at ThinkProgress, which he attributes to Podesta’s hands-off approach. Asked whether that approach continued for the entirety of his time at CAP, Duss says simply, “No, it didn’t.”

In 2011, the year that CAP’s current presi-
dent, Neera Tanden, took over from Podesta, Duss’s team drew the ire of pro-Israel organizations and media outlets in Washington. Following an article in *Politico* by Ben Smith (now editor in chief of *BuzzFeed News*) spotlighting *ThinkProgress’s* critical coverage of Israel, Duss and several other CAP writers felt targeted. “The goal of that piece was definitely to start a campaign against us,” says Duss, who adds that he has no personal resentment toward Smith and respects much of his work. “It was clear he was working off of an opposition document that had been shopped to him that was later leaked.” Duss specifically calls out the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), *The Washington Free Beacon*, and some members of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies for coordinating a campaign against him and his colleagues.

“Reporters get information from all sorts of places, and from people with all sorts of motives,” Ben Smith says in response. “That was an accurate story about the differences on Israel inside a Democratic institution—a story that is obviously still playing out in the party.” In any case, Gharib and Clifton would voluntarily leave CAP after what Duss says was significant internal pressure that interfered with their work. Duss remained at the organization for three more years, essentially daring the higher-ups to fire him.

Faiz Shakir, who ran *ThinkProgress* at the time and hired all of the writers targeted by AIPAC, still speaks warmly of Duss. “Matt was advocating for the Iranian deal long before it was mainstreamed; he was also warning of the consequences of [Israel’s] settlement expansion long before the Obama administration tried to take a hard line on the issue,” says Shakir, now the ACLU’s national political director. “For his work, he obviously engendered opposition from powerful groups who didn’t want to see ideological movement on those issues.”

Tanden’s only comment for this profile was delivered via her communications director: “While at CAP, Matt Duss made important contributions to our national-security team, and he has done critical work since.”

While it’s clearly a sensitive subject for all parties involved, the tensions from the CAP incident presaged the higher-ups to fire him. Duss was an outspoken critic of Duss’s future boss Sanders during the 2016 Democratic primaries and remains so today. CAP’s acceptance of funds from the United Arab Emirates, which started during her tenure, was recently a source of significant internal turmoil, as was Tanden’s 2015 event with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whereas Duss has vociferously criticized both the UAE and Israeli governments for years. His experience at CAP speaks to the limits of trying to challenge donors and policy-makers within powerful Democratic Party–aligned organizations—limits that Sanders will likely run into again if he seeks to reform foreign policy in a progressive direction.

In 2014, Duss left CAP to become president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, a small nonprofit that provides grants to Israeli, Palestinian, and American civil-society groups. While at FMEP, Duss participated in working groups in coordination with Ben Rhodes to support the Obama administration’s nuclear deal with Iran, which faced significant opposition from hawks and pro-Israel groups in Congress.

Several times during Duss’s tenure at both CAP and FMEP, some neoconservative and pro-Israel critics accused him of anti-Semitism, a charge that he finds hurtful and absurd. A 2013 article in *The Washington Free Beacon* insinuated that Duss, his brother, and his father are all hostile to Jews, largely relying on their persistent criticism of the Israeli occupation as evidence. In 2015, a Republican congressman issued a press release accusing Duss and his family of “anti-Semitic [sic] ties,” again citing as evidence their criticism of the Israeli government. “Any fair reading of my work—and, frankly, my life—refutes that plainly,” Duss says.

Duss’s deep interest in the Israel-Palestine conflict is rooted in both his Christian upbringing and his humanitarian instincts. The first of his many visits to Israel and the occupied territories was in 2003, in the middle of the second intifada, while his brother was doing relief work there. “A bus had blown up in Jerusalem a week before, so the reality of terrorism is there; you have to recognize it,” Duss says. “But at the same time, watching the daily indignity and humiliation and violence that is visited on Palestinian civilians in multiple ways… there’s no justification for that.”

The public conversation about Israel has shifted in the past few years. Younger Jews on college campuses and elsewhere have become disenchanted with Israel and more critical of the occupation, and this has created more space in the media and in politics for views like Duss’s. The new Congress includes several Democrats who have endorsed the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement, a position that many other Democrats not only oppose but are trying to make illegal. Neither Duss nor Sanders has endorsed boycotting Israel, but both have defended the right to engage in such boycotts, and in 2015 Duss testified before Congress that “it is a mistake to focus on the BDS movement while ignoring the main reason for its continued growth, which is the failure to end the occupation.” While some BDS activists may consider that a moderate position, no one has ever voiced it in the context of a presidential campaign.

During the 2016 Democratic primary contest between Clinton and Sanders, Duss bemoaned the absence of a real foreign-policy debate. At the time, many progressives were frustrated with Clinton’s reflexive hawkishness, on the one hand, and Sanders’s perceived lack of a serious interest in international affairs, on the other.
Halimo Mohamed Abdi said the blast broke both her hips, left shrapnel embedded in her thigh, and caused terrible burns that cost her both breasts. Before she lost consciousness, she told me, she saw three boys—ages 9, 10, and 16—die in the explosion, which occurred at night in a field outside Barire, a village 30 miles west of the Somali capital of Mogadishu. She also said the strike came from the sky and that afterward she had to be hospitalized for three months.

When Abdi was finally able to leave the ward, she found her house in ruins and 25 of her goats dead. Now she lives in Salama camp, one of the 996 squalid settlements lining the 20-mile road that runs from Afgoye to Mogadishu. The camps are filled with tens of thousands of Somalis who have fled American air strikes and the fighting between government militias and Al Shabab, the extremist group linked to Al Qaeda.

Abdi, like many Somali herders, doesn’t follow the Western calendar, so she’s unsure of the exact date of the strike. But she says it was about two weeks before Eid al-Fitr, which began on the evening of June 14 last year.

The United States Africa Command is the only military actor that acknowledges conducting air and drone strikes in this region of Somalia, known as Lower and Middle Shabelle. Located just a few hours outside Mogadishu, both areas are Al Shabab strongholds. On June 1, AFRICOM issued a press release stating that, on May 31, a strike had been conducted 30 miles southwest of Mogadishu, killing 12 “terrorists.” But the AFRICOM statement only raised more questions: Did the American command count the three boys killed as terrorists? Why was Abdi’s farm targeted? Was this even the attack she described?

Such questions have become increasingly common with the escalation of US air operations in Somalia. Since Donald Trump took office, the US military has approximately tripled the number of strikes that it conducts each year in Somalia, according to figures confirmed by the Pentagon, while such actions—and the reasons behind them—have become increasingly opaque.

“It’s hard to know what standards and processes the Trump administration, since taking office in 2017, has
been applying to counterterrorism operations in places like Somalia, given the administration’s retrenchment on transparency with respect to the overall policy framework governing counterterrorism strikes,” said Joshua Geltzer, the senior director for counterterrorism at the National Security Council from 2015 to 2017.

In March of last year, 13 NGOs, including the American Civil Liberties Union and the Human Rights Clinic at Columbia Law School, released a statement criticizing the lack of information on the use of armed drones and other lethal force by the Trump administration: “We are deeply concerned that the reported new policy, combined with this administration’s reported dramatic increase in lethal operations in Yemen and Somalia, will lead to an increase in unlawful killings and in civilian casualties.”

Representative Adam Smith (D-WA), the new chair of the House Armed Services Committee, said that the Trump administration hasn’t even shared this information with Congress. The administration, he said, has failed to deliver a report on its military actions in Somalia that was mandated by the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act. “We don’t know what the strategy is,” Smith said, “because we required the administration to lay out its long-term strategy... but they have not yet done so, as required by law.”

The White House did not respond to requests for comment.

Over October and November of 2018, I spent five weeks in Somalia investigating the impact of the US air campaign. My goal was to find out whether there were strikes happening that were not being made public and civilian casualties that were not being disclosed. I interviewed 25 Somalis from Lower and Middle Shabelle who had been displaced by the strikes and were now living in camps near Mogadishu. Others who provided me with information or insights included current and former senior Somali security and intelligence officials; current and former senior American security and diplomatic officials and contractors; members of the country’s Federal Parliament; and about a dozen well-connected Somali and American analysts, activists, and aid workers.

My investigation identified strikes that went unreported until they were raised with AFRICOM, but also others that AFRICOM could not confirm—which suggests that another US agency may also be launching air attacks in the region. The investigation also tracked down evidence that AFRICOM’s claim of zero civilian casualties is almost certainly incorrect. And it found that the United States lacks a clear definition of “terrorist,” with neither AFRICOM, the Pentagon, nor the National Security Council willing to clarify the policies that underpin these strikes.

The relationship between the United States’ and Somalia’s security apparatuses evolved with the new presidents who took office in both countries in early 2017. In March of that year, The New York Times reported that President Trump had signed a directive that designated parts of Somalia as areas of “active hostilities” for at least 180 days. This designation granted AFRICOM greater flexibility to launch strikes in those regions. During most of President Obama’s time in office, suspected members of Al Shabab could only be targeted if they were judged to be threats to the United States. The new directive allowed AFRICOM to kill anyone deemed to be a member of Al Shabab, and it also required less coordination between military and intelligence agencies before a strike could take place.

Nearly two years later, the United States Africa Command will not say whether the declaration of “active hostilities” is still in place or what parts of Somalia it applies to. Nor would AFRICOM comment.
on which agencies were helping to vet the targets or had done so in the past, instead referring me to a spokesperson at the Department of Defense. That person told me that a member of the National Security Council was better placed to answer my questions. The NSC said they would look into my queries but did not respond in time for publication.

Changes were afoot in Somalia as well. The rules of engagement between the two countries have always been informal, according to Abdillahi Mohamad Sanbalooshe, the director of Somalia’s National Intelligence and Security Agency in 2014 and again from April 2017 through February 2018. Sanbalooshe told me that little was written down, less was signed, and nothing was concrete. There was “no military agreement; there is only gentleman’s agreement,” he recalled of the operational arrangements regarding intelligence and security.

But the cooperation went from informal to optional when, a month after Trump’s inauguration, Somalia elected Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, a dual US-Somali national better known as Farmajo, as president. A senior adviser to Somalia’s previous and current presidents, who spoke on condition of anonymity to protect his safety, told me that Farmajo gave the Pentagon a “blank check” when it came to deciding where and when to strike. (AFRICOM maintains that strikes are coordinated with the Somali government.)

Despite all the comments, analyses, and educated guesses that I was offered, the only certain facts are these: Since the inaugurations of Trump and Mohamed, drone attacks and bombings have spiked.

The Pentagon reported 45 “precision strikes” in Somalia in 2018, up from 35 in 2017 and 14 in 2016. But this may not represent the full extent of the US air campaign.

Under both the Obama and Trump administrations, AFRICOM’s policy has been to publicly acknowledge the strikes through a press release or the “responses to questions” (RTQ) policy, which means that a mission will be avowed if AFRICOM is specifically asked about an occurrence that happened on a precise date; otherwise it may go unannounced. “We acknowledge whatever we’ve done,” said John Manley, the Africa Command’s media-relations chief. “If we say, ‘No, it did not happen,’ then no, it did not happen from US AFRICOM.”

Candice Tresch, a Pentagon spokesperson, explained the policy further. “When AFRICOM limits their acknowledgement to ‘response to query,’ it is because of a realistic operational-security concern, a significant force-protection matter, or potential diplomatic sensitivities.”

Complicating this picture is the very real possibility that another US agency is also conducting strikes in Somalia. In March 2017, The Wall Street Journal reported that, according to unnamed officials, Trump had granted the CIA permission to launch drone strikes on its own. Under the Obama administration, the CIA had been used to gather intelligence and locate the targets, but the Pentagon was supposed to make the actual strike.

Daniel Mahanty, the US program director for the nonprofit Center for Civilians in Conflict, told me: “As far as we know, the CIA could be executing people through secret air strikes just about anywhere, and for reasons only known to some in the government. Nothing would prevent it under this administration’s expansive interpretation of domestic and international law or what we know about its still-secret drone policy.”

This lack of transparency has produced an almost total sense of confusion over what the United States is doing with its air attacks in Somalia. Three previously unreported strikes came to light as I investigated the story of an attack relayed by Khadija Hassan Ali, a mother of three from Marka, a city about 60 miles south of Mogadishu.

Ali said that her husband, Abdullahi Sheikh Hassan, died in late July from what she believes was a heart attack after nighttime strikes hit her village amid fighting between Al Shabab and government-led militias. She is certain of the timing because, in Somali culture, a wife formally mourns for four months and 10 days after the death of her husband, so she had the dates in mind when I talked with her in late November.

AFRICOM did not publicly announce any strikes in July, but a document leaked to me by an international human-rights organization indicated an attack on July 25 in Qalimow, a village to the north of Mogadishu and about 95 miles from Ali’s home. I approached AFRICOM and asked if any strikes had occurred between July 22 and 27. Applying RTQ, a spokesperson acknowledged a strike on July 23 but would not specify the location. After weeks of pressing, AFRICOM said the strike happened 30 miles north of Kismayo, Somalia’s southern port city, which is hundreds of miles from both Qalimow and Marka.

This information only makes the situation more puzzling: When asked to avow a strike that a major international organization noted on July 25, AFRICOM admitted a strike in an entirely different location on July 23, and neither of these strikes match Ali’s recollections. In other words, there may have been three different strikes—one acknowledged by AFRICOM, one noted by the international organization, and one recalled by Ali—all around the same time, none of which were previously made public, and only one of which came to light via RTQ.

Saak Osman (an alias to protect his safety) told me about another air strike that AFRICOM says doesn’t match its records. Osman said the strike killed his brother and almost certainly his uncle as
well, and he insists that neither he nor his family members were part of Al Shabab.

Osman is from O’wdhiile, a village about 55 miles south of Mogadishu in Lower Shabelle. Around 5 PM in early July 2017, Osman said he heard an explosion. He waited until it seemed safe, and then ran to the farm that was hit—only to find the body of his 38-year-old brother. Osman said his brother was picking fruit with his uncle, 42-year-old Abdullahi, whom he has not seen since and presumes was killed in the blast.

A day later, Osman said, government soldiers came and inspected the scene. After they left, Al Shabab arrived and accused villagers of feeding the government information. Six members of the group interrogated Osman for seven days. He said they blindfolded him, beat him with their rifles, and shot him repeatedly in the leg. After a local emir negotiated his release, Osman continued, he was tossed in a vegetable cart and left on the side of the road. Still suffering from the wounds of his torture, he took a four-hour minibus ride to Mogadishu, where he spent four months recovering at Medina Hospital. He said that during this time, Al Shabab kept threatening his father and surviving brother. Today, Osman lives in Geedweyne camp, a settlement near Afgooye. He has to stay there, he told me, because between the strikes and Al Shabab, “there is no space to live.”

AFRICOM doesn’t list any strikes near his location in July 2017, but in November 2017, it confirmed three previously unreported strikes on July 15, 20, and 21 to The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, a British nonprofit newsroom. After repeated questioning, AFRICOM released the location of the three strikes to me; none are near Osman’s home. When approached with Osman’s story, AFRICOM stated that it didn’t match any of its records. This raises the possibility that it was a CIA strike; the CIA has not responded to any press inquiries for this article.

Aside from the mystery surrounding such strikes, there’s another critical area where transparency has decreased: civilian injuries and deaths. As mentioned earlier, AFRICOM maintains that its air strikes have not caused a single civilian casualty in Somalia.

I asked retired Brig. Gen. Donald Bolduc, who served as the head of Special Operations Command Africa from April 2015 to June 2017, if he thought that civilian casualties could have gone unrecorded. He said that he did, but in a follow-up message, he clarified: “There is a possibility. But I also know there are established procedures to avoid civilian casualties.”

In November, The Daily Beast reported, based on conversations with former counterterrorism officials and experts, that the review process after a strike involves planes making a second pass over the area hit to determine the extent of the damage. When asked about its procedures, AFRICOM said that it would not comment on its intelligence or surveillance methods.

What happens if civilian casualties are suspected is also muddy. Within AFRICOM, a Civilian Casualty Allegation Team is designated to investigate, and it works with other agencies, NGOs, and governments, as well as media reports, to assess the claims.

However, two former Somali security officials—including Sanbalooshe, the former head of the National
Intelligence and Security Agency—as well as a Somali legal expert and activist said the Somali government does not have the capacity to help investigate these strikes.

Sagal Bihi, a member of Parliament and the former chair of Somalia’s Human Rights, Gender, and Humanitarian Committee, told me that she had raised the issue of civilian casualties with the Ministry of Defense in 2017 and was told that the military “investigates as needed” into any such allegations. But the national military is barely functioning, and the clans that once controlled pockets of the country have complicated relationships with the government and may be reluctant to share information with it. Additionally, according to my interviews, Al Shabab bans the use of smartphones in the territories it holds, which makes taking photographs and sending information difficult. All of these factors make civilian casualties hard to investigate, but nearly every Somali I spoke with was certain that people with no connection to Al Shabab were being killed in the air strikes. “Civilian casualties will always exist,” Bihi said, “because we are talking about an enemy that really takes ‘human shield’ to the next level.”

Felix Horne, the senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch, told me in an e-mail that his organization “is concerned about ongoing allegations of civilian casualties caused by US drone strikes in the Middle Shabelle and Lower Shabelle regions, where much of the fight against Al Shabab is taking place.” He added, “The federal government of Somalia has not taken any known measures to investigate these claims.”

Somalia’s Office of the Prime Minister and Office of the President did not respond to queries about civilian casualties.

Further, two high-level former Somali security advisers say civilian casualties are all the more likely because the United States doesn’t have the ability to collect solid information on the ground. “There’s not enough intelligence to justify kinetic strikes,” said one. “They [the US military] don’t have enough linguists. Even the CIA doesn’t go out of [the Green Zone],” an area of tight security in Mogadishu.

“There are very few people in the Pentagon that can even explain to you what is going on in East Africa,” said Gen. Donald Bolduc.

“I asked AFRICOM, the Pentagon, the CIA, and the National Security Council about their methods for determining whether the people killed in air strikes were members of Al Shabab, as well as the United States’ intelligence capabilities in Somalia. None responded to such questions.

Of the 25 Somalis displaced by air strikes that I interviewed, only one said that he was seeking answers to what happened. He’s speaking to human-rights organizations and the media, but most of the others communicated a sense of pain and bewilderment about why their villages had been hit. Osman, the man from O’wdhile who lost his brother and uncle, said he assumed the attack didn’t intend to target civilians, that it had all been a mistake. But until the US government opens up about these strikes, it will be almost impossible for Osman or anyone else to learn who the United States is killing in Somalia and why, or what lethal errors we’re making.

This article was reported in partnership with Type Investigations.

Had Clinton defeated Trump that fall, Duss expected to remain at FMFEP and attempt to push the new administration toward a more progressive approach to the Middle East. Instead, mere weeks after Trump’s shocking victory, Duss met with Sanders in person and soon found himself working for the Vermont senator, taking a pay cut in order to directly shape policy on Capitol Hill. “He’s very much like he is in public, except funnier,” Duss says of Sanders, “and that’s how I immediately knew we could work together.”

While they come from very different backgrounds, Sanders and Duss share something important in common: At least by Washington standards, they both spent their 20s adrift. After graduating from the University of Chicago, where he was more interested in activism than in grades, Sanders moved to Vermont and worked as a carpenter while making radical film strips and writing for alternative publications. He didn’t win an election until he was 39, didn’t go to Washington for another decade after that, and has only emerged as a leading national figure in the past few years. Like Duss, Sanders has stubbornly held onto a set of core ideals and waited, at whatever cost to his career, for the national debate to shift his way. As Duss puts it, both men’s identities were fully formed outside the Beltway.

“There are very few people in the Pentagon that can even explain to you what is going on in East Africa,” said Gen. Donald Bolduc.

“The people with Matt’s views don’t always work within the US government, so I was glad he took on his current role as an adviser for Bernie,” Ben Rhodes says. “It’s good for the Senate to have a progressive activist in that role, and it’s good for someone like Matt to learn how to navigate the complexity of being a Senate staffer.” Rhodes, who rocketed to international influence at 29 on the basis of his “mind meld” with Obama, is the most obvious example of the kind of role that Duss might be expected to play in a Sanders administration. Rhodes was also a critic of the US foreign-policy establishment, which he dubbed “the Blob,” and its interventionist consensus—and during his time in the White House, he made many of the same enemies that Duss has.

In the lead-up to the 2020 Democratic primaries, a number of the expected major contenders have tacked left on the domestic-policy issues that Sanders staked out in 2016. But no one has indicated as clearly as Sanders that there needs to be a break with the foreign-policy consensus that Clinton embodied and would have reinforced. No one besides Sanders has hired an adviser with such a clear track record of defying the Blob. But while foreign policy could be an issue that attracts activists to Sanders, it will also likely inspire attacks, especially with regard to Israel. In fact, Ann Lewis, a pro-Israel Democratic operative who pressured CAP over Duss and his cohort in 2012, now co-chairs a well-funded new organization, the Democratic Majority for Israel, dedicated to countering the growing criticism of Israel among progressives.

Then again, the world has changed a lot in the past decade, and some Democrats are optimistic about ending the status quo. “Matt represents a real break from interventionist thinking,” says Ro Khanna, “and it’s why foreign policy is going to be an advantage for Bernie Sanders if he runs. Last time, they said he was naive on foreign policy. This time, he’s responsible for the biggest foreign-policy success of the past few years, with the Yemen vote. And I would give a lot of credit to Matt Duss.”

Duss himself is insistently modest, refusing to claim any special credit for Sanders’s perceived new outspokenness. He compares his boss to the legendary jazz trumpeter Miles Davis. “One of Miles’s real geniuses was as a band leader, assembling the best players of the moment and getting them to play better than they ever had before—and in many cases than they ever would again,” Duss says. “This is the best band I’ve ever played in.”
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How solidarity and radical organizing paved the way to victory in the LA teachers’ strike.
EARLY ON THE MORNING OF JANUARY 10, THE SUN BATHED VENICE HIGH SCHOOL—FAMOUS FOR ITS appearance as Rydell High in the film version of *Grease*—in a cinematic glow of light and mist, a statue of Myrna Loy providing a dramatic backdrop for the teachers, parents, and students who had shown up with hand-painted signs. The crowd had gathered for what was supposed to have been the first day of the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) strike but, after the strike was pushed back, turned out instead to be a thrilling preview. “I don’t know, but it’s been said, billionaires run the Board of Ed!” the people in the crowd chanted. A student took the microphone and declared support for the teachers. Homemade signs proclaimed: “You can’t put kids first if we put teachers last” and “Random’ searches criminalize students of color.”

Longtime educator Monica Studer carried a sign that read: “I walked the line in 1989.” That was the year of the last UTLA strike, and Studer still wore buttons from that struggle—“I don’t want to strike but... I will!” and “1989 we walked, we won, WE'RE STILL NOT DONE 1991”—on a lanyard around her neck. Back then, Studer said, the issues were similar to the ones pushing UTLA toward the picket lines today—wages and teacher input on how schools were run—but there were no charter schools in the picture. “Charter schools are underregulated, and the district charges them the minimum amount that they can to be on our campuses,” she said.

Back then, the classes were smaller, too. These days, Studer told me, the teachers at Venice High regularly have as many as 44 students in a room built for a class half that size. “There is no more room in a classroom for desks,” she added—let alone the additional time necessary to read and assess the work of each student. “Because of the large class sizes, that allows students to slip through the cracks, which should not happen.”

Still, Venice High is better off than other schools in the LA system. Because it receives Title I money (that is, supplemental federal funds for low-income students), Venice High is able to afford a full-time nurse—a luxury that many LA schools don’t have. “This year,” Studer continued, “we were able to expand to having a psychiatric social worker and having a full-time People Services person who helps kids with their attendance.... Most schools do not have what we have.”

And so Studer, along with some 50 students, parents, and community members, had trekked at sunrise to what was once America’s iconic high school. They’d shown up even though the strike had been postponed for several days, thanks to a lawsuit filed by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) contending that the union hadn’t given sufficient notice of the work stoppage. The stakes, said Marcy Winograd, a retired special-education teacher, were simply too high.

“We wanted the district to know the community is behind the teachers and the students,” Winograd said. “We know that the success of a strike is going to rise and fall on the level of community support. It is absolutely imperative that people get out in front of their neighborhood schools and support our teachers, support our youth, support the future of this planet.”

ON JANUARY 14, despite the pouring rain, the UTLA strike began with an explosion of exuberant, defiant rebellion. For a solid week, more than 30,000 educators took to the picket lines, while students, parents, and neighbors braved the weather to join them—and put together a number of solidarity actions that lasted well into the evenings. Outside Venice High, teachers filmed a video for a strike-themed dance; at Harry Bridges Span School in Wilmington, longshore workers joined the teachers to keep trucks from crossing the picket line; in North Hollywood, parents organized a human chain stretching nearly a mile and connecting three schools. On the fifth day of the strike, an estimated 60,000 people attended a rally at Grand Park in downtown LA—a bigger crowd than had assembled on day one in the same location. And on the sixth day? On the sixth and last day of the strike, UTLA president Alex Caputo-Pearl stood alongside LAUSD superintendent Austin Beutner and Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti to announce an agreement that gave the teachers a comprehensive and unambiguous victory.

Caputo-Pearl said of the new contract, “This is much more than just a narrow labor agreement; it’s a very broad compact”—and he was right. The new contract not only delivered a raise to LAs teachers, but also brought gains on every issue they had raised with me that first morning—and many more. They won reductions in class size; nurses in every school; more counselors, librarians, and wraparound services; and a path to reducing the amount of standardized testing. They won increased school funding and support for a ballot measure that would reform California’s long-broken property-tax system. They won 30 new “community schools,” which will feature increased services; democratic input from parents, students, and teachers; additional arts and ethnic-studies courses;...
and a multicultural, antiracist outlook. And in perhaps their biggest victory, they won input on charter-school “co-locations.” As further confirmation of their success, and a sign of just how effectively the strike had shifted the narrative on charter schools, the school board voted on January 29 to call for a statewide cap on charters.

“It’s more than I could have ever imagined,” said Rosa Jimenez, a history teacher at the UCLA Community School in LA’s Koreatown. “We really did win big, and it’s not the end. We now have a sturdy ground to stand on, with ourselves and with what we’ve learned from this about organizing—how to build a coalition, how to work with students and parents in a meaningful way.”

The union was able to win on this broad set of demands in large part because it wasn’t fighting alone. For a week, every corner of Los Angeles was “Red for Ed.” The city was clearly united in its support for the striking teachers—but to understand how that came about, it’s necessary to go back more than 10 years, to a time when the UTLA was rocked by cutbacks and struggling against the charter challenge. It’s necessary to understand how the UTLA became a fighting union.

“This stuff doesn’t come out of nowhere,” Caputo-Pearl observed. “Often, it comes out of a couple of decades of quiet work.”

ACK IN THE EARLY 2000s, THE UTLA WASN’T THE force it is today. It was, to many members’ minds, too quiescent in the face of relentless attacks on public education. But then came the Great Recession, and things began to change.

Rosa Jimenez was in her second year of teaching when she was laid off, along with many other young educators. The daughter of Mexican immigrants, Jimenez had learned from her father, who worked in a factory, the importance of fighting for her rights as a worker. Indeed, she had become a teacher in order to serve and build relationships with her community. So when the crisis erupted and the layoffs began, it spurred her and her colleagues to action. Many of these young laid-off teachers were people of color, underrepresented in a district that serves a student body that is between 80 and 90 percent students of color, and they began to organize among themselves to bring a racial-justice lens to the union. That moment, Jimenez said, was the beginning of the movement that culminated in this year’s strike.

Caputo-Pearl, along with other current UTLA leaders, was also part of that organizing. In addition to engaging in civil disobedience outside LAUSD’s offices, he and his fellow teacher-activists began building a caucus within the union. This would eventually become the Union Power caucus, which won control of the union in 2014 on a promise to make social justice a priority, focus on the needs of low-income students of color as well as of teachers, and foster changes within the union in order to do so. They were even able to win a vote to increase union dues to fund a political department, an organizing department, a research department, and a parent/community-relations department—none of which the union had had previously.

All of this required carefully building structures within the union for constant communication across a 960-mile school district—structures that would allow the union, once the strike began, to know that it had the backing to hold firm at the bargaining table, and when it might be time to make a deal.

At the same time the new caucus was busy rebuilding the union’s strength, its members had also begun to form partnerships with community and student groups. These partnerships eventually evolved into Reclaim Our Schools LA, a grassroots coalition made up of groups like the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), the student-led organization Students Deserve, and the UTLA itself. The fruit of that inside/outside strategy could be seen in the streets during the strike—and in the clear, community-wide investment in the demands the union was making.

Amy Schur of ACCE explained that UTLA, unlike other unions (or, indeed, past UTLA leadership) really treated the community members as true partners, and the difference showed. “The greatest victory is the power we’ve built through labor and community uniting around a long-term economic-, racial-, and social-justice agenda and plan,” Schur said.

Forging that agenda meant building regular spaces where members of the different coalition partners could come together to discuss plans, demands, and strategy. It meant taking the demands that students brought to the table—including for mental-health services, ethnic-studies classes, and an end to random searches—and incorporating them into the union’s collective bargaining. And it meant that community groups took the kind of action that the union, at times, could not, effectively bringing the teachers’ demands into their spaces.

That constant back-and-forth helped create an organic understanding that the stakes were shared by everyone involved—parents, students, teachers, and people in the community—and that the strike was not just a fight for public schools, but a fight for the very idea of the public good. Indeed, one of the chants I heard most often was: “Whose schools? Our schools! What kind of schools? Public schools!”
It was this robust defense of the idea of the public good, and the public sector’s role in bolstering that good, that won the teachers wide support. It also changed LA’s understanding of what a union could do. Less than a year after the Supreme Court issued its Janus decision, which dealt what many expected would be a death blow to public-sector unions, UTLA managed to remind America what a powerful, community-based union that fights for the whole working class looks like.

On the afternoon of January 16, in the drizzle outside Verdugo Hills High School in Tujunga, a pickup truck pulled to the curb, and the student in the passenger seat handed two cartons of hot coffee—along with bags filled with cups, cream, and sugar—to a band of red-ponchoed teachers. It was the third day of the strike, and the teachers had lost none of their verve. Lisa Cheby, the school’s librarian, held a sign that asked: “Without a teacher librarian, how would Buffy have saved the world?” The Rev. Aaron Peterson, a history teacher and the union chapter chair at Verdugo, told me, “It is amazing to see the unity in the school, the faculty. Administrators brought doughnuts today.”

So many of the teachers I spoke with talked about their schools as potential models for better public education, even as they were clear-eyed about the reasons for the strike. Amanda Swann, a theater teacher in Verdugo’s arts magnet program, spoke of the support in her community for the program, but also of her struggles over 25 years of teaching to find funds for her work. Each year, she said, she and other arts teachers go to Sacramento to march for more support for their programs. The skills that students learn in the arts, she added, are vital: “It gives them empathy, creativity.”

On the picket lines, the teachers discovered some things about themselves, too. Their bonds grew tighter—strengthened and solidified—as they walked the perimeters of the schools where they so often had so little time to talk, or as they huddled under shared umbrellas and sang along to “The Ghost of Tom Joad” with musician Tom Morello. They also learned what solidarity looked, sounded, and even tasted like. They experienced it in the doughnuts dropped off by parents, in the supportive car horns, in the people who turned back rather than cross a picket line, and in the children who came by wearing red. The teachers discovered their power and felt the value of their work reflected back at them.

Peg Cagle teaches high-school math in Reseda, one of the farthest-flung parts of the school district. A big part of her school’s population, she said, consists of new immigrants, and some portion of her students lives in “alternative settings,” which might mean they’re homeless, in foster homes, or otherwise outside of their parents’ care. “These are kids who are very often super, super traumatized, displaced—and all of that on top of the stress of negotiating school within an environment which is not in their native culture, not in their native language,” she told me. “And you are going to put 40 of them in a classroom?”

For Cagle, a big part of the strike’s significance was in “shifting the cultural perspective around education and the lack of respect for teaching.” Watching a good teacher at work, she added, is like watching a swan glide across the water—people remain totally unaware of what goes on beneath the surface. “We wouldn’t make any decision within medicine without consulting doctors, but we feel totally comfortable as a society making all sorts of decisions about education when the teacher’s voice is, typically, if even included, it is almost included for the sole purpose of dismissing it and discounting it.”

During the strike, the teachers made that voice heard. It is impossible to imagine how loud tens of thousands of educators can be until you’ve marched alongside them through a tunnel in downtown Los Angeles and heard them chant “Strike! Strike!” in unison to the beat of a bass drum reverberating off the walls. It was impossible, that week, to ignore what teachers were saying. They were heard in Sacramento, where the state’s new governor, Gavin Newsom, called for transparency regarding charter schools on the strike’s first day. They were heard in Washington, DC, where presidential hopefuls tripped over themselves to issue statements of support. They were heard in Chicago, West Virginia, and Arizona, where previous strikes had fueled their momentum, as well as in Denver, where teachers authorized a strike on the day that UTLA announced its new deal. And they were heard in Oakland, where an overwhelming majority of teachers recently voted to authorize a strike.

It was a voice that demanded respect not only for their profession, but for the ideals on which public education was founded. “Without public education, there will be no democracy,” Cagle said. “If you don’t want a democracy, then fine—do what you will with public education. But if you truly believe that democracy serves the public good, then you have to support public education, because it’s the only thing that’s going to get us there.”
agreement on a novel and sweeping solution: the elimination of all
ground-launched theater nuclear weapons in the ranges indicated
above. With that decision, the two sides essentially “decoupled”
conventional ground combat from the onset of nuclear war, greatly
reducing the risk of Armageddon.

Once the treaty went into force in 1988, the United States and
the Soviet Union destroyed 2,692 nuclear delivery systems—the
first time an entire class of such weapons had been eliminated. In
recent years, however, Russia has deployed a nuclear-capable ground-
launched ballistic missile, the 9M729, that Washington insists has
a range in excess of 500 kilometers; after first denying possession
of such a missile, Moscow now acknowledges it but says it does not
violate INF restrictions. Meanwhile, Russia insists that US MK 41
antimissile batteries deployed in Romania—supposedly to shoot
down Iranian missiles aimed at Europe—could be used to launch an
offensive ballistic-missile attack on Russia. Efforts to resolve these
contending charges through negotiations have proved fruitless.

In announcing the decision to withdraw entirely from the INF
Treaty in six months, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed the
administration’s goal was to force Moscow into compliance: Destroy
all 9M729s, he said, and Washington would reconsider. Absent
that, he added, the United States would be forced to acquire similar
weapons. On February 2, Russian President Vladimir Putin denied
violating the INF Treaty and announced Moscow’s own intent to
withdraw from it.

The Trump administration’s concerns over the 9M729 could be
allayed by calm, professional diplomatic talks with Moscow. Inspecc-
tions could determine if both the 9M729 and the MK 41 do, in fact,
violate the INF Treaty; if so, measures could be taken to bring both
countries into compliance. However, it is clear from the talk at the
Pentagon and in industry circles that Bolton and company are not
interested in promoting European security, but rather in developing
and deploying US weapons to be aimed at China as well as Russia.

Many American military analysts fear that China—which was not
a signatory to the INF Treaty—has acquired a stockpile of conven-
tionally armed ballistic missiles that put US carrier battle groups and
other military assets at risk. The answer, the hawks say, isn’t fresh
negotiations with both Russia and China to devise a trilateral treaty,
but rather the deployment of new US missiles aimed at those Chi-
nese capabilities. But the US already possesses more than enough
weapons of this type—air- and sea-launched cruise missiles, for example—to deter Russian and Chinese attacks, and the acquisition
of new US missiles will only spark an arms race that puts this country
(and our Asian and European allies) at greater risk. Support should
be voiced for the Prevention of Arms Race Act, introduced by 11
Senate Democrats (including several presidential hopefuls), which
would halt the development and deployment of new US nuclear
missiles unless stringent preconditions have been met.

It is also vital to remember why such weapons were banned in
the first place: They provide an easy bridge from conventional to
nuclear war. Should the United States deploy hundreds of ballistic
missiles in Europe and Asia aimed at Russian and Chinese ter-
ritory, Moscow and Beijing would almost certainly expand their
nuclear arsenals and could even adopt a launch-on-warning policy.
By precipitating a new arms race in intermediate-range weapons,
the Trump administration is returning us to the early 1980s, when
any military clash between the major powers—intended or not—
could rapidly escalate into a thermonuclear conflagration. The
only adequate response to this peril, as in that earlier dangerous
era, is a massive antinuclear mobilization.

MICHAEL T. KLARE
FROM THE MOMENT THAT A LIGHT GETS TURNED ON IN THE MORNING, EVERY ACTION OF A WESTERN LIFE USES ENERGY. ITS EASY AVAILABILITY—THANKS LARGELY TO THE SO-CALLED FOSSIL FUELS—GAVE US MODERNITY, AND NOW THE ENDLESS COMBUSTION OF ALL THAT COAL AND GAS AND OIL HAS TRIGGERED THE END OF THE HOLOCENE AND IS CALLING INTO QUESTION THE VERY SURVIVAL OF OUR CIVILIZATION. SOME OF THE RICHEST COMPANIES ON EARTH HAVE BEEN IN THE ENERGY BUSINESS, AND GEOPOLITICS HAS LONG FOLLOWED THE OIL DERRICK. EVEN OUR DOMESTIC POLITICS IS DOMINATED BY THIS INDUSTRY MORE THAN ANY OTHER; IT IS, AFTER ALL, WHERE THE KOCH BROTHERS MADE THEIR MINT.

SO THE WONDER IS HOW LITTLE ATTENTION WE ACTUALLY PAY TO THE SUBJECT. IN THE WESTERN WORLD, WE HAVE TAKEN ABUNDANT ENERGY SO MUCH FOR GRANTED THAT IT MIGHT AS WELL BE AIR OR WATER—ONLY ITS ABSENCE, DURING A BLACKOUT OR AN OIL EMBARGO, REALLY ATTRACTIONS OUR NOTICE. I ONLY VISCERALY GRASPED THE MEANING OF ENERGY WHEN IN RURAL GHANA AND CÔTE D’IVOIRE, WHERE NEWLY CHEAP SOLAR PANELS WERE PROVIDING THE FIRST RELIABLE FLOW OF ELECTRONS TO VILLAGES THAT HAD NEVER KNOWN ARTIFICIAL LIGHT OR THE BREEZE OF AN ELECTRIC FAN. SEEING THE PURE, UNDISTILLED PLEASURE THAT THIS SMALL MIRACLE PROVIDED WAS LIKE TRAVELING BACK IN TIME—OR, GIVEN THE HIGH-TECH AND SUSTAINABLE SOURCE OF THIS NEWFOUND POWER, TRAVELING FORWARD.

RICHARD RHODES’S ENERGY: A HUMAN HISTORY, MATTHIEU AUZANNEAU’S OIL, POWER,
and War: A Dark History, and Kate Ervine’s Carbon all time-travel in both directions, offering us visions of a much cleaner future and tracing the origins of our ominously polluted present. Since this is the great existential crisis of our time, it’s a good sign that a robust literature is emerging, of which these volumes are solid examples. But though much of their discussion is about history, the crucial questions turn on what comes next. As the excitement over the Green New Deal proposed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (among others) makes clear, that future is very much up for grabs.

In Energy, Richard Rhodes goes furthest back, starting with a London powered mostly by wood. But by the 16th century or so, the demand for energy began to outstrip the supply, and so households turned to coal. From the beginning, coal provided cheap heat, but it also caused trouble. Soon, hundreds of boys were employed as chimney sweeps, and doctors noted an epidemic of “soot wart” among them—squamous-cell carcinoma of the scrotum, where “the sweeps’ sooty sweat collected as they broomed their way up London’s chimneys.” If you fast-forward to Delhi in the present day, estimates are that half of its 4.4 million children have irreversible lung damage from breathing the smoke that chokes their city. The dangers of fossil-fuel use have, from the start, been concentrated among the poorest and most vulnerable.

Burning coal in a fireplace simply substituted for using wood; it didn’t really change the direction of our economic life. That awaited the invention of the steam engine, when the potential energy embedded in each lump of coal could be put to work doing the kind of labor that previously required people or draft animals. Thomas Newcomen invented the first such workable beast early in the 18th century; fittingly, its task was to drain water from coal shafts to make mining easier. (Trains—and hence the transportation revolution—also began in the mines, where the first rails were laid to make it easier to haul up ore out of the earth and to nearby smelters.) But it was with James Watt’s greatly improved steam engine in the second half of the century that the Industrial Revolution in all its smoky glory began to take shape, as Rhodes, writing with the magisterial high-altitude view of the popular historian, makes clear: “The year 1800, the turn of a new century, hinged in Britain between the old organic economy and the new economy of industry powered by fossil fuel.” England, he tells us, was “eruptive with steam”—powering barges and locomotives; “turning drive belts and working looms” in Blake’s satanic mills.

And so it began, this new world of abundant energy. Rhodes chronicles all the important steps that came with the industrial age: the development of electricity, the rise of oil and then cars, the construction of gas pipelines that girdle the world, the splitting of the atom. He is a master of the brief sketch, and so we can go in a few pages from Thomas Midgley, who helped invent the brain-poisoning lead additives in gasoline, to Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, the founding member of the royal house that now distinguishes itself by dismembering journalists.

Doubtless because he has devoted so many previous books to atomic power and atomic bombs, Rhodes spends a great deal of this volume on nuclear energy (considerably more than its share of the world’s power production would warrant). Adm. Hyman Rickover, who persuaded the Navy to power its submarines with reactors and headed up the Atomic Energy Commission, is a hero; and Rhodes ends with a couple of chapters that are essentially special pleading for a nuclear-power renaissance, on the grounds that it will be a necessary feature of any post-fossil-fuel age. Rhodes’s argument would be more persuasive if he didn’t pass over renewable energy so lightly. Oddly, sun and wind, though now the fastest-growing sources of energy on the planet, get just a few pages, some of which are devoted to arguing that part of the problem with both is that the energy they produce can’t easily be stored. But just as history hinged in 1800, something similar may be happening today: The price of solar energy has fallen 88 percent in the last decade, and now the storage batteries developed by Tesla and others seem to be following their own plummeting cost curve. Given the dire nature of the global-warming emergency, these should be seen as breakthroughs that can be seized on by governments wanting to move quickly. Nuclear power, by contrast, keeps getting more expensive.

That said, Rhodes argues persuasively that the risks of atomic energy have been overstated, at least when compared with the dangers of carbon. Because the events at Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima were so dramatic, he argues, we have a harder time properly evaluating these threats. If something goes wrong at a nuclear plant, it can cause immediate havoc on a huge scale. But a power plant burning coal or gas—and running exactly according to plan—will ultimately help to destroy the climate that sustains human life on this planet.

Carbon is therefore a far greater threat, Rhodes insists—indeed, the most serious pollutant we face—and so it likely makes sense to maintain the nuclear plants we’ve already paid for and built, so long as they can be kept reasonably safe. In my home state of Vermont, I argued for closing the state’s plant, Vermont Yankee, which was shut down at the end of 2014. It was badly maintained, and its owners had lied repeatedly to authorities about things like whether an underground network of pipes carried radioactive waste. However, in the wake of its closing, Vermonters also placed a de facto moratorium on large-scale wind power, not wishing to see or hear turbines spinning on the horizon. But power needs to come from somewhere.

If Rhodes tends toward the cheerful (“Far from threatening civilization, science, technology, and the prosperity they create will sustain us as well in the centuries to come,” he concludes), then Matthieu Auzanneau’s Oil, Power, and War offers precisely the opposite view. Auzanneau is a former reporter for Le Monde, and his “dark history” provides a relentless account of how the oil industry has polluted every moment of the 20th century, including discussions of oil’s central role in both world wars; accounts of scandals, now mostly forgotten, from Teapot Dome to BCCI; and even a reconsideration of 9/11.

This long tour is conducted in something like braggadocio prose. Chapter titles include “Washington Gives Absolute Power to American Petroleum” and “Grandeur and Decadence: The Explosion of Opulence, Misery, and the Human Footprint.” A better editor or translator might have made it more readable (at the ninth time the author refers to oil as “black gold,” one begins to wince); at the very least, someone should have made it shorter, since at more than 500 pages, it is going to overwhelm all but the most committed reader. (Thank heaven he stuck with oil; had he, like Rhodes, also considered coal
and gas, we would have run out of paper.)

Auzanneau’s endless attack on the Rockefellers occasionally crosses the line into conspiracy-mongering (in fact, there is a little too much conspiratorial thinking on occasion)—like the assertion, with scant evidence, that the cost of “filling gas tanks” in 2008 “broke the budgets of many modest, indebted American households,” triggering foreclosures and causing the global financial crisis. If you want a truly devastating book on Exxon and its history, Steve Coll’s Private Empire remains the touchstone.

But with that said, thanks are owed to Auzanneau for getting all this down in print, and to Chelsea Green for undertaking its publication in English. It reminds us, as Rhodes’s account really doesn’t, of an essential fact that we should never forget: The immense wealth generated by the fossil-fuel industry has translated into unassailable political power. An exasperated Franklin Roosevelt remarks at one point in the book, “The trouble with this country is that you can’t win an election without the oil bloc, and you can’t govern with it.” As Auzanneau notes, in a sentence as accurate as it is ineptly translated, “The need to cozy up to the heirs of the industrial and financial powers of oil never ceased to forcefully exercise its constraints on American politics.”

Auzanneau devotes little of his book’s vast acreage to climate change. He’s more worried about “peak oil”—the idea that dwindling reservoirs may lead to a permanent oil shock, with civilization-rending consequences. This fear is likely misplaced: The consequences of global warming seem to be coming ever faster, and the fracking boom has suspended a reckoning with oil scarcity. But in any event, the crucial point is that Big Oil’s political power has delayed—perhaps fatally—the chance for meaningful change in our energy system. We now understand, due to the intrepid reporting of the Pulitzer Prize–winning journalists at InsideClimate News, that Exxon and the other major oil companies knew everything that we needed to know about climate change by the 1980s. They used that knowledge to make their own plans for the future (for instance, drilling campaigns in an Arctic they knew would soon melt), but concealed it from the rest of us behind a vast and expensive bulwark of denial and disinformation. In so doing, they managed to prevent action for at least a quarter-century past the moment when science had reached a strong consensus on the subject—and that quarter-century may well have been the crucial period for addressing climate change. If this is the case, the brief oil era will be inscribed in a geological history that will be easily readable by geologists millions of years into the future—assuming, of course, that we have a future.

Katherine Ervine, a professor at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax, offers a much slimmer and in many ways more useful volume. Carbon begins with a sturdy chronicle of the growth in fossil-fuel use—and precisely because of its brevity, the key points stand out, chief among them the tight links between energy use and increased economic growth, and between economic growth, inequality, and injustice. No better example exists than global warming, and Ervine’s account of the climate crisis will help readers understand why “climate justice” has become a rallying cry. This is true globally, and it is true domestically as well. Poor and vulnerable communities, usually composed of people of color, bear the brunt of the side effects of our fossil-fuel use, and Ervine is acute in her descriptions of what makes the tentative and voluntary Paris accords so different from, say, the robust rules governing the World Trade Organization. “Unlike trade agreements that seek to extend the current global political economic system,” she writes, “addressing climate change requires that we confront that system and the fossil capital so deeply embedded within it. At its core, the issue of carbon is an issue of power all the way down.”

This understanding prepares Ervine well for evaluating the various options before us to attempt to stanch the flow of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Her thorough account of carbon-trading schemes underlines their essential flaws: “Uncertainty, low prices, overinflated baselines, gaming the market, substandard auditing, unrealistic assumptions.” If we’re going to put a price on carbon use, she argues, a straightforward tax makes more sense, “at levels sufficient to generate meaningful revenue...to fund aggressively zero-carbon transitions that might benefit society as a whole while paying climate debts.” As it happens, such a proposal was on the ballot in Washington State in the recent midterm elections, and it was initially popular enough to scare the oil industry into breaking the state’s record for campaign spending. In the end, the industry’s scare ads were enough to sink the proposal and delay the day of reckoning a little further. (The Yellow Vest protests across France are another reminder that trying to balance the carbon books on the backs of ordinary people will prove a difficult haul.)

Ervine is also rightly dismissive of “solar radiation management,” the vast geoengineering scheme that would pump huge quantities of sulfur into the atmosphere to blot out some of the incoming sunlight. This approach could, among other things, alter the world’s weather patterns enough to cause droughts and even famines across precisely the places already most harmed by climate shifts. Ervine is equally dismissive of using natural gas as a bridge fuel and of the value of green consumerism. (You will not think about your reusable grocery bags with the same pride once you’ve read her carbon numbers.)

Which leaves us with movement building. “Dealing with climate change is fundamentally political,” Ervine writes, “with political mobilization and collective action promising a much greater impact than going it alone.” And “when we mobilize politically to demand...system changes, the greater reach of these changes, while good for the climate, also promises greater social and ecological justice.” Ervine does an excellent job of explaining one such virtuous cycle: a law passed in Germany that supports community control of the big renewable-energy projects funded by a feed-in tariff. Absent such a robust community stake, similar efforts elsewhere—including in Ervine’s home province of Nova Scotia—have proved less politically durable. When your community is the one making the money, the sight of a windmill on the horizon is less objectionable. In fact, it might even seem like a beacon of the future.

Though the 2018 midterm elections were fought largely on the issues of health care and the need to check President Trump’s abuses of power, the great unresolved issue of the 20th century for Americans is the onset of climate chaos, which guarantees that energy will be front and center in our politics for years to come. That’s why these lessons are so important: This is the biggest challenge that humans have ever faced, and after waiting so long to do something about it, we have no margin of safety left for taking routes that turn out to go nowhere.
IN THE CHAOS OTHERWISE KNOWN AS THE TRUMP ERA OF AMERICAN POLITICS, HISTORY, IT SEEMS, HAS LEAPFROGGED INTO THE FOREGROUND OF DISCUSSIONS OVER THE COUNTRY’S CURRENT PREDICATION. IN THE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS ABOUT WHO WE ARE AS A NATION AND HOW WE GOT HERE, A WAVE OF NEW HISTORICAL MONOGRAPHS HAS RETURNED TO THE FOUNDERs, THEIR INTENTIONS, AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR TODAY. ONE SUCH WORK, JOSEPH ELLIS’S ENGAGING AMERICAN DIALOGUE: THE FOUNDERS AND US, COMPARES ATTITUDES TOWARD RACE, EQUALITY, LAW, AND FOREIGN POLICY DURING THE FOUNDING PERIOD AND OUR OWN. ANOTHER, JILL LEPORE’S AMBITIOUS THESE TRUTHS: A HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES, SURVEYS THESE SEMINAL ISSUES BY TRACING THE CHANGING MEANINGS OF “LIBERTY” AND “EQUALITY” FROM THE FOUNDING ERA TO THE PRESENT.

JONATHAN GIEAPP’S THE SECOND CREATION: FIXING THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION IN THE FOUNDING ERA HAS A NARROWER SCOPE, OFFERING A CLOSE READING OF CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY WITH NO MENTION OF THE PRESENT. YET HIS STUDY NONE-THELESS FOCUSES ON MANY OF THE STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES THAT CONTINUE TO CONSUME US—including presidential powers, the role of Congress, and the use and abuse of originalist approaches to the Constitution—and in so doing raises questions that shine a light on today’s national debates.

An intellectual historian of America’s founding period, Gienapp is particularly concerned with how the Constitution became an authoritative document in the early years of the Republic. “What kind of an instrument was it?” he asks. Was it intended to be a law, a treaty, or a statute? Was it limited to the powers that it enumerated, or was it meant to convey implied powers? Was it intended to be applied via a process of “excavation,” with lawmakers mining the original text, or “invention,” with lawmakers taking their cues as time and context demanded from the spirit of the founding document? Ultimately, Gienapp shows us, the arguments for excavation and invention converged, a trend that culminated in the debate over the 1795 Jay Treaty between the United States and Britain, which sought to resolve issues lingering from the Revolutionary War. According to Gienapp, the terms of that debate bestowed upon the Constitution an unprecedented “fixed” and “sacred” status—one that, the author contends, we continue to honor to this day.

Gienapp begins his study not with the Constitutional Convention of 1787, as most scholarship on the making of the Constitution does, but instead with the decade after ratification, when the first pressing questions about how to implement the Constitution challenged politicians and the public. Concerned less with the implications and consequences...
of the policy decisions taken at the time, and more with the ontological evolution that framed the debates over the Constitution's implementation, Gienapp endeavors to show us the transformation of what he terms “the constitutional imagination” during this first decade of the Republic.

The congressional debates of this period, he argues, transformed the Constitution from a set of “parchment barriers” with an indeterminate set of definitional guidelines to a “fixed,” “archival,” and “sacred text” in which authority became fully tethered to words rather than to the possibility of perpetually open-ended implications. As Gienapp contends, during the early Republic, the Constitution was thereby fixed in two senses: its nature and purpose was clarified and it was firmly established as an object of authority.

Gienapp takes as his conceptual launching pad the “necessary and proper” clause of Article I, which defines the powers and responsibilities pertaining to Congress and over which the Federalists and Anti-Federalists had sustained hotly contested debates. For the Anti-Federalists, the lack of specificity in the wording was cause for concern, since it would inevitably open up the doors for the abuse of executive powers. Was the phrase “necessary and proper” really “unbounded,” “impossible to define,” and thus “vulnerable to misreadings, distortions, and sophistic interpretation of all sorts?” And did this then render the Constitution “susceptible, as the Anti-Federalists derisively claimed, to lawyers’ manipulation,” rather than remain a document accessible to the people?

To combat the perils of insufficiently constrained legal authorities and political power-mongering, the Anti-Federalists had sought, largely unsuccessfully, to compel more specificity in the language during the Constitutional Convention. Now, in the early years of the Republic, their intellectual heirs renewed this call to articulate specific powers rather than allow general, aspirational principles to dictate policy decisions. Those who adhered to the idea of a set of implied powers insisted that any uncertainty could be addressed by the amendment process and by Congress's legislative power, which would be sufficient to fill in the gaps left by the vagueness of the Constitution’s wording. Gienapp convincingly argues that, over the course of several seminal debates, these antagonistic views began to merge. The aspirational and the concrete began to find common ground, and in so doing, turned the Constitution into a fixed, textually authoritative document whose standard for interpretation resided in its archival past.

An initial step toward envisioning the Constitution as a fixed entity emerged in 1789, when the First Federal Congress met and began trying to implement policies on the many issues on which the Constitution was “unfinished” and silent, leaving politicians uncertain as to its application. At issue in this first Congress was the power to remove officials from executive office: Was it reserved exclusively for the president or, like the appointment power, for the president with the Senate's consent? To find the answer, politicians looked to the historical record, pitting memories and documents from the Constitutional Convention against one another. As a result of this process, Gienapp contends, the removal debate introduced an “essentialist constitutional imagination,” a recognition that the Constitution itself was bound by the intent of its makers—an intent that was to be found in the discoverable past.

Gienapp sees this debate and its appeal to historical references as “the first concerted, communal effort following ratification to draw upon the Constitution to justify claims, inaugurating a powerful set of practices for using and conceiving of the document that lingered well beyond the debate's conclusion.” While it was ultimately decided that the power to remove was vested in the president alone, the historical nature of the debate is what stands out for Gienapp, with lawmakers envisioning the Constitution as more fixed than uncertain, anchored to the original intent of its authors and ratifiers.

A second step toward viewing the Constitution as a fixed and finished entity took place over the issue of whether to make the Bill of Rights supplemental to the Constitution, or to incorporate it directly into the body of the text. The decision to add the Bill of Rights as a series of amendments pointed to the Constitution’s acceptance as a sacred text, one whose original form and language should not be tampered with. The incorporation debate, Gienapp concludes, realized the Constitution as an “interpretive object” consisting of two parts that together created a “set of textual guarantees,” and as such, provided the basis for decisions about the Constitution’s proper application.

Questions about the essence and scope of the Constitution took yet another step toward fixity in the 1791 debate over Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton’s effort to create a national bank, one that he and the bank’s supporters eventually won. Once again, politicians faced the question of whether the language of the Constitution allowed for implied powers. How much discretion, they wondered, was justified? Opponents of the bank argued that the Constitution did not, in fact, grant Congress the power to charter a national bank. Referring to “the archive of the Constitution's creation” and the “original intent of those who had authored and approved of the Constitution,” the bank’s opponents eschewed any interpretation beyond the explicit language—but to make their argument and define “original intent,” they included not just the original authors of the Constitution but also the states that had ratified it, thus carving out a role for public opinion as a factor. Determined to refute these arguments, the bank’s supporters embraced their opponents’ playbook, citing archival and textual references and original intent rather than relying solely on the claim to implied powers. In this latest debate over the Constitution, Gienapp notes, both sides added a new element, one that he hints at in earlier debates but which found fuller expression here: the importance of popular sovereignty and public opinion as a factor in the arguments.

Five years later, the arguments over the Jay Treaty renewed the controversy between those who saw the Constitution as unfinished and open to implied powers and those who sought fixity in the Constitution’s language and terms. The treaty covered various contentious issues between the United States and Britain, including trade, the detention of US soldiers, and the presence of British troops on US soil. But as Gienapp presents it, the debate’s significance lay in the controversy over the treaty-making power itself: Was Congress authorized to play a role? The Constitution specified that the power to enter into treaties resided with the president upon approval by the Senate. But the House questioned the relationship between treaty-making powers and legislative ones, with the latter arguably representing the will of the people. The political fervor on both sides was heightened by the fact that the Jay Treaty privileged the United States’ relationship with Britain, so recently the enemy of the colonists, and demoted its
relationship with France, whose revolution so many Americans had identified with.

Ultimately, the legislators resolved that the House’s consent power was not to be added to that of the Senate. But here, as with the other debates, Gienapp is more concerned with the structure of the arguments than with the political controversy itself. To argue their side of things, the Federalists reaffirmed the growing notion of the Constitution as a sacred text, constructed by the “unique wisdom of the drafter,” and advanced arguments concerning the original intent of its authors. But they also cited the authority of the people, as made apparent at state ratifying conventions, and concluded that to reverse anything stated in the Constitution would therefore go against the popular will. Those advocating for House participation in the ratification of treaties pegged their arguments to the same source of authority: the archival record, including the ratifying conventions. Both sides thus saw themselves as espousing the “true meaning and spirit of the Constitution.”

Confronted with the House’s formal request to have a voice in treaty matters, George Washington turned to his own personal memories, reminding legislators that he, too, had been “a member of the General Convention, and knowing the principles on which the Constitution was formed,” he was therefore an authority on the original intent of its authors. Washington maintained that the House was wrong about what the Constitution’s authors had intended. The terms of his explanation—archival references, the original intent of the founders, and the popular authority of the document—echoed those that had already been used in arguments on both sides of the issue.

According to Gienapp, the debate over the treaty power thus marked the culmination of an agreement upon the Constitution’s fixed nature. The president, the Senate, the House, and the political parties all concurred that the meaning of the Constitution was unchanging and that questions about the powers it granted and the protections it offered, whether explicit or implied, were to be answered by excavating the Constitution’s original meaning. They now agreed not on policy prescriptions per se, but on what the Constitution was—a sacred artifact—and on how it was to be interpreted and applied: according to textual analysis and archival excavation about its original intent. The Jay Treaty was wildly unpopular among the people, but more important to Gienapp was the affirmation that had been granted to the Constitution itself during the debate. As the country’s first decade wound to a close, the nation’s leaders had finally finished creating its founding document.

Pivotal to this transformation of the constitutional imagination, and to Gienapp’s study, is the evolution of James Madison’s understanding of the Constitution. For Gienapp, Madison perfectly illustrates the evolving mind-set of the founding era: initially a stalwart defender of invention as the preferred means for taking the Constitution into the future, Madison became an advocate of the idea that the Constitution’s guarantees were “political scriptures.” During the Constitutional Convention as well as the debates over the “necessary and proper” clause, the Bill of Rights, and the power of removal, Madison had argued against the Constitution’s enumerated powers on the grounds that such fixity was nearly impossible and provided an insufficient guard against abuses of power. But when it came to the bank dispute, Madison mounted a constitutional challenge to Hamilton based on the Constitution’s fixed and self-contained character, citing its explicit limits on such a venture.

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From the liberated camps.

and their constitutional status in wholly
different, nontextual ways.”

constitutions would have come to think about rights
and their constitutional status in wholly
different, nontextual ways.”

Just because Gienapp forgoes the deeper
political implications of this evolution, as
well as the possible relevance of his work
for today, doesn’t mean that readers should
do likewise. Would a constitution less fixed
in time, less “sacred” and more malleable,
provide more fluidity in terms of remedies
to the excesses of executive power? Would
it be helpful now if the president’s power
to remove executive-branch officials was
dependent on the Senate’s assent? Perhaps
the greatest lesson to be taken from Gie-
napp’s work resides in his preoccupation
with the terms of debate rather than policy
outcomes—for while the Constitution may
be fixed, he has shown us that its power can
and does alter with the times.


data compression and encryption

together to get the Wild Boars out
before the rains fell and the waters rose.

But before we could switch
channels and savor the jubilation
of watching them saved from the worst
that could happen, trotted out of the cave,
wrapped in tin foil like baked potatoes
and rushed under golf umbrellas
to the thunderous sound of a downpour
of clapping into the waiting helicopters,
their mothers, aunts, grandmothers already
readying the meals the boys had requested—
fried rice with crispy pork, spicy chicken—
we heard the crying
of children ushered into chain-link
enclosures, calling for their mothers,
their fathers, the wrenching look
of a toddler glancing up at the face
of a stranger speaking a language
she didn’t understand—

And we didn’t understand
how this could happen: on the one hand,
saving the children, on the other hand,
wresting them from their parents,
as if we live in a zero sum world
where something has to be taken away
if something is put back together,
happiness being the give of a rope
that goes taut somewhere else—
where a body hangs limp
from the branch where the lynch mob
has strung it.

It must be the fault
of such cruel mathematics, for how
else to understand this strange
disconnect, as if a part of us
we didn’t know we had lost
in the fear-filled caverns of the heart—
the selves we discovered we could be
when we saved the Wild Boars—
were calling to us in the voices
of terrified toddlers,
in danger of being drowned out,
as the waters keep rising.

JULIA ALVAREZ
There have been few personalities in architecture as vexing, complex, and influential as Philip Johnson. Born in Cleveland in 1906, Johnson was heir to a vast stock-market fortune. From his education at Harvard to the height of his career, designing skyscrapers for some of America’s largest companies, Johnson was aided by both his money and his vast social circle, becoming one of the most powerful and polarizing men in the history of the field. His architectural expression underwent dramatic stylistic transformations, from a consummate Miesian modernism to a polemical postmodernism; in the 1970s and ‘80s, Johnson’s corporate skyscrapers seemed to pop up in every major city in America, for better or for worse.

“Johnson was a historicist who championed the new, an elitist who was a populist, a genius without originality, a gossip who was an intellectual, a opportunist who was a utopian, a man of endless generosity who could be casually, crushing cruel.” This is how Mark Lamster’s new book, The Man in the Glass House, introduces its subject, setting the stage for a biography that not only raises the bar for writing with nuance about difficult historical figures, but also offers an eye-opening glimpse into architecture’s transformation from a staid and upwardly mobile profession to the deeply unequal and star-studded spectacle it is today.

Johnson began and ended his career as a power broker. In his 20s, fresh out of Harvard, he joined the newly established Museum of Modern Art in New York as a curator, helping to found its department of architecture. A consummate socialite, he had an impeccable sense of taste and a cunning wit, both of which were necessary when dealing with the art world. With his keen eye for contemporary artists, Johnson was responsible for the purchase or donation of several of MoMA’s most iconic pieces, including Jasper John’s Flag and Andy Warhol’s Gold Marilyn Monroe.

One of Johnson’s important early contributions was bringing the work of contemporary architects—primarily Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier, as well as Americans like Frank Lloyd Wright—to the museum, giving the field broader public exposure and sealing its place among the fine arts. One of Johnson’s great achievements was his ability to bridge the gap between the art world and the corporate world. He was able to bring together artists and architects to create spaces that were both beautiful and functional.

The Man in the Glass House tackles the myths and enigmas of Johnson’s life, and of a supposedly egalitarian architectural culture, in one fell swoop. As Lamster concisely puts it: “We cannot not know Philip Johnson’s history because it is our history—like it or not.”

Kate Wagner is an architecture and cultural critic based in Baltimore. She is the creator of the blog McMansion Hell.

THE MONUMENTALIST
Philip Johnson and the birth of corporate starchitecture
by KATE WAGNER

PHILIP JOHNSON IN LINCOLN CENTER’S NEW YORK STATE THEATER, 1964 (AP PHOTO / JOHN ROONEY)
arts. His “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” in 1932 successfully sold the profession to America by reducing and redefining the architecture of the day into an aesthetic that would come to be known as the International Style. And in his curating, he conveniently omitted architectural modernism’s more populist programs and ideology (the building of affordable housing, schools, recreation centers, and the like). In fact, Johnson, who could afford to fund his own projects and work on commissions for free (a significant advantage over his competitors), had little care for social concerns unless they somehow benefited him: “Social responsibility was boring,” Lamster notes, “and for Philip Johnson, to be boring was an unforgivable crime.”

Johnson’s later exhibit for MoMA, 1934’s “Machine Art,” put everyday objects on display—an entirely new idea, and one that thrust industrial design to the artistic forefront. This radical display of everything from ball bearings to the automobile was an innovation in that it included objects from domestic life in the canon of design; but it also created a culture that equated design with commercial commodity, with the art museum as its supermarket of choice. His earliest work changed the very rules about what artistic practices could be included inside museum walls, but, in pure Johnson fashion, he helped create through these very exhibits the bloated art marketplace we now live with today.

A chunk of The Man in the Glass House is devoted to a complete and damning exposition of Johnson’s affiliation with fascism. Johnson’s fascist past is a common architecture-school topic of discussion, but the true extent of his participation in fascistic movements is revealed here in horrifying detail. Johnson’s political activities included his leaving MoMA to embark on a failed political campaign to usurp Louisiana populist strongman Huey Long, and later helping to build a fascist political party with the anti-Semitic radio preacher Father Charles Coughlin. They expanded beyond the American scene to include trips to Nazi Germany (he even spent time in Poland as a “journalist” during the early days of the German invasion) and, later, involved the circulation of Nazi propaganda in the United States as an unpaid agent of the German state.

Johnson’s fascist beliefs endured well past his youthful dalliance and into his middle age. His architecture, too, seemed to toy with fascist motifs. Of one example, the 1964 Beck house in North Dallas, Lamster writes: “The Beck’s got the iconic design they wanted, but perhaps did not realize that the arcaded facade rather overtly referenced the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, in Rome—a monument to Mussolini’s fascist experiment.”

Once more, it was Johnson’s money and powerful connections to the donor class, including the Rockefeller family, and the art and museum establishments that enabled him to be forgiven and welcomed back into the fold of the New York cultural elite with little consequence. He was never once publicly confronted with the full extent of his racist and anti-Semitic activities, which he doggedly tried to divert attention from by profusely apologizing, citing his Jewish friends and his work (including a nuclear facility) for the state of Israel.

The role that Johnson’s personal fortune played in shaping the architecture world is perhaps the most revealing aspect of Lamster’s book, and the un-scrupulous ways that Johnson used his power paint a clear picture of how architecture got to be what it is today: a dual world comprising a cluster of big-name firms taking commissions from the likes of Saudi oil princes and billionaire investors, and the actual lives of most architects, who like so many other white-collar workers must deal with a race to the bottom in terms of declining wages (including unpaid internships), the debts incurred from an expensive professional education, long hours, and little credit.

Lamster reveals in great detail how Johnson, in collaboration with a small number of powerful cultural institutions (and the billionaires that funded them), determined who would become the next generation’s architectural stars. Little by little in Lamster’s book, the hoary narrative—still bafflingly predominant in today’s architecture world—of the scrappy young draftsmen pulling himself up by his bootstraps to become a great architect through hard work and talent is relentlessly dismantled.

Johnson, as an institutionally supported tastemaker and member of the donor class, not only exercised control over his own career but was directly responsible for instigating both the major careers and the major upsets of 20th-century architecture (while deriving much notoriety and glee from the latter). Lamster describes the many parties and social occasions at which Johnson gathered and groomed the up-and-coming hot-shots; being in his good graces helped secure commissions that kick-started the careers of some of architecture’s biggest celebrities, including Michael Graves, Robert A.M. Stern, and many more. His influence also extended into the realm of theory and architectural education: He bankrolled Robert Venturi’s Complexity and Contradiction, the book that provided postmodernism with its theoretical foundation. It was truly the boys’-club era of architecture, one in which very few women and minorities were allowed. And this boys’-club culture has now come full circle with the “Shitty Men in Architecture” list, on which a number of Johnson’s protégés, such as Richard Meier, were outed.

The critical way in which Lamster handles Johnson’s role in the architectural movements of the late 20th century is particularly frank and refreshing, and demonstrates his prowess at connecting the architecture of the recent past to our current dilemma. Crucially, Lamster links postmodern architecture’s semi-ironic invocation of traditional elements to the political conservatism of the time:

[T]hat was the look of the moment in the burgeoning Reagan era. It was morning in America, and Johnson’s solid buildings, with their familiar architectural elements—columns, pediments, vaults, gables, and so many other details jettisoned as extraneous by modernists—spoke to a conservative clientele open to a corporate language that corresponded to the white-picket-fence suburbs to which they returned after work.

In Johnson’s life, we can see this distinct shift in architecture mirrored in his own move away from cultural institutions and their patrons toward working directly with the corporations themselves. With the help of his business partner John Burgee, Johnson made the leap from designing museums and private homes to designing skyscrapers and corporate headquarters in cities throughout the land. The changing style of Johnson’s work at the time reveals his keen understanding of the shift in corporate taste: His earlier such work (and arguably his best), the late-modernist IDS Tower in Minneapolis and the Penzoil Place complex in Houston, morphs in the mid-‘70s and early ‘80s into the campy (but admittedly lovable) postmodern AT&T Building in New York and the glass turrets of the Pittsburgh Power and Gas Tower—literally a corporate castle built for the rule of a new, neoliberal generation of the business elite.

Later, when Deconstructivism—the explosive, gravity-defying style defined by buildings like the Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain and the Jewish Museum in Berlin—came into vogue, Johnson helped curate...
(with theorist Mark Wigley) another MoMA exhibition that pushed architecture even further into an elitist, celebrity-obsessed, and market-driven mode. Lamster describes how the curators chose to eschew the radical philosophical basis of the movement in favor of vaulting yet another predetermined gaggle of architects—Frank Gehry among them—to acclaim, giving us the term “starchitecture” in the process: “For the next two decades, the profession would be defined by a chosen few jet-setting international figures building ever grander and more expensive monuments designed to capture public attention. That had always been Johnson’s goal.”

Even so, not all of Johnson’s life and contributions to the field are explicitly negative. He makes for an easy villain and a difficult protagonist, and it’s Lamster’s ability to balance the many facets and faces of Philip Johnson that makes *The Man in the Glass House* such a complete and compelling portrait. Here was a man whose penchant for public spectacle belied a deep insecurity, whose contributions in life and work were a murky mix of negative, positive, and nihilistic. Johnson, despite his sometimes shocking cruelty and self-centeredness, was still, to some, a lifelong friend; he was also a devoted partner to the art collector and curator David Whitney. Some of Johnson’s work was expertly crafted and profoundly elegant, such as the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center and the Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. At other times—as in the case of his buildings for Donald Trump, the Crescent in Dallas, or the University of Houston School of Architecture—it was kitschy, loud, and cynical.

Johnson’s talent and cunning as a patron, architect, and curator changed both the built environment and the way we, the public, appreciate and understand architecture. *The Man in the Glass House* deals with the contradictions of Johnson’s life more completely than any previous biography of the architect. Lamster deftly avoids the common practice of writing a book about architecture that dutifully moves from style to style and building to building in favor of one that weaves salient architectural criticism and approachable analysis into a rich story about a truly complicated person. Johnson’s life—indeed, the story of 20th-century America—is a story “of darkness as much as light; a story of inequality and bigotry, of the perils of cynicism, of human weakness and venality, of rampant corporatism, of the collapse of wealth and authority into the hands of a plutocratic class.” In *The Man in the Glass House*, the darkness and light are inextricable.

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**WHAT WE HOPED TO FORGET**

Kiese Laymon’s *Heavy* offers a coming-of-age tale full of pain and hope

by BIJAN STEPHEN

How much do you weigh? The question is almost invasive, no matter whether it’s asked with love or carelessness. It hides the other question—How much do you carry with you?—which is more important by far, and commensurately harder to answer. The heaviest things—the ones that alter the very shape of your body and mind—don’t have to be physical at all.

Kiese Laymon, a writer and professor of English, has spent much of his life asking these questions. In his new memoir, *Heavy*, he offers the answers he’s found, although by the end of the book it’s clear those answers are less important than the price of the search. “I wanted the book to begin with my weighing 319 pounds and end with my weighing 165 pounds,” Laymon writes on its first page. “I wanted to write a lie.” And then, on the next: “I started over and wrote what we hoped I’d forget.” That “we” is instructive, because it’s almost immediately apparent that *Heavy* is written to the most important person in Laymon’s life, the woman who shaped and abused him: his mother. She’s never referred to by name, showing up addressed as a second-person pronoun—the “you” that haunts the text like a specter.

Which is fitting, because it feels as though most of the book’s pivotal events happen beneath its surface. *Heavy* is about shame, rage, guilt, self-hatred, and sexual violence. It’s about what the body can bear and the cost of bearing it. It’s a story of broken people who mend themselves imprecisely and improvisationally, and it’s also a story of Southern blackness and Southern black folk, a group of people who have been seen more often than heard—a fact
that Laymon hopes to correct in Heavy. Throughout his memoir, he wants to let his friends and family have a say: They and the author grow up before our eyes—from his mother’s house in Jackson, Mississippi, to Oberlin College in Ohio, to Vassar in Poughkeepsie, New York, and then back down to Mississippi—in worlds that are as loving as they are cruel. It is a black book about black lives. But it is also about white power, which makes Heavy, ultimately, a chronicle of violence and powerlessness.

Laymon grew up in a home full of privations. His mother was an underpaid academic who worked her way through graduate school and into a professorship while Laymon was a child growing up in Jackson. She’s a complex figure, and we see her grow alongside her son, coping with many hardships and doing what she can to protect him from a hostile world. “[My body] knew that all over my neighborhood,” Laymon writes, “boys were trained to harm girls in ways girls could never harm boys, straight kids were trained to harm queer kids in ways queer kids could never harm straight kids, men were trained to harm women in ways women could never harm men, parents were trained to harm children in ways children could never harm parents, babysitters were trained to harm kids in ways kids could never harm babysitters. My body knew white folk were trained to harm us in ways we could never harm them.”

The harm wasn’t limited to the outside world; it happened at home, too. Laymon was repeatedly sexually abused by one of his mother’s students, Renata. “Choking on Renata’s breasts made me feel lighter than I’d ever felt,” he writes of the first time. His mother hurt him as well, beating him when she thought he was out of line, while insisting to Laymon that it was for his own good. “Excellence, education, and accountability,” she explained, “were requirements for keeping the insides of black boys in Mississippi healthy and safe from white folk.” Even when he was a college student, his mother continued to police his behavior, worried as she was about how the white world might harm her son, and still he found himself running from her. Laymon’s mother wasn’t immune to the violence around her, either: Once, when he was a teenager, she picked him up with a black eye inflicted by her long-term boyfriend.

The barrage of trauma in Heavy is unremitting: Laymon has to witness and survive countless incidents of violence and abuse—above all, the toxic vapors of white supremacy, which permeate the events in the book like mustard gas does a battlefield. While attending Millsaps College in Jackson, for example, Laymon wrote essays for the student newspaper satirizing some of the school’s racists. Soon after, a group of drunken frat boys accosted him and his girlfriend while the pair were on their way to work, egging Laymon on to “write about this.” “The white boys were blasting Snoop’s ‘Gz and Hustlas’ the whole time they were calling us niggers,” Laymon reports. “When we got to work, we called the local news and told them there was something they might want to see happening on the campus of Millsaps College.” The publicity started the cycle again.

A particular kind of rage develops in the face of such repeated brutality, and it’s this rage that often leads Laymon to harm himself. “Usually, when I wanted to run from memory, I transcribed rap lyrics, or I drew two-story houses, or I wrote poems to Layla, or I watched black sitcoms, or I thought about new ways to act a fool in class…or I ate and drank everything that wasn’t nailed down.” As he grows older, the rap lyrics and sitcoms and poems disappear, and what remains are the stress eating and acting a fool. In college, things get particularly bad. Laymon’s friend Ray tells him to stop eating and drinking when he’s sad. But he can’t stop; it’s both a compulsion and a coping mechanism. When Laymon gets older and starts teaching as a professor at Vassar, the compulsions invert: He loses weight as methodically as he once gained it, and instead begins to gamble his money away. All the while, Laymon’s mother is doing the same, as though they’ve finally caught up with each other.

Laymon tries to run from the world, but it follows him everywhere. Near the end of the book, administrators at Vassar call him into a meeting about his tenure and imply that he’d lied about completing grad school; later, he is asked by the Poughkeepsie police to answer for anonymous and threatening racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic letters sent to the members of his committee. “Either way, I am supposed to be happy because I am free because I am not in handcuffs,” he writes after his name has been cleared. “I will know that I am not free precisely because I am happy that my wrists are free of handcuffs the month I earn tenure with distinction from Vassar College.”

Heavy
An American Memoir
By Kiese Laymon
Scribner. 256 pp. $26

Heavy is a dark book, and the trauma that Laymon orbits is almost like a black hole; its shape is circular. Even when he finally tries to have an honest conversation with his mother (at a casino, of all places) about the things he’s experienced, the harms that befell him, it’s still impossible for either one to understand the other without blame. Both are addicts, shaped and abused by the lives they’ve lived, and they know these addictions won’t just go away. “Two miles from all those promises and three minutes from our last cliché, I will understand that no meaningful promises are made or kept in casinos,” Laymon writes. “I will head back to the casino and spend the last ten dollars I stole from Flora’s apartment. I will stop at Vassar College when I leave the casino. I will not know where home is. I will not smell the roses. I will not leave the past in the past. I will teach my students. I will write and revise. I will become a tired teacher and a terrified black writer.” But even if Laymon can’t reconcile with his mother in real life, Heavy is his effort to do so in his writing. “Please do not be mad at me, Mama,” he ends. “I am just trying to put us where we bend. I am just trying to put you where I bend.”

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ACROSS
1 Fashion celebrity’s bad mood cut short when taking in poetic tribute to a hairstyle? (10)
6 Doctor said, “This is a good place to speak” (4)
9 Republicans aren’t accommodating Democratic sponsor (9)
10 Sorceress’s concept: I became an object (5)
11 Soothe, except when absorbing loss (5)
12 Some members of the film crew arrived with noodles (9)
13 Bother to break up President Taft’s original design element (5,3)
15 Trap disheartened medical examiner (6)
17 Happen to act as a detergent (6)
18 Criminal company in San Francisco is at fault (8)
21 Forbid part of cartoon pertaining to a European city (9)
22 British man in African nation switching sides (5)
24 41 nests in half-open flower (5)
25 More energetic running, but I shifted to the end to get some meat (9)
26 Island in Southeast, outside Kentucky (4)
27 Aquatic creature (seabird) moves into path with a certain amount of speed (5,5)

DOWN
1 Volunteers sing off-key and have dinner (5,2)
2 Boy extended play, mounting piece of tricycle (5)
3 Gather around to insist on small taunt from a victorious gambler (4,2,3,4)
4 Burn bad cover disk, all right? (8)
5 Bury Monet in ruins west of Brittany (6)
7 Mad albino is sick in the stomach (9)
8 Checker’s helper: second person who makes preserves (7)
10 Frequently interrupting refusals in Moscow and London, weight is hoisted for ballerina (6,7)
14 Lo-cal demonstration (that’s not a figure of speech) (9)
16 Mark, tossing out a fruit-and-pork loaf (8)
17 Primates benefit in degrees (7)
19 Like a wild animal overturning base angle (7)
20 Controversy setting back Arabic translation: Winnie ____? (6)
23 Clean rear of sleeping area (5)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3488

ACROSS
1 CAR + PEN + TRY 6 hidden
9 aug. 10 MI (rev.) + SIBEHAV
11 aug. 12 T + WEAK 11 DI + OR
14 H AND M + ED + OWN 18 COSMIC
RAYS 19 aug. 22 IRIS + H 24 aug.
26 KEEP (rev.) + GOING 27 SHIV + A
28 N + OMAN 29 letter link

DOWN
1 CRASHED 2 aug.
3 E + MB (rev.) + AS 4 TC/MOA
5 YES + TERNARY (rev.)
6 TWEN (rev.) + TIES 7 P + LACE
8 CH (E)-CK (or) N 15 AFRICA LIST
16 ONTHESID (rev.) + E 17 MIC + HI +
GA (rev.) 18 CHIC + KEN 20 aug.
21 S + T + AS IS (film) 23 I + BEAM
25 Hidden

CARPENTRY TOPIC
R I A N E W H
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S H W P T N C G
H I T P A R A D E T W E A K
E E X R I
D I O R H A N D M E D O W N
U M E A S H
C O S M I C A R Y S T E P S
H C I S H
I R I S H A P A R T H E I D
C B I L R A S C
K E E P I N G S H I V A
E A S U T U S
N O M A N T E E N I S T E

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