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WARNING:
THE PLASTICS CRISIS IS ABOUT TO GET WORSE
FRACKING TRIGGERED A PRODUCTION BOOM—WITH TOXIC CONSEQUENCES.
by Zoe Carpenter
Channeling Allende
As a person who has lived and worked in South and Central America for many years, I read with joy and sorrow the comment by Ariel Dorfman (“Advice for Maduro,” March 11/18). Joy—as well as gratitude—for the clarity and directness with which the author speaks for Salvador Allende. Sorrow for the powerful truth of his words as he recalls the tragedy of the coup against Allende and the people of Chile, as well as the misguided steps of the current government of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela. Dorfman does not overlook the destructive interventions of the US government in Latin America, either.

Gregory Rienzo
Hayward, Calif.

Dorfman’s points are well made, and I hope Maduro pays heed to them. That said, today’s world is not the world of the 1960s and ’70s. Globalization has extended the reach of US foreign policy (and our goons have also built upon our past experiences of regime change), while the moderating influence of the Soviet Union is sorely missed (a critical France, too). Also, we have codified the association between our military and organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

So, if I were a member of the jury deliberating over Maduro’s missteps and authoritarian acts, I would push for leniency. Maduro faces a formidable fifth column, and Venezuela’s powerful oligarchy, in residence in Miami, was even enabled by President Obama. As with our dirty works in Honduras, Europe has been MIA, while Chile, Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina have all eagerly encouraged the US manipulations against the duly elected Venezuelan leadership.

I see very dark times ahead in all of Latin America, if John Bolton and Eliot Abrams achieve their goal.

Clark Shanahan
Warren- ted Praise
Re George Zornick’s “A Fighter From Within” [March 11/18]: We can argue that all of the Democratic contenders have some blots on their résumés, but the most pressing problems in the United States right now are inequality in wealth and the corrupting influence of money in government. Once these problems are solved, all of the other progressive goals will be easier to achieve, from a New Green Deal to universal health care. Elizabeth Warren knows all the tricks that the banks, billionaires, and corporations use to get around the law. She is the most capable person to correct this rigging of our system. That’s why I vote for her.

Manuel Fiadeiro
New York City

Correction
In Mark Hertsgaard’s article “The Climate Kids Are Coming” [March 25], the group of young activists who met with Senator Dianne Feinstein were identified as members of the Sunrise Movement. The group also included members of Youth vs. Apocalypse and the Bay Area Earth Guardians.

Comments drawn from our website letters@thenation.com
Calling Out the Israel Lobby

The basic facts of the Ilhan Omar affair were simple, though much of the hysteria seemed to ignore the facts. The new congresswoman talked about the pressure that the pro-Israel lobby puts on members of Congress to show “allegiance to a foreign country.” It wasn’t that different from the mainstream media’s common descriptions of “allegiance to Israel.”

But irate lobby officials demanded that the Democratic House leadership punish Omar for what they falsely claimed was her use of an anti-Semitic slur regarding Jews and dual loyalty—words and meanings that she never spoke or implied. The leadership immediately offered a resolution aimed at condemning Omar. But then the pushback began, from outside activists and from the Congressional Black and Progressive caucuses. Within a week, a broad anti-oppression resolution condemned not only anti-Semitism but white supremacy, racism, and a host of other wrongs—including, for the first time, Islamophobia—had passed overwhelmingly.

It was a tough week for Omar, but it has to be called a victory for the social movements and members of Congress committed to Palestinian rights; to transparency in political donations; and to a foreign policy based on human rights, international law, and equality rather than unconditional support for a nuclear-armed apartheid state occupying other people’s land.

The discourse shift on Israel-Palestine has been underway for years. It’s visible in the Jewish community, where support for Israel is no longer assumed; in the African-American community, where leading intellectuals are increasingly speaking out on the issue; and in mainstream Protestant churches, where boycotts arising from Israel’s violations of international law are now routine. In the media, the changes are significant, though not as dramatic—the most influential newspapers now frequently publish Palestinian voices and challenge US support for Israel, while social media have broadened the knowledge of Israeli human-rights violations, especially for young people.

But until recently, that discourse shift hadn’t reached inside the Beltway. There, the illusion persisted that Congress’s annual gift of $3.8 billion of our tax money to the Israeli military could not be questioned; that Washington must shield Israeli officials from international accountability for their war crimes; and that criticizing Israel or its US supporters is political suicide. But those days are over.

The recent furor led The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal to question AIPAC’s power and expose its influence. It led both the black and progressive caucuses to ask why one of the first two Muslim women in Congress was being attacked when so many other members had made racist, Islamophobic, and other hate-filled statements that were greeted with silence.

This pushback was a victory. But changing an entrenched status quo is difficult; the real test will come when we see how often other members of Congress are willing to speak out against AIPAC and allied lobbies like Christians United for Israel.

We may get a hint when the annual AIPAC convention takes over Capitol Hill. Members of Congress will face pressure to applaud Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and display their allegiance to the US-Israel partnership—even though Israel has just revoked the participation of Arab political parties in the upcoming Knesset elections, and Netanyahu has orchestrated the return to electoral politics of the violence-supporting Jewish Power party, linked to the late American extremist rabbi Meir Kahane.

Four years ago, 58 members of Congress skipped Netanyahu’s speech against the Iran nuclear deal before a Republican-initiated joint session of Congress. That action was mostly led by the Congressional Black Caucus, outraged at Netanyahu’s unprecedented racist snub of President Obama. For a while, it looked like a one-off. But now it’s a whole new world out there. Maybe—just maybe—speaking out against Israeli abuses and refusing to toe the lobby line will start to look like a habit.  

PHYLLIS BENNIS

Four years ago, 58 members of Congress skipped Netanyahu’s speech against the Iran nuclear deal before a Republican-initiated joint session of Congress. That action was mostly led by the Congressional Black Caucus, outraged at Netanyahu’s unprecedented racist snub of President Obama. For a while, it looked like a one-off. But now it’s a whole new world out there. Maybe—just maybe—speaking out against Israeli abuses and refusing to toe the lobby line will start to look like a habit.  

PHYLLIS BENNIS
Exclusive: ICE’d Over

Documents show the agency has kept tabs on protesters.

In the summer of 2018, as protests against the Trump administration’s immigration policies intensified and the movement to “abolish ICE” gained momentum, the federal agency at the center of the storm was keeping tabs on a series of anti-Trump protests in New York City, according to documents obtained by The Nation through a Freedom of Information Act request. Among the protests that Immigration and Customs Enforcement tracked were several promoting immigrant rights and opposing the administration’s deportation policies, as well as another protesting the National Rifle Association. One event had been organized by a sitting member of Congress from New York City, who had recently introduced legislation to shut down the agency and restructure its duties.

On the evening of July 31, 2018, Congressman Adriano Espaillat, a Democrat who represents parts of northern Manhattan and the Bronx, organized a rally at an Upper Manhattan park to protest the white-supremacist group Identity Evropa. Just a few days earlier, a gang of Identity Evropa members had gathered at the same park to unfurl a racist, anti-immigrant banner from a bridge there. “Stop the Invasion,” the banner read. “End Immigration.”

Identity Evropa’s action was an affront to the local community, Espaillat says. The rally he organized in response, called “Uptown Standing Together Against Racism and Xenophobia,” was meant to counter the group’s hateful message. “Our rally was about unity,” Espaillat continues, noting that the family-friendly event had been attended by more than 300 people, including children, as well as New York State Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul. “It was about pushing back against hate and telling our immigrant neighbors, our Latino neighbors, our Jewish neighbors that we will always stand with them if they are targeted by racist and anti-Semitic groups.”

Despite this inclusive and peaceful sentiment, Espaillat’s rally ended up on a government list. In an e-mail sent on July 31, 2018, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), ICE’s investigative arm, transmitted detailed information to an undisclosed number of recipients, including at least one Department of Homeland Security supervisor, about public protests mostly planned by liberal and left-leaning groups in New York City. The e-mail contained a four-page document, titled “Anti-Trump Protest Spreadsheet 07/31/2018,” which listed the time, date, location, and purpose of various protests slated to take place around the city.

The document, which covered demonstrations that occurred between July 31 and August 17 of last year, also contained the names of the groups sponsoring each protest and the number of people who had signed up on Facebook to attend. The e-mail accompanying the document contained a simple message to its recipients: “All, Please see below listing...with updated protest information. Please remain vigilant and aware of your surroundings.”

Representative Espaillat’s rally against white supremacy was one of a dozen protests included in the spreadsheet. While it is not known whether the spreadsheet was a stand-alone document or part of an ongoing effort to monitor protests—or how it fits into HSI’s mission of investigating “cross-border criminal activity”—it provides evidence that ICE, for a brief period at least, has kept tabs on left-leaning political events in New York City.

“I am shocked—totally shocked,” Espaillat says of the spreadsheet. “I would like to find out why our event was on that list, and whether it was surveilled or infiltrated—and why the racist, anti-Semitic group was not on the list,” he adds, referring to Identity Evropa.

In addition to the rally organized by Espaillat, the spreadsheet includes protests and marches put together by Young Progressives of America, Refuse Fascism NYC, NYC Says Enough, the New Sanctuary Coalition, and Rise and Resist. It also flags an August 4 protest against the National Rifle Association organized by the group Gays Against Guns. Only one conservative event—a pro-ICE, pro-border-wall demonstration that was described as being organized by a pair of right-wing groups—appeared on the spreadsheet. However, it was listed as a “counter-protest.”

ICE declined to comment on the specific logic that informed its “Anti-Trump Protest Spreadsheet.” But in a statement to The Nation, agency officials said: “[I]t is important to note that Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) special agents are regularly conducting field investigations in the New York City area. The referenced e-mail was provided to HSI agents for situational awareness should any HSI employees be travelling through those areas, whether on work or personal time.”

ICE’s spreadsheet isn’t the only evidence that the agency has been keenly attuned to left-leaning political activity in New York City. E-mail communications obtained by The Nation show that top officials at ICE’s New York field office appear to be highly aware of the organizations and advocates opposed to their controversial agency.

One February 2018 exchange, between the deputy field-office director and the assistant field-office director (whose names have been redacted), focused on an immigrant-rights demonstration held outside ICE’s offices on Ash Wednesday. Several months later, on July 24, the deputy field-office director sent an e-mail to a number of top local ICE officials and what appear to be multiple ICE listservs—including one titled “#Ice-Watch_Event_Notification”—in order to provide agency personnel with information about several upcoming protests near the agency’s Manhattan offices. One of those protests, dubbed the “Deportee Suitcase Solidarity March,” occurred on July 26 and was meant to highlight the cruelty associated with deportations.

The July 24 e-mail, which was labeled “confidential” and of “high” importance, contained detailed information (continued on page 8)
THE SCORE/BRYCE COVERT + MIKE KONCZAL

Filibusted

The Senate’s filibuster rule appears nowhere in the US Constitution, but if it continues to be exercised in its current form, it will kill any hopes for the progressive agenda and reinforce the most destructive tendencies of the Republican Party. Under current Senate rules, it takes a supermajority of 60 votes for lawmakers to build something, but only 50 for them to tear it down. This baseline asymmetry allows the GOP to continue dismantling the government and leaves the Democratic Party unable to pass the bold plans necessary to build a progressive future.

The core Republican agenda has three crucial elements. The first is cutting taxes for the rich, because the GOP insists that low taxes drive growth and that progressive taxation unfairly punishes society’s winners. The second is disassembling the social safety net via privatization, vouchers, or block grants and starving the rest of the federal government of funds (except for the military). Republicans do this because they’re convinced that church groups and local communities can provide social insurance better than the federal government—an idea that was already anachronistic when it was tried during the Great Depression. The third is using the judiciary to tie reform efforts into knots, weakening or killing any regulations.

None of this requires a 60-vote supermajority in the Senate. A process called “reconciliation” allows budgeting and tax measures to pass with only 50 votes (and the vice president casting a tiebreaker). To choke off government services, Republicans need just 50 votes to constrict the budgeting and tax stream—and they’ve been ruthless at this. They have repeatedly passed 10-year tax cuts for the rich, forming new baselines for what voters expect to pay in taxes and creating political headaches for liberals when these cuts expire. The GOP has also invented elaborate ways to gut agencies like the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau through funding mechanisms, though they have yet to pass them.

The entire Republican debate on repealing the Affordable Care Act took place within this 50-vote threshold. Whether it was turning health care over to the states entirely, phasing out the ACA’s expansion of Medicaid, defunding Planned Parenthood, or enacting a last-minute “skinny repeal” of small, targeted cuts, the Senate needed just 50 votes to accomplish any (or all) of this. It was very different from the passage of the ACA, which required 60 votes.

Keep in mind that the last time the filibuster posed a real obstacle to the GOP’s agenda—when it was blocking Neil Gorsuch from taking a stolen Supreme Court seat—Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell simply repealed the Voting Rights Act, don’t need to pass the Senate, since the Supreme Court has already eviscerated the Voting Rights Act for them. Though various experts are now debating what could or could not move within this 50-vote threshold, it’s clear that the filibuster will distort and limit the scope of the progressive agenda—and on the same scale that Southern white supremacy limited the vision and scope of the original New Deal. A Green New Deal that unapologetically uses public power to curb carbon emissions and create an economy with better jobs for many would almost certainly require 60 votes; tinkering around the edges of the climate crisis with green subsidies and tax breaks for private businesses would need just 50. The same is true for any serious expansion of Medicare. Also, since the reconciliation process is tied to yearly budgets, it means fewer and bigger bills that are more vulnerable to collapse. Plus there’s a wide range of necessary reforms, from the $15 minimum wage to restoring voting rights, that can’t even be included under the Senate’s current rules on reconciliation.

To overhaul our carbon economy and address its many economic injustices, progressives must be able to pass ambitious legislation. In theory, the filibuster affects both parties, but in reality, it shackles the agenda of progressive Democrats while institutionalizing the Republican Party’s cruel nihilism.

MIKE KONCZAL

The Filibuster: Why We Can’t Have Nice Things

To get around the filibuster requires:

60 votes

Even if Democrats win a majority, they need to get rid of the rule if they want big reforms:

Green New Deal

To keep global warming from increasing more than 2.7 degrees F

Automatic Voter Registration

To add 50 million voters to the rolls

$15 minimum wage

To give $120 billion in higher wages to 40 million US workers

Sources: Green New Deal Resolution, Brennan Center for Justice, Economic Policy Institute

2019 infographic: Tracy Matsue Loeffelholz
Mike Oliver 1945–2019

Mike Oliver, emeritus professor of disability studies at the University of Greenwich in England, died on March 2, 2019, after a short illness. He was 74.

A wheelchair user since the age of 17 and a sociologist by training, Oliver played a pioneering role in developing what has come to be known as the social model of disability. He argued that structural barriers, such as a lack of wheelchair ramps or a failure to provide sign-language interpreters, impede disabled people far more than the physical impairments themselves. In other words, an ableist society is what disables the “disabled” and keeps them largely unemployed and in poverty.

In every advanced capitalist country, disabled people face tremendous barriers when it comes to housing, transportation, and employment. These barriers are so comprehensive and widespread that most individuals don’t give them a second thought. By establishing and popularizing the impairment/disability distinction, Oliver helped disabled people view the discrimination they face as a matter of human rights rather than as a medical condition.

It is difficult to convey now how revolutionary this argument was. Individuals who had spent years regarding their daily challenges as a matter of personal failure were suddenly politicized.

Disability-rights advocates around the world owe Oliver an enormous debt of gratitude.

—Ravi Malhotra

Eric Alterman

Of Course It’s Propaganda!

Fox News has poisoned political discourse from the moment it went on the air.

Thanks to an article by The New Yorker’s Jane Mayer, Fox News will not host any primary debates for the Democratic presidential candidates in the coming election season. As Tom Perez, chair of the Democratic National Committee, explained in a statement to The Washington Post: “Recent reporting in The New Yorker on the inappropriate relationship between President Trump, his administration, and Fox News has led me to conclude that the network is not in a position to host a fair and neutral debate for our candidates.”

The decision is the correct one, even if the reasoning is off-kilter—as is typical for leaders of the Democratic Party. The problem is not with Mayer’s characteristically compelling reporting. It’s with the framing of both her article and Perez’s decision. Mayer’s piece ran with the subhead “Fox News has always been partisan. But has it become propaganda?” The problem with this question is that Fox News has always been propaganda, ever since it first went on the air in October 1996.

Fox News anchor Chris Wallace had a fair point when, speaking with The New York Times, he asked: “Do I think Tom Perez read the New Yorker article and suddenly said, ‘Oh, my gosh, there’s gambling going on in the back room?’” Perhaps he did—but if so, that willful blindness is an even bigger problem.

Fox has never been an honest news network, and the inability and/or unwillingness of so many to recognize this obvious fact is what has allowed it to poison our discourse for so long. Feed the last 23 years of this column into a computer algorithm, and you could generate countless more essays on why Fox News, aside from the billions it brings in for Murdoch, is to push a right-wing agenda. To take just one example, nearly every Murdoch property—but especially Fox News—amplified and exaggerated the dishonest case that George W. Bush’s administration made for its allegedly preemptive war against Iraq in 2003. Back then, The New York Times reported that “Mr. Murdoch’s creation of the Fox News Channel has shifted the entire spectrum of American cable news to the right.” Two years later, political scientist Jonathan S. Morris analyzed the data from the Pew Research Center’s Biennial Media Consumption surveys in order to “identify demographic and behavioral factors that predict Americans’ exposure to cable and broadcast nightly news.” Alarmingly, he found that Fox News viewers were “more likely than nonwatchers to underestimate rather than overestimate the number of American casualties in Iraq.”

Fox News’ dishonesty has been crucial in shaping our politics. Examining the voting data for 9,256 towns in the 2000 elections, Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan found that Republicans did better in places where the network was carried by cable providers. They discovered “a significant effect of Fox News on Senate vote share and on voter turnout. [The] estimates imply that Fox News convinced 3 to 8 percent of its viewers to vote Republican.” And that was just the beginning: A more recent study
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Clearly, Fox has been a powerful advocate for Republicans since its inception—but just as often, it was Fox in the driver’s seat. Back in 2010, Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) was negotiating with Senators John Kerry (D-MA) and Joe Lieberman (I-CT) to write a bipartisan energy bill, and he reportedly warned them that they had better make progress quickly, “before Fox News got wind of the fact.” It was just such phenomena that led conservative David Frum to observe, “Republicans originally thought that Fox worked for us, and now we’re discovering we work for Fox.”

Initially, the Obama administration tried to address Fox’s dishonesty by barring its officials from appearing on Fox’s Sunday shows. The administration was attacked—and Fox defended—by the likes of CNN’s Jake Tapper, The Baltimore Sun’s David Zurawik, and many others. We are hearing similar nonsense today from political consultant Liz Mair, writing in the Times opinion section; Maggie Haberman, the Times’ White House correspondent; NBC’s Jonathan Allen; the Associated Press’s Zeke Miller; and Politico’s Jack Shafer. All have argued that the Democrats are showing fear and a lack of confidence by refusing to grant Fox the right to question their candidates according to the network’s own dishonest and deeply biased terms. But the truth is that it’s long past time for the Democrats to wise up and point out what even Fox’s competitors in the mainstream media will not: that Fox is not news. Its power to pollute our debate lies in playacting on TV. “Real” journalists debase themselves and their profession by participating in the destructive and debilitating charade.

COMIX NATION

Alina Das, a professor at New York University Law School and an attorney for Ragbir and the New Sanctuary Coalition, says the fact that ICE sent out a detailed document titled “Anti-Trump Protest Spreadsheet” is further evidence that “ICE is surveilling our communities based on not only the fact that they are speaking out, but who they are speaking out against.”

Civil-liberties experts, meanwhile, fear that the agency’s apparent monitoring of protest activities in New York could have a broader chilling effect on the freedom of speech and peaceable assembly. “The document reveals government surveillance of what appears to be peaceful protest, and that kind of surveillance threatens to chill protected First Amendment activity,” says Caroline DeCell, a staff attorney at Columbia University’s Knight First Amendment Institute. “Especially absent some kind of evidence of an actual threat to peace, there seems to be no justification for this kind of surveillance.”

Jimmy Tobias is a contributor to The Nation.
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The Interns Are Revolting

More than 30,000 university students across Quebec are set to launch a general strike on March 18, vowing to take to the streets and boycott classes in order to protest unpaid internships. Organized by a coalition of student organizations under the acronym CUTE (Comités Unitaires sur le Travail Étudiant), the Grève des Stages—loosely translated as the “Strike of the Interns”—escalates a years-long fight by student workers to be adequately compensated for their labor and to exert greater control over their working conditions. According to the French-language newspaper Le Devoir, 77 percent of these internships—many of them a mandatory part of students’ coursework—are unpaid. Also, the internships are only partially covered under Quebec’s labor laws, and so many students have little recourse if their bosses mistreat them.

The Grève des Stages movement is deeply informed by radical-feminist perspectives. A common refrain during the protests has been “Grève des stages, grève des femmes”—“The interns’ strike is a women’s strike”—in recognition of the fact that most interns are women training in traditionally gendered professions like health care, education, and social work. Jacqueline Ohayon, a member of McGill University’s Social Work Student Association, told Global News CA that a lack of government support for social services is ultimately to blame: “Because they are underfunded, they rely on free work from us.”

—Rosemarie Ho

The Man With the SS Tattoo

How do we deal with the Nazis living among us?

Some years ago, while on a camping trip with my family in Joshua Tree National Park, I stopped by a local grocery store to get some firewood. At the checkout counter, I found myself behind a white man buying diapers and baby formula. As he reached for a pack of gum from the display rack, his shirt sleeve lifted, revealing a tattoo of SS lightning bolts. I recoiled in horror, but he seemed entirely unconcerned. To him, I was just another tourist in hiking clothes. To me, though, his presence was indelible—the white supremacist in the checkout line.

I thought of him again last month, when federal officials announced the arrest of Christopher P. Hasson, a Coast Guard lieutenant who planned to “murder innocent civilians on a scale rarely seen in this country.” A self-proclaimed white nationalist, Hasson had reportedly admired the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, pondered the use of biological weapons and attacks on food supplies, and created a spreadsheet of targets that included prominent reporters and Democratic politicians. Hasson had previously spent five years in the Marines and two in the Army National Guard, slowly rising through the ranks without attracting notice for his dreams of a “white homeland.”

The Hasson case is but one example of white extremism in the United States. Two years ago, hundreds of white nationalists—including six active-duty and former members of the military—marched through Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting: “Jews will not replace us!” Last year in Kentucky, Gregory A. Bush tried to enter a black church but, after failing at this goal, shot and killed two black customers in a Kroger supermarket, while sparring the white one. (“Whites don’t kill whites,” Bush told him.) Also last year, Robert D. Bowers, angered by the involvement of the Pittsburgh Tree of Life synagogue in refugee resettlement, killed 11 people there during a bris ceremony. It was the largest anti-Semitic attack in the country’s history.

The trend is extremely worrisome. According to the Anti-Defamation League, the overwhelming majority of fatal attacks by extremists in the United States last year were perpetrated by right-wing domestic extremists. Yet white nationalists continue to evade detection, and it’s not exactly difficult to figure out why. Between 2002 and 2017, the Department of Homeland Security spent an astounding $2.8 trillion on counter-terrorism efforts, most of it to fight Islamist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, both at home and abroad. Domestically, the Countering Violent Extremism Task Force has focused on immigrant organizations and Black Lives Matter activists.

By comparison, elected officials seem uninterested in the threat posed by white extremists. The House of Representatives held multiple hearings on the 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, once grilling Hillary Clinton for 11 hours, but it has not tackled the white-nationalist attacks in this country. Likewise, the Senate Armed Services Committee routinely hears from experts about foreign threats, but it has not requested an official investigation into the white nationalists in the military.

At a news conference held after Hasson’s arrest, a reporter asked Donald Trump if he thought he should moderate his rhetoric. “No, I don’t,” the president replied. “I think my language is very nice.” Trump, of course, has referred to the neo-Nazis who marched through Charlottesville as “fine people” and has called the news media “the enemy of the American people.” He has run an anti-Semitic campaign ad, retweeted white-nationalist accounts on Twitter, and won the praise of former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke.

Yet it is Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar who has made news concerning the rise of anti-Semitism in this country. In a tweet she says was intended to criticize AIPAC’s lobbying on behalf of Israel, Omar invoked “the Benjamins” and, a few days later, blasted those who would “push for allegiance to a foreign country,” leading members of both parties to accuse her of spreading hateful tropes. “It is shameful that House Demo-

Elected officials seem uninterested in the threat posed by white extremists, and it’s not exactly difficult to figure out why.
crats won’t take a stronger stand against anti-Semitism in their conference,” Trump tweeted. He was joined by a growing chorus of Republicans, who insisted on Omar’s censure and even resignation from her committee seats. In the end, House Democrats passed a resolution condemning hate in all its forms—with 23 Republicans opposed.

As the controversy took over the headlines, I wondered again about the white supremacist in the checkout line. Was he paying attention to the language in the House resolution? He might be a man of action rather than words. Perhaps, like Christopher Hasson, he used his work computer to study the manifestos of mass shooters. Or perhaps he had no immediate plans but took the long view, working to elect people who would represent his positions. Earlier this month, leaked chat logs from members of the white-supremacist group Identity Evropa revealed that they had donated to Congressman Steve King’s campaign and called members of Congress to express support for him. (King is the nine-term congressman from Iowa who recently wondered when phrases like “white nationalist” and “white supremacist” had become offensive.)

White supremacy has always been part of this nation’s history. The US Constitution, written by wealthy white landowners, was designed to keep power in the hands of white men. Although that power has continually been contested, it has never been relinquished without a struggle. Only in the last few decades have Americans of different national, religious, and ethnic backgrounds begun to enjoy the full rights and privileges of citizenship.

In fact, America is becoming increasingly diverse: A child born today is as likely to be white as nonwhite. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, white nationalism is back with a vengeance. Defeating it will be the moral, electoral, and educational challenge of a generation.

White supremacy has always been part of this nation’s history. The Constitution was designed to keep power in the hands of white men.
WARNING:
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PLASTICS
CRISIS IS
ABOUT TO
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PRODUCTION BOOM—WITH
TOXIC CONSEQUENCES.
by Zoë Carpenter
A long line of dump trucks idles at the edge of the waves, each full of plastic—bags and milk jugs and floss containers, hair clips, shrink wrap, fake ferns, toys, and spatulas. Every minute, one of the trucks lifts its bed and deposits a load of trash into the sea.

The dump trucks aren’t real, but the trash is. No one knows exactly how much plastic leaks into the oceans every year, but one dump truck per minute—8 million tons per year—is a midrange estimate. Plastic waste usually begins its journey on land, where only 9 percent of it is recycled. The rest is thrown away, burned, or buried, left to wash into streams and rivers or to blow out to sea. Once in the ocean, the plastic drifts or sinks. The sun and the waves break it down into tiny particles that resemble plankton. Birds and fish and other sea creatures eat it and begin to starve. One analysis predicts that by 2050, the plastic in the oceans will outweigh the fish.

Some of the trash winds up in one of five current systems in the oceans known as gyres, where it forms a slowly circulating plastic soup. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is the largest of these zones, spanning an area twice the size of Texas between Hawaii and California, a merry-go-round of the remains of global consumption. Researchers have found small plastic shards and large objects in the gyre: hard hats and Game Boys and milk crates and enormous tangles of fishing nets, all swirling in a smog of microplastics.

Often inaccurately described as a solid island, the garbage patch has become a potent symbol of the world’s plastic problem, alongside viral photos of a sea horse clutching a Q-tip, a sea turtle with a straw wedged deep in its nostril, and a dead adolescent albatross with a stomach full of jewel-like plastic shards. These images have helped raise the alarm about plastic waste around the world, inspiring responses ranging from weekend beach sweeps to the Ocean Cleanup, a controversial and expensive effort to collect the trash in the Great Pacific gyre. Even the corporate response is like trying to empty a bathtub with a teaspoon while the tap is on full blast.

Against this backdrop, investing $1 billion in trash collection and cleanup is like trying to empty a bathtub with a teaspoon while the tap is on full blast. But plastic—and its fossil-fuel precursors—leaves a merry-go-round of the remains of global consumption. The expected result of all this investment is a spike in production—with capacity increasing by more than a third in the next six years alone, according to an estimate from the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL). Most of this new plastic will be sent to developing countries with waste infrastructure ill-equipped to handle it. “If you’re going to increase production of plastics—double it in the next 15 years—you’re going to see an increase of unrecyclable plastic products and packaging going to the more remote parts of the world, where there is still no plan for efficient recovery,” said Marcus Eriksen, a scientist and former Marine who co-founded the 5 Gyres Institute. Against this backdrop, investing $1 billion in trash collection is like trying to empty a bathtub with a teaspoon while the tap is on full blast.

But plastic—and its fossil-fuel precursors—leaves a mark long before bags and bottles and Q-tips scatter across fields or wash into the oceans. Communities all along the supply chain will feel the impacts of the American plastics renaissance. What the industry describes as a bright new economic opportunity, others see as a looming disaster. “For too long, one of the most invisible aspects of the plastics crisis has been the impacts of plastics on communities who live in the shadows and along the fence line of plastics refining and manufacturing,” said Carroll Mufett, CIEL’s president and CEO. “These people are experiencing the impacts of our plastic planet in a way that is more immediate and more severe than just about anybody else in the world.”

In the United States, the front...
of the plastics boom runs along the Gulf Coast from Texas to Louisiana, and through the upper Ohio River Valley, which spans Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. It’s made up of small communities that often had little say in their role in the new infrastructure build-out, with decisions made largely behind the scenes by politicians and corporate behemoths. Until recently, many people had no idea that their towns would soon become the knots connecting an immense plastic net thrown across the country.

**In May 2017, Donald Trump made his first overseas trip as president,** to Saudi Arabia. He waved a sword during a ceremonial dance, accepted lavish gifts—including a portrait of himself and a robe lined with white tiger fur—and signed a $110 billion arms agreement. Meanwhile, in a mint-and-gold-colored room within the Saudi royal court, executives struck their own deals. Among them were Darren Woods, the CEO and chairman of ExxonMobil, and Yousef Al-Benyan, CEO of the Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), one of the world’s largest producers of petrochemicals. With Trump, Saudi King Salman, and then–US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (a former Exxon CEO) looking on, Woods and Al-Benyan shook hands on a joint venture to build what will be the largest plastics facility of its kind, on Texas’s Gulf Coast.

Long before the deal was immortalized with glitzy photo ops, it was known as Project Yosemite—a code name designed to keep the initiative secret while its backers scouted sites. What the two companies wanted to build is known as a “cracker,” a facility that uses heat and pressure to crack apart molecules of ethane gas so they can be reconfigured as ethylene and later polyethylene, the building block for a wide range of plastic products, from packaging to bottles. Once an unwanted by-product of oil and gas fracking, ethane flowing from Texas’s Permian Basin and Eagle Ford Shale is now prompting a massive build-out of petrochemical infrastructure—pipelines, crackers, polyethylene plants, tanker terminals—along the Gulf Coast from St. James, Louisiana, to Corpus Christi, Texas.

In 2016, with help from Texas Governor Greg Abbott, Exxon found a site for Project Yosemite on 1,400 acres of farmland north of Corpus Christi. By the time residents of two neighboring towns learned of the massive project, county commissioners had already rezoned the farmland and were eagerly courting the oil giant. Soon Exxon was seeking $1 billion in tax breaks from the county and local school district. “That’s when people woke up,” said Errol Summerlin, a retired Legal Aid attorney who lives a few miles from the Exxon site, in the town of Portland. “Bingo. We started the battle then.”

A trim man with slightly stooped shoulders and a gravelly voice, Summerlin has lived in the same single-story white-brick house in Portland for 34 years. When I met him there in early January, he laid out a large map across his glass-topped dining table. With his finger, he traced the outline of Copano and Aransas bays to the north, where briny waters provide habitat to shrimp and oysters, redfish and black drum, roseate spoonbills and whooping cranes, and where billions of gallons of wastewater from the cracker will discharge. He pointed to an industrial corridor established in recent years on the north side of Corpus Christi Bay, where the flare from a natural-gas plant flickers incessantly. “That’s Cheniere. You’ve got Sherwin Alumina, you’ve got Oxychem, Flint Hills…” he said, ticking off various industrial sites. Across the water, a narrow shipping channel runs like a vein along Refinery Row, a corridor of round white storage tanks and towers that puff out columns of white and gray fumes.

When Summerlin learned that hundreds of acres of farmland would be turned into an entirely new industrial zone for the cracker plant, he was disturbed. “Industry has been inching itself closer and closer to Portland,” he explained. Plotted on a map, the rectangle of land where Exxon plans to build is nearly as large as Portland and about twice the size of neighboring Gregory, a low-income, largely Hispanic community. While county officials and members of local business groups boasted of some 600 permanent jobs promised by Exxon, Summerlin worried about air and water pollution from the plant. According to Exxon’s requested air permit, the facility will emit sulfur dioxide, volatile organic compounds, and nitrogen oxides, which can combine to form ozone smog; carcinogens, including benzene, formaldehyde, and butadiene; and other particulate matter. The health risks of these emissions include eye and throat irritation, respiratory problems, and headaches, as well as nose bleeds at low levels and, at high levels, more serious damage to vital organs and the central nervous system.

In late 2016, Summerlin and other concerned residents joined a newly formed group called Portland Citizens United, which sought initially to collect information about the proposed plant and later to try to stop the project, or at least convince Exxon to relocate to an area already given over to heavy industry. First they challenged the rezoning, which had been done in violation of open-meeting laws. That set the project back a few months. The Portland City Council unanimously adopted a resolution opposing the site, on the grounds that it was too close to public schools—but because the site lies just outside city limits in unincorporated San Patricio County, the resolution amounted to a toothless plea. Now, the Texas Campaign for the Environment and the Sierra Club, working on behalf of Portland and Gregory residents, are contesting the air-quality permits that Exxon requested from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. Summerlin is not naive about the prospects of this effort: The commission is notoriously friendly to industry and, as far as Summerlin knows, has never denied a permit—certainly not to Exxon, one of the largest employers in the state. Nevertheless,
Summerlin said, “I’m doing my best to slow the suckers down.”

We got into Summerlin’s car and drove through Portland’s sleepy neighborhoods, past the high school and middle school, then hooked a left on the straight, flat road that runs next to the site. Once planted with cotton and sorghum, the plot is a weedy brown rectangle two miles long and a mile wide, ringed by a tall wire fence and newly installed power lines. Summerlin drove slowly along the fence line, pointing to the outflow ditches where stormwater will be flushed out to the bays. In the fields stretching out to the north and east, a fleet of windmills stood at attention, arms spinning lazily. We passed a small pasture of Texas longhorns, which raised their heads to look at the car. Sandwiched between houses, with industrial smokestacks looming on the horizon, the cattle appeared lost. Further down the road, limp plastic bags dotted a fallow field of brown stalks like giant tufts of wet cotton.

As Summerlin learned more about the facility, he grew increasingly alarmed by its scale and started to feel like the community had been misled. In addition to the steam cracker, which will produce 1.8 million tons of ethylene every year, Exxon and SABIC are building three units to make polyethylene and monoethylene glycol—which can be turned into antifreeze, latex paints, and polyester for clothing—as well as a rail yard where plastic pellets will be loaded onto trains bound for ocean ports and then shipped to Asia and Latin America. The facility needs a new road to transport components to build the plant, as well as a cargo dock and marine terminal. “They’re all lauding this as a game changer—and it is, in a bad way,” Summerlin said. “It transforms the whole area.”

Such infrastructure is just a small part of what oil and gas companies have planned for the Gulf Coast. Across Texas in recent years, more than 8,000 miles of pipeline have been laid down to carry oil, gas, and natural-gas liquids (which include ethane) from the Permian Basin and the Eagle Ford Shale to the coast, where dozens of new petrochemical projects are in the works. Exxon alone is planning to spend some $20 billion over a decade on its “Growing the Gulf” venture, a suite of petrochemical projects that includes the cracker outside Portland; another cracker at the company’s chemicals complex in Baytown, near Houston; and an expansion of its plastics plant in nearby Beaumont. Other development is being driven by Congress’s lifting, in 2015, of 40-year-old restrictions on crude-oil exports. With oil and natural-gas production surging, companies are eager to get their products overseas. Recently, the Port of Corpus Christi put forward plans to build new terminals for massive oil tankers, which raised hackles in Port Aransas, a beach town close to the proposed site that depends on tourism and fishing, both of which could be disrupted by ships nearly the length of four football fields coming and going.

All of these new facilities will require water; Exxon’s cracker alone will consume 20 to 25 million gallons per day, more than all the water currently used each day in San Patricio County’s water district. But the area is prone to drought. The Port of Corpus Christi has plans to build a seawater-desalination plant on Harbor Island near Port Aransas, which could lead to discharges of extremely salty water back into the bays that serve as nurseries for shrimp and fish. The development is also vulnerable to hurricanes. When Hurricane Harvey swept across Houston in 2017, many chemical plants shut down, releasing an estimated 1 million pounds of excess toxic emissions that drifted into neighboring communities.

But with little resistance from regulators, companies are plowing ahead with new development. Recently, the Port of Corpus Christi purchased 3,000 acres to the west of Portland, which Summerlin expects will be leased for other petrochemical projects. “We know what’s going on,” he said, “but nobody’s telling us.” A recent planning document showing the port’s new tract of land listed code names for two new undisclosed proposals: Projects Falcon and Dynamo.

About 80 miles up the coast from Portland in Point Comfort, tiny translucent pellets the size of lentils burrow into the muck and weeds at the edge of a sluggish creek. Further out, the pellets mingle with aquatic plants, floating together in whorls like confetti. Oystermen and anglers working in bays nearby find them inside oyster shells and in the guts of fish.

Diane Wilson has been collecting these pellets for years. The “nurdles,” as they’re often called, have taken over her barn, which is stacked with bags of them, and 30 years of her life. A former commercial shrimper, Wilson is locked in a protracted battle against the source of the pellets: Formosa Plastics, a Taiwanese company that manufactures polypropylene, PVC, and other petrochemicals at a 2,500-acre complex along Cox Creek. In 1994, Wilson tried to sink her shrimp boat in a nearby bay to protest the chemical-laden wastewater discharges from the plant. Almost daily over the past four years, she and a handful of volunteers, some of them former Formosa employees, have gone out in kayaks and waders to collect evidence of the ongoing pollution. Although the US Environmental Protection Agency and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality have fined Formosa repeatedly for various air- and water-quality violations, the nurdles continue to wash into the creek. Wilson is currently suing Formosa, asking a federal judge to fine the company $173 million and order an end to the dumping.

In Louisiana’s St. James Parish, a majority-black community that spans the Mississippi River west of New Orleans, Formosa’s plans to build a $9.4 billion plastics complex have drawn outrage from residents already hemmed in by dozens of chemical facilities and refineries. Cotton,
sugar, and indigo plantations once lined the river; more recently, lifetime resident Sharon Lavigne remembers, her grandfather caught shrimp in the Mississippi River and picked figs and pecans from the trees in their yard. Now, St. James hosts more than a dozen industrial sites—part of a corridor stretching from Baton Rouge to New Orleans that is often referred to as “Cancer Alley.”

Formerly designated for agricultural uses, the land for Formosa’s new plant—which sits in a district that is more than 85 percent black—was redesignated as a “future industrial” zone in a planning document published in 2014, a decision that residents and environmental groups say was made with inadequate community input. A section of the planning document focused on the parish’s history quotes a 1950s-era historical account that describes the early 1800s in St. James as an “era of fabulous plantation life” and “luxurious living,” during which “acres were counted by thousands and slaves by hundreds.” Aside from demographic figures, that is the report’s sole mention of the area’s black communities. Anne Rolles, founding director of the environmental-justice group Louisiana Bucket Brigade, called the planned development in the area one of “the most disgusting racial situations I’ve ever seen.”

Like many St. James residents, Lavigne can list a number of friends and relatives who have died from cancer or been sickened by respiratory conditions. After she learned about Formosa’s plans to build yet another facility, Lavigne, a teacher who lives about a mile and a half from the proposed site, started a group called RISE St. James. At first, it consisted of 10 people meeting at her house. The group has since grown to a few dozen; they’ve held marches and shown up at public meetings to oppose Formosa’s new plant—which sits in a district that is more than 1,400 organizations, primarily led by environmentalists, environmental groups, and indigenous peoples. The Break Free From Plastic movement, a coalition of more than 1,400 organizations, is working to connect these various localized struggles, from communities in West Texas impacted by fracking to neighborhoods in the Philippines that are awash in plastic trash. Carroll Muffett of CIEL, which is a member of the coalition, said, “They realize they’re all fighting different aspects of the same industry and the same problem.”
plastic waste that gets into [the] environment.”

Plastics producers have responded to growing public pressure by offering some support for cleanup efforts. “We believe we have a role in fixing it,” said Steve Russell, vice president of plastics for the American Chemistry Council, which represents petrochemical companies, speaking of the plastic-waste crisis; he added that current funds for the industry’s Alliance for Plastic Waste are “a start point” and expects them to top $10 billion eventually. But many environmental advocates see these efforts as greenwashing. Marcus Eriksen of the 5 Gyres Institute said that many of the solutions put forward by the industry require costly technology that will take years—if not decades—to scale. “They’ve been very effective in making the public think that recycling is key, and that it’s the burden of the citizen, of the community, of the government to manage waste,” Eriksen continued. “Globalization is still going to send unrenewable materials to more remote parts of the world that can’t employ the solutions that industry proposes, because they’re expensive.”

Environmental groups like those in the Break Free From Plastic movement are increasingly calling for a prevention-focused strategy, in which companies stop making materials designed to be used only once and pay the full cost of collecting and recycling plastic products. NGOs, academics, even the corporate consulting group McKinsey have embraced the concept of a “circular” plastics economy, in which products flow through a closed loop rather than “leaking” out. The circular model depends on improving the economics and technology of recycling and on fundamentally redesigning materials to replace single-use plastics with biodegradable or recyclable alternatives. A true circular model also requires reducing and eventually eliminating the amount of plastics created from fossil fuels—by developing alternative feedstocks from renewable sources, and by supplanting virgin feedstocks with recycled content.

Running in the opposite direction are the major oil companies, who have placed big bets on their role as plastics producers. For oil giants like Exxon and Shell, plastics and other chemicals represent an increasingly significant source of profit—one that a circular-economy approach would threaten. “While increased recycling of plastics represents a gain in circular-economy terms, it is less good news for oil-resource-holding countries and oil companies, which will lose part of a source of future demand growth,” McKinsey analysts wrote recently. According to the International Energy Agency, “petrochemicals are rapidly becoming the largest driver of global oil consumption,” picking up the slack as efforts to curb emissions and increase efficiency limit other sources of demand. In 2015, while only 10 percent of Exxon’s revenue came from its chemicals division, chemicals accounted for more than a quarter of its profits.

As climate change forces a reckoning with fossil-fuel consumption, plastics offer another incentive to keep drilling. “Investing in chemicals is part of our strategy to thrive through the energy transition,” wrote Shell’s van’t Hoff. The billions invested in new petrochemical infrastructure and local markets for ethane could help keep shale drillers—many of whom have been bleeding money—afloat. (According to the US Energy Information Administration, the high content of ethane and other natural-gas liquids in “many shale plays has made it economical for operators to continue to aggressively develop…shale gas resources during periods of low natural gas prices.”) The boom in plastics “will perpetuate a fossil fuel economy that underpins both the climate crisis and the plastics crisis,” concludes a 2017 CIEL report, “while impacting frontline communities and the wider public at every stage of its toxic lifecycle.”

E arly one morning last September, a gas pipeline near Terrie Baumgardner’s home in western Pennsylvania exploded, turning the sky the color of dirty orange sherbet. Flames shot 150 feet into the air, destroying a house and sending several families scrambling to evacuate. Driving down the interstate days later, Baumgardner could make out a patch of scorched earth where the gas had burned itself out.

Two days later, officials in the nearby township of Independence voted to repeal a rule mandating that pipelines be built at least 100 feet away from homes and 500 feet from parks, schools, and hospitals. Eliminating the ordinance eased the way for the Falcon Pipeline, a 97-mile project that will carry ethane from the Marcellus Shale to a new cracker being built by Shell on the banks of the Ohio River in Beaver County. To Baumgardner, a retired college instructor and member of a local nonprofit called the Beaver County Marcellus Awareness Community, the elimination of the pipeline-setback rule was yet another example of state and local officials’ rush to accommodate Shell.

The cracker, slated to start operating in late 2021 or early 2022, will be the first to open outside the Gulf Coast in decades. But it’s just one of several projects underway in the Ohio River Valley as corporations, state officials, and members of the Trump administration look to transform the region into a brand-new petrochemical corridor. A Thai company has proposed a cracker farther down the Ohio River in Belmont County, Ohio, and the industry and its political allies want to build a massive storage hub to hold as much as 100 million barrels of ethane and other natural-gas liquids beneath West Virginia, and possibly Pennsylvania and Ohio as well. The US Department of Energy is considering a $1.9 billion loan for that project, which Energy Secretary Rick Perry has described as a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for this country.”

To many people in northern Appalachia, petrochemicals look like the answer to the economic problems created by the collapse of steel and coal. Shell has helped drive that narrative, commissioning a study that predicted the cracker would produce $15 to $19 billion in regional economic activity in southwestern Pennsylvania over four decades. Although some economists have disputed the methodology that produced this rosy projection—for instance, it assumes that every job created at the plant will lead to 13 others elsewhere, and omits the cost of a historic $1.65 billion tax break the state gave Shell—it was welcome news in Potter Township, where Shell is building its facility: 500 jobs there vanished when a zinc-smelting facility closed in 2014, leaving hundreds of acres contaminated with lead and arsenic. Shell promised to clean up the site and pledged hundreds of thousands of dollars for local historic-preservation projects.

But to others, including Baumgardner, whatever economic benefits the cracker provides are far outweighed by the risks of large-scale petrochemical development.
Shrinking the military-industrial complex by putting it to work at home.

Peter-Christian Aigner & Michael Brenes
F YOU NEEDED ANY FURTHER PROOF THAT MOST AMERICANS STAND WITH the left wing of the Democratic Party, consider the reaction to the Green New Deal. Despite the attacks on it by leading Democrats and Republicans, more than 80 percent of voters support the proposals in the House resolution: job and income guarantees, universal health care, a cleaner environment, and lower socioeconomic inequality. Americans turn out, yet again, to be far less conservative than the political elites.

Nowhere has the gap between majority will and political consensus been more conspicuous or long-standing than in US foreign policy. The election of Donald Trump—and his repudiation of multilateral institutions like NATO—is perhaps the best demonstration of that fact. But there is strong evidence that most Americans were never “liberal internationalists” intent on spreading democracy—often by force—to the rest of the world. While it’s notable that support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has waned, polls show that Americans have consistently preferred diplomacy to military “solutions,” both before and even shortly after the 9/11 attacks. Nonetheless, US soldiers and mercenaries are currently active in 80 countries—nearly half the planet.

This situation has prompted the left to call for a comprehensive foreign-policy alternative. But it remains unclear how exactly the left can make inroads against the “American empire,” as it is now casually described even on the right. Any talk of dramatically changing foreign policy must also include reforming the institutions that shape it. In part, this means creating organizations to compete with the “foreign-policy establishment,” or what Ben Rhodes, President Obama’s deputy national-security adviser, aptly dubbed “the Blob.” But the left might do well to resurrect another idea: converting the military-industrial complex to peacetime work.

Defense conversion is most closely associated with George McGovern, the South Dakota senator and 1972 Democratic nominee for president, who made it his signature issue in Congress. A recession in the mid-1950s and the military cuts following the Cuban missile crisis gave McGovern the opportunity to push the idea through the Senate, and in 1964 he called for a National Economic Conversion Commission (NECC) to oversee the task. McGovern wanted to free up hundreds of millions of federal dollars for domestic-welfare programs. But the Vietnam War killed that project, and even his fellow Democrats denounced him as a “radical.”

McGovern drew his ideas from Columbia University economist Seymour Melman, who devoted much of his research to defense conversion. In his most famous book, The Permanent War Economy (1974), Melman argued that the military economy was a form of “state capitalism,” whose “relentlessly predatory effects” had caused America’s economic decline. Melman combined an economist’s predilection for statistics with an activist’s zeal in denouncing what he called “Pentagon capitalism.” Americans, he insisted, had to eliminate unnecessary military spending if they wanted to prevent any future Vietnams.

Melman argued that a combination of community-based groups, alternative-use commit-
tees, and federal mandates (such as a revitalized NECC) could lead the country out of the permanent war economy. Melman—and later McGovern—thought that through comprehensive government planning, defense workers could be retrained and defense companies shifted to commercial manufacturing; that local communities would thrive if they were no longer exclusively dependent on the defense industry; and that federal investment in civilian work would provide unemployed defense workers with opportunities to address environmental problems like pollution and to contribute their labor to “peaceful uses.”

The military-industrial complex, Melman wrote, had robbed Americans of a manufacturing-based economy with stable wages for the working class. With labor concentrated in defense companies—which were notoriously unstable, given their dependency on the Department of Defense—the working class became tethered to an inefficient industry that served elite interests. Defense companies created products that did not raise the purchasing power of their workers and did not bring reinvestment back into the economy in the form of consumer goods, new jobs, or public infrastructure. The result was a “post-industrial economy” in which wealth was stratified and jobs were scarce. It was the inequality produced by the military-industrial complex that was the true tragedy of the Cold War, Melman argued, not just military adventurism and bloated defense budgets.

Even without Vietnam, however, the question of how Melman’s conversion plan would have addressed the military-industrial complex’s lobbying for increased defense spending remained unanswered. Melman’s solution was to “send representatives to Congress who would reflect a nonmilitarist orientation,” but even many liberal Democrats were consistently opposed to military cuts in their districts, as they would be in later decades. The problem of the profit motive for defense contractors, and how those profits insidiously influenced elections and politicians, plagued would-be reformers of the military-industrial complex.

The solution was left to Harvard’s John Kenneth Galbraith, who introduced a grander vision of defense conversion in 1969, when he proposed nationalizing the defense industry. Galbraith’s argument was straightforward: Arms manufacturers depended on Congress to fund their research-and-development programs. Privately made weapons also routinely underperformed and cost far more than estimated. By converting these already highly concentrated and essentially public firms into governmental nonprofits, Galbraith believed voters could “substantially civilize the incentive structure.”

Obviously, nationalizing arms production would not immediately eliminate the military-industrial complex. Like President Dwight D. Eisenhower had earlier, Galbraith understood
that these private “merchants of war” were every bit as invested in the system as the generals, the CIA directors, and the national politicians, from members of Congress to the president. All pushed for greater internationalism; all saw their powers and budgets grow enormously as a result. The only real way to shrink the military-industrial complex would be to sever the connections between for-profit businesses and the security state. Galbraith argued that nationalization was thus a necessary first step before any systematic plan for conversion might be implemented.

Galbraith expected his proposal to gain some traction. (Liberals, he said, were finally beginning to show “a certain minimum of courage” about the Pentagon.) Instead… nothing. Conservatives cried socialism. Moderates disapproved. The only real way to shrink the military-industrial complex was to sever the connections between private business and the state. Galbraith argued that the defense industry was thus a necessary first step before any systematic plan for conversion—both from defense workers and the defense industry itself.

Galbraith’s (and Melman’s) biggest supporters in the 1970s were labor unions. Despite the AFL-CIO’s support for the Vietnam War and its deep involvement with Cold War foreign policy, union leaders such as the United Auto Workers’ Walter Reuther and the International Machinists’ William Winpisinger backed the idea of conversion to a civilian economy. More than 1,000 labor activists even sponsored a “Labor for Peace” forum in 1972 demanding an end to America’s war in Vietnam and an effort “to turn our country from the path of killing and destruction to the path of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness through peace, dignity, and full employment.”

But little changed throughout the 1970s. Even as Democrats became the more dovish party, few championed conversion. Meanwhile, the defense industry mirrored larger economic trends: declines in manufacturing, cuts in wages, and a shift to white-collar labor. Many defense jobs, with their good pay and benefits, disappeared—to much local anger. Nationally, however, support for more “Vietnam-type interventions” remained low, despite a loud chorus of bipartisan elites advocating incursions in Africa and Latin America in the late 1970s and ‘80s.

Reagan’s election in 1980 and his subsequent military buildup postponed defense conversion indefinitely. New York Democratic Representative Ted Weiss—who, like McGovern, was a Melman disciple—consistently proposed conversion legislation once he took office in 1977. Democratic House majority leader (and later speaker) Jim Wright remained committed to Weiss’s legislation for much of his tenure; but some combination of Reagan, congressional Republicans, and the Department of Defense would work together to kill Weiss and Wright’s bills through the early ‘90s.

The unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union put conversion back on the table. In the early 1990s, a series of grassroots campaigns with names like the Arizona Council for Economic Conversion and the Coalition to Stop the Trident pushed for alternative sources of revenue for military firms. Faced with these pressures, 1992 presidential candidate Bill Clinton—who had started his political career working for McGovern—expressed an interest in cutting defense spending to invest in transportation infrastructure, including “a high-speed rail network.” Yet again, however, liberals and conservatives alike voted to keep the military-industrial complex going, even though the United States had become the world’s uncontested superpower. This remains the case today, as the military-industrial complex keeps growing exponentially.

Nonetheless, there are potential countervailing forces. Direct job-creation programs have always been popular, despite opposition from Republican and Democratic leaders. In polls, the idea of establishing a government-funded option for unprofitable but economically productive and socially valuable work consistently wins huge majorities. Herein lies an opportunity for proponents of the Green New Deal to regulate military contractors and finance job growth by converting the military-industrial complex to peaceful ends.

Galbraith’s idea of nationalizing the defense industry offers a practical means for curbing the enormous pressure that military spending exerts on elections. Because they belong to a private industry and are free to lobby, Pentagon contractors reinforce the bipartisan echo chamber. They hire ex-military brass and pundits without diplomatic or scholarly backgrounds to dominate the media conversation, and they fund the think tanks on which Democratic and Republican presidents rely. The military-industrial complex is not just a product of the “foreign-policy establishment”; it protects and strengthens that establishment. It has served as an enormous barrel of pork for elected officials, well-heeled donors, and (more understandably) American workers—so much so that private contractors now reap almost 50 percent of the military budget. Any effort to reform this “industry,” to figure out how it can be a servant, not the master, of the public interest, is crucial. And conversion—via nationalization—remains the best way forward.

Letters poured in reporting enormous waste—from defense industry workers themselves.

John Kenneth Galbraith, one of the most famous economists of the 20th century, argued that the defense industry should be nationalized.

Peter-Christian Aigner is the deputy director of the Gotham Center at the City University of New York. Michael Brenes, a historian and the senior archivist for American diplomacy at Yale University, is currently finishing a book on the military-industrial complex in American politics.
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The Price of Austerity in England
Savage cuts in social services have put county councils in crisis.

by SASHA ABRAMSKY

KEV STANDISHDAY IS A PERSONABLE, MIDDLE-AGED SOCIAL WORKER in the British county of Northamptonshire, a 90-minute drive northwest of London. He dresses casually, his face dominated by a striking white pointed goatee. While Standishday’s specialty is counseling troubled families, these days he works for the public-sector union UNISON, commuting by car to a two-story brick office building from the picturesque village of Little Harrowden, where he lives with his wife and five kids.

There is no secondary school in Little Harrowden, so Kev’s daughter has to take a bus each morning to the nearby town of Kettering. The county ended up in such a mess in the austerity years following the 2008 financial crisis that it had to file for bankruptcy in 2018; as a result, those bus trips are no longer subsidized. So now the Standishdays have to pay £700 a year (nearly $1,000) for the privilege of sending their child to school. The cost hurts.

As a social worker in a cash-strapped county, Kev saw his pay essentially frozen for several years. In a feckless attempt to balance its books, Northamptonshire took thousands of county employees out of national pay-and-conditions contracts, imposing wage freezes, unpaid furloughs, and other cost-saving changes. But that presented new challenges. “We can’t recruit and retain staff,” Kev says, “because conditions are so poor.”

Since 2010, UNISON estimates, the cost of living has increased by 27.6 percent. During that time, however, county employees received only 5.5 percent in wage increases, translating into a huge decline in living standards for workers who weren’t paid much to begin with. Kev says a teaching assistant in the county these days tops out at about £14,000 ($18,000) per year. As a result, there’s been a brain drain, with qualified people moving to higher-wage locales.

Unlike the United States, Britain doesn’t have a constitutionally delineated federal system that delegates powerful legislative, taxing, and regulatory powers to local authorities. Instead, it depends on a largely informal division of duties.

“British local government is a hodgepodge of centuries’ worth of development,” explains Ashley Walsh, head of policy and research for the non-partisan High Pay Centre. While Parliament funds the National Health Service and the education system, other services—such as those for the mentally ill, as well as programs for foster children, drug-treatment centers, and local transport and road maintenance—fall on the counties or, in the larger urban areas, on city councils. The cities tend to be controlled by the Labour Party; most of the counties are Conservative.

Unlike American states, British counties cannot impose their own income or sales tax. Instead, they rely on what is called a council tax, which is levied on properties. Depending on the value, property owners fall within one of eight bands. The money raised from this tax, however, has never been sufficient to fully fund council services; as a result, these tiers of government are largely reliant on Parliament’s largesse.

In 2010, British Prime Minister David Cameron came to power as the head of a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition. It was two years after the global financial crisis had erupted, and the outgoing Labour government—which had spent heavily to shore up social services before 2008, and even more aggressively to protect the banking system during the crisis—was being widely criticized for ballooning the national deficit. As a result, Cameron’s government committed itself to a harsh austerity program.

“It’s been a period in which government has cut its costs to meet its new realities post–financial crisis,” says Matthew Whittaker of the Resolution Foundation, a London-based think tank focused on policy issues affecting low- and middle-income people. Government spending per person as a share of GDP, he adds, has “been on a downward trajectory for much of the last decade.” From 2009–10 to today, the foundation estimates, spending on day-to-day public services has fallen by 9 percent. As a percentage of GDP, such government spending has fallen by 23 percent, from a high in the year immediately after the crisis of 22 percent. In October of last year, Resolution issued a report predicting that even with the recent mild easing of austerity, by 2022 that number would decline to 14 percent.

Despite widespread complaints about the underfunding of the National Health Service, over the past few years government spending on the NHS has actually risen by billions of pounds annually. Thus, to achieve its desired rollback in state spending, the Tory government went after a huge array of “discretionary” programs, eviscerating the welfare system. Resolution estimates that since 2010, per-person spending on housing and communities has decreased by 35 percent, and spending on transport by a whopping 77 percent. Rubbing salt into the wound, the grants given to local governments cratered by roughly 60 percent, meaning that counties also had no choice but to cut services, too.

In response, some counties got creative and started to invest in local shopping malls, office complexes, and other real-estate ventures, looking to partner with international investors in regional-development schemes. Others pushed through incre-
mental increases in their council taxes. But all had to implement punishing cuts.

Northamptonshire's strategy was centered on a project called Next Generation, which aimed to outsource virtually all government services, essentially turning thousands of county employees into insecure contract workers for private companies. But there was no functioning oversight of the contracts signed with companies, resulting in vastly inflated costs for the provision of vastly inferior services.

Northamptonshire became, says social worker and local UNISON official Alvarez "Wilky" Wilkinson, "an Easy Jet council" (a reference to the low-cost airline that provides basic services but charges for everything else), where everything was contracted out for short-term gain.

Making a bad fiscal situation worse, the council also embraced a vanity project, spending a startling £53 million on an entirely unnecessary new glass-fronted county hall.

The negative consequences of this fiscal mismanagement spiraled. To take just one example: One young man in the county was eligible for welfare benefits, but to get them he had to fill out paperwork at the job center in the town of Peterborough. However, the regular bus service for his village had been cut and replaced by a "dial-up bus," forcing applicants to phone the company to be picked up. This new service was available on a first-come, first-served basis; when the man couldn't get a bus ride into town, he lost access to his benefits.

Then there were the food banks, which saw a staggering increase in usage, from 41,000 at the onset of the austerity budgets to 1.2 million in 2016–17, as impoverished residents found their benefits cut off. There was also a spike in gang activity in poor towns and neighborhoods—a problem that Wilky, who works with at-risk youth, attributed to the shuttering of so many youth programs. "In the past fortnight, we've had two stabbings in Northampton—one a murder. That's not normal times," he tells me. Eight people have been arrested, five of whom are teens.

Linda McFarlane, a local resident with an array of physical and mental-health challenges, lost her social-services grant because the county increased her co-pay and she couldn't afford the higher rate. With her support system no longer in place, she let her apartment slide into disrepair and, on her 40th birthday, was evicted. McFarlane ended up homeless and living in a tent in the woods. Finally, caseworkers from a local shelter-cum-assisted-living facility rescued her. "To get that first shower after four weeks of being on the streets was heaven," McFarlane recalls. "Clean clothes... They gave me a coat." Yet the homeless shelter itself has not been immune to county cuts. Its security grant has been reduced, and its outreach services now have to raise money from private sources.

Wherever one looks in Northamptonshire, county services have hit the skids. Virtually all discretionary services (those not required under law) have been eliminated. Transport subsidies, eviscerated. Library services, slashed—the beautiful Victorian-era library in the center of Northampton, for example, stopped buying new books, fired most of its staff, and eliminated its public toilet. Grants to the arts, slashed. Support programs for teenage parents, redlined out of budgets. Elder-care systems, largely destroyed. Early-warning monitoring systems for at-risk children and assistance programs for domestic-violence victims, left to languish. Home-aid services to the disabled, massively reduced. Grants to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, imperiled. And so on.

All told, somewhere between £300 and £400 million in cuts were implemented in Northamptonshire after 2010. "The resources are no longer there," says Paul Crofts, a campaigner with the group Save Northants Services. "They’ve been chopped. Young people become collateral damage in these austerity cuts."

A half-hour’s drive west of Northampton, in the village of Daventry, a severely disabled man, John Smith, reports that he now has to wait longer for everything, from the installation of a new shower chair to increases to his disability grant that would allow him to pay his home help the legal hourly rate. Smith, 53, is a disability-rights advocate with Disabled People Against the Cuts (DPAC). On the frame of his wheelchair is a sticker: "Your cuts kill."

"We’ve had cuts in social-care support," he says, sitting in his living room with his two black cats, Nessa and Elfie, curled on cushions nearby. Whereas, in the past, the goal was to maximize disabled residents’ independence, in the wake of the cuts “people exist on minimal support now—help to get up in the morning, if they’re lucky; to wash; to go to bed.” What’s no longer in the mix, he says, is a concerted effort to keep the disabled from falling into profound social isolation.

The number of hours the county council paid for his home help was slashed, and the day-care centers in which disabled people could socialize have been shuttered. Smith says he has friends who couldn’t get timely help in the evenings and ended up sleeping in their wheelchairs; others who need assistance getting up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom have been told they no longer qualify for 24/7 care and should use adult diapers.

Many of the services that the county councils fund are vital for marginalized communities, but they largely go unnoticed by the broader public. As a result, during times of austerity, Conservative-controlled counties have managed to slash these services without taking a political hit from the more affluent majority of their electorate. Such is the case in Northamptonshire, where poor residents have seen unprecedented cuts—yet the Conservatives were re-elected two years ago, boasting in their manifesto that they had kept the council tax lower than anywhere else in the country.

This has also been the case
with several other counties, including Cambridgeshire and Somerset, which, while not in bankruptcy, have also experienced extraordinary fiscal uncertainty over the past five years. In July 2018, says journalist Daniel Mumby, who covers county finances as part of the Local Democracy Reporting Service, an internal audit found that Somerset was likely to head into bankruptcy by 2021. In response, everything from road-gritting in the winter to children’s and elder-care services were reduced.

In Somerset, as in Northamptonshire, the electorate’s affluent majority has remained solidly Tory. In fact, says Paul Crofts, before 2017, “Northamptonshire Tories actually boasted they were a pioneering authority. I think they were given a green light. It was a neoliberal project.”

By the end of 2017, however, the financial hole was too large to ignore. Northamptonshire became the first British county in two decades to go bankrupt, filing what is called Section 114 paperwork.

Suddenly, everyone disavowed the council. The central government sent in highly paid auditors who wrote up scathing reports and recommended creating two new “unitary councils” to merge district and county responsibilities; doing so, it was hoped, would dilute the county’s incompetence. The local members of Parliament, all hard-line Conservatives, were stinging in their criticism of the council. Next Generation was shelved.

The council leaders were ousted in an internal party coup after some 20 Tory councilors wrote a public letter urging their removal. According to Victoria Perry, one of the rebels: “No one really understood what [Next Generation] was, except a massive outsourcing project, which cost us £60 million and achieved nothing.” In the wake of the rebellion, a new leader, Matt Golby, was elected to steward a more sustainable budget. “The leadership was changed, and we move on,” Perry says, perhaps a touch optimistically.

Most humiliating of all, at least for the council leaders, Northamptonshire was forced to sell off its new county hall—and then lease it back on a 35-year-contract. The cash that the council raised by doing so would in normal times have had to be reinvested in capital projects; instead, the central government, in a special waiver, allowed the council to use it to temporarily plug its budget holes. And finally, after years of refusing to raise the council tax incrementally, the Tory-dominated body was forced to introduce a 5 percent increase all in a rush—thus further cash-strapping residents already suffering from pay freezes and service cuts. For Labour councilmember Danielle Stone, this all but guarantees “the impoverishment of our families and communities.”

Recently, Northamptonshire has managed to stabilize its financial condition. But it has done so by accepting as a new normal the appallingly low level of services ushered in over the past nine years. At the end of February, the anti-tax Tory council passed a budget for the upcoming fiscal year. It had managed to balance the books, but over outraged protests from the Labour and Liberal Democrat councilors, it did so without including a pay raise for the thousands of county staff members who have seen their paychecks erode so hugely.

Nor did it restore most of the cut services.

Stone stood up in the council chambers to argue that “on every single well-being indicator, our county is failing,” with declining educational achievements and growing levels of hunger and homelessness. She also challenged her Tory colleagues on their decision not to grant pay increases: “You’re joking, aren’t you, if you say we can’t afford it? We can’t not afford it. What really gets me is the unfairness of what’s going on.”

For Esther Gallen, who lives with her 7-year-old twin daughters in the small village of Hartwell—the only place where she can afford the rent—and commutes to her job at a drug-treatment center in Northampton, this means ongoing insecurity about her bus route to work. Her village is connected by a subsidized bus that goes from the town of Milton Keynes, in the south, through Hartwell to Northampton.

Gallen—with her two daughters, dressed as wizards, in tow—went to the council’s budget meeting along with a few other protesters. “Our route has been spared temporarily, compared to some that have been cut entirely,” she said, explaining how, after she and some neighbors launched a save-our-buses campaign, Milton Keynes’s district council ponied up the cash, while Northamptonshire balked. But she knows that the £27,000 operating subsidy could easily disappear. And if it does, she will be isolated in Hartwell.

In the mid-17th century, a local chapter of the Diggers, an early communist organization that campaigned for redress for the poor, set up shop in the county, holding a series of meetings in Bareshanks field, outside Northampton. The nine founding members of the chapter signed a declaration denouncing those who “withhold the Corn (or the Land) from the poor, which the people shall curse.” Not long after, the local justice of the peace shut the chapter down. Almost 370 years later, antipoverty activists are once again decrying the actions of local leaders.

“We had to turn away 150 families last year because we didn’t have any spaces.”

—Ann Bodsworth, Domestic Violence Services/Women’s Aid

Hard times: The People’s Assembly, an anti-austerity group, set up a food bank opposite Downing Street, London, November 2017.

Sasha Abramsky’s latest book is Jumping at Shadows: The Triumph of Fear and the End of the American Dream.
Pennsylvania has a long history of damage related to extractive industries, from the Donora smog of 1948, when a poisonous air inversion killed 20 people and sent some 6,000 others to the hospital, to the fragmented disasters of fracking: toxic-waste ponds, ruined property values, lingering illnesses. “This area of the Ohio River Valley, and other areas that have had a lot of experience with resource extraction, they follow this boom-bust cycle. When you’re in a bust phase and you lose jobs, there’s a lot of momentum: ‘Well, we need to attract industry to bring these jobs back,’” said Jennifer Baka, an energy geographer at Penn State. “We can’t think outside of the box and think about what an alternative-energy future might be, because we’re so familiar and accustomed to the existing fossil-fuel economy.”

Southwestern Pennsylvania suffers from some of the poorest air quality in the nation, according to Matthew Mehalik, the executive director of the Breathe Project, which works on air-pollution issues. “If you consider that backdrop—that we already have a serious air-quality problem—the potential to add more burden to our airshed will only make things worse,” he added. One estimate puts the health-care impacts over a 30-year period from the Shell plant and two other crackers proposed in the region at $616 million to $1.4 billion in Beaver County alone, and up to $8.1 billion nationally.

Critics of the projects also argue that regulators and communities are unprepared for the scale of development that is now underway. Lisa Graves-Marcucci, the Pennsylvania coordinator for the Environmental Integrity Project, is particularly worried about what she describes as “piecemeal, egg-slicer” permitting, in which projects like Shell’s cracker are isolated in obscurity, obscuring the web of industrial infrastructure—drilling sites, compressor stations, storage hubs, pipelines—that goes along with them. Even some people in the industry have suggested that communities might not be fully aware of what’s coming. “I think the magnitude of some of these projects that we’re talking about here is hard for a lot of us and a lot of our communities to wrap their heads around,” said Chad Riley, the CEO of the Thrasher Group, an engineering firm with projects in oil and gas fields, speaking at an industry conference in 2018 that was attended by reporter Sharon Kelly.

Ultimately, the fate of a facility that will affect the whole region was largely decided by three supervisors in tiny Potter Township, population 496. “Decisions have been made at higher levels of government, or sometimes in these small communities...that will forever change our region,” Graves-Marcucci said. “Does that mean we’ve signed over our entire future to this constant need to drill more and frack more? Are we stuck on this treadmill of plastics?”

Pennsylvania’s northeastern neighbor has taken a different approach. New York banned fracking in 2014 and, a year later, unveiled a clean-energy initiative that established some of the most aggressive energy-transition goals in the country. In 2018, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced a $1.5 billion investment in renewables projects across the state, with a goal of creating 40,000 clean-energy jobs by 2020.

For a long time, Terrie Baumgardner didn’t think much about what would come out of Shell’s ethane cracker. Early on, she heard that the plant would produce plastic pellets, perhaps to fill stuffed animals. “But I don’t think we realized at that point what a hazard plastic was for us and for the planet,” she said. “It’s only lately become a ‘for what?’ question—why are we doing this?” She continued: “Our leaders said, ‘Here comes an industry and it can get people jobs.’ And it was a backward-looking industry, but they didn’t see it that way.”

(continued from page 17)
In June 2004, Agustín Fernández Mallo was struck by a motorbike while crossing the street in Thailand. Instructed to stay in bed for the remainder of his vacation, he spent the next 25 days in his hotel, popping pain medication, watching TV, and reading.

A physicist who worked at a hospital on the Spanish island of Majorca, Mallo was a poet and critic in his spare time, and he saw his confinement as a chance to begin a new project. His writing, which had a small cult following, tended to be academic and otherworldly. A typical Mallo poem might juxtapose excerpts of a scholarly paper on neutrinos with lyrics from a Smiths song or musings on film theory. Over the course of several weeks, as he scribbled notes on napkins, receipts, and anything else within reach, something new began to take shape. By the time he returned to Majorca, he realized he was at work on a novel. He named it Nocilla Dream, after Spain’s knock-off version of Nutella.

Nocilla Dream was completed in just three months, and the final version reflected its haphazard creation. According to a coda at the end of the book, Mallo was influenced by a handful of disparate sources: a New York Times article about a desolate stretch of highway in Nevada; a sugar packet in a Chinese...
restaurant that contained a verse by Yeats (“All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born”), and a chance hearing of the 1982 song “Nocilla, ¡Qué Merendilla!” (“Nocilla, What a Snack!”) by the Spanish punk band Siniestro Total. An assemblage of short texts, 113 in all, the novel includes a mix of found material and original fiction. There are quotes from physicists and philosophers, descriptions of distant cities, excerpts from scientific papers, and observations about nationhood and the Internet. Reading Nocilla Dream, many critics have noted, often feels like channel surfing.

Most of the entries are between a paragraph and two pages in length; the shortest is only a sentence: “The following day, Peter threw his art books in the fire, and the day after that, he left.” Mallo opens the novel on US Route 50, the so-called “loneliest road in America,” which spans the Nevada desert between Carson City and Ely and is bracketed by “a whorehouse at each end.” Somewhere along the highway is a lonely cottonwood tree covered in discarded shoes, which locals claim as “proof that something happened here.” These melancholy details, lifted from the Times article, provide the initial outline of the novel. Mallo then fills in the blanks, often with a cast of recurring characters, including a hitchhiking ex-boxer from San Francisco, a prostitute who falls in love with a client, and a young boy catfishing a woman in China.

Along with his fictional protagonists, Mallo includes real people. In one section, we are dropped into the former Madrid apartment of the American surrealist painter Margaret Marley Modlin, who spent her final years as a shut-in. In another, an elderly Francisco, a prostitute who falls in love with the soundness of scientific principles, it also held to the belief that the universe itself is fundamentally unpredictable.

The inspiration for Nocilla Dream grew out of Mallo’s notion of “postpoetry,” a term that he coined in 2000 and elaborated on in his insightful introductory essay, Bunstead draws a parallel between the trilogy’s fractured chaos and its huge, almost yearning emphasis on order and the wider Spanish experience of this period, which saw the country struggling to define itself in the absence of Franco.

In 2007, shortly after the publication of Nocilla Dream, Mallo and a group of about 40 other Spanish writers—including Eloy Fernández Porta, Vicente Luis Mora, Gernán Sierra, and Jorge Carrión—gathered in Seville for a conference on the impoverished state of Spain’s literature. Most of them had grown up during La Movida, and the energy and originality of their work had not yet infiltrated Spain’s conservative literary culture. But Mallo’s success was starting to have an effect, and the Spanish press paid attention: Covering the conference, it anointed the Seville writers as the beginning of a new literary movement. They were members of a new generation of writers—the “Nocilla generation”—that wanted to deprovincialize the Spanish novel for the 21st century, and they planned to do so by bringing into their fiction high and low culture, technology, and formal experimentation. Moreover, they were committed to “a new style of narration: fragmentary.” All of the Nocilla writers rejected the label, but it stuck nonetheless.

Reading about this moment, I was re-
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minded of Natasha Wimmer’s introduction to The Savage Detectives, in which she describes a young Roberto Bolaño leaping onto a table in a Mexico City bookstore in 1976 and announcing the birth of the movement that would eventually displace the Latin American “Boom” writers. While the publication of Nocilla Dream was a similar instance of gauntlet-throwing—Spanish-language cultural historians have long thrived on identifying and amplifying generational breaks—Mallo and his peers were also returning to the radical ideas of the past century, borrowing from Dadaism, Situationism, and American postmodernism to better frame their present. The result was a blend of historical avant-gardism and contemporary innovation. As the Nocilla writers drew from pop culture and the Internet, developments in the arts and the social sciences, they were also working to recover and help preserve a once-censored past.

By the time the second installment of his trilogy, Nocilla Experience, was published in 2008, Mallo was well-known in Spain. He had also gained a number of detractors, who accused of him of trying to depoliticize literature, of passively accepting a late-capitalist worldview, and of prizing showmanship and experimentation over literary quality. Some of these criticisms Mallo had anticipated. In Nocilla Dream, he includes several fictional reviews of the novel itself: “The emptiest and most pretentious pedantry reaches its zenith,” one critic complains of the book.

Nocilla Experience was unlikely to convert anyone who felt strongly about its predecessor, but it is a richer and more satisfying encounter with the ideas that Mallo was testing out in Nocilla Dream. Our cast this time includes a barnacle collector in Spain, a doctor in the Russian city of Ulan Erge, a widowed bouncer at a strip club, an American soldier who falls in love with an Iraqi woman in Basra, and a man who mourns his divorce by running across the United States. Glimpses into these lives are punctuated by excerpts of interviews with musicians and a recurring quote from Apocalypse Now, which grows a few sentences longer each time it appears.

Like its predecessor, Nocilla Experience is a global novel. Insofar as it is set anywhere, the action mostly happens in the Nevada desert and on the Russian steppes—open, empty spaces seemingly devoid of life or detail. In Nocilla Dream, Mallo invokes anthropologist Marc Augé’s idea of the “non-place”—locations, such as hotels and airports, designed for function over enjoyment—and challenges the notion that such sites are uninteresting. In Nocilla Experience, these non-places come into focus. We see the Singapore airport through the domestic patterns of a man living in it; elsewhere, a tree transforms a nondescript highway in Nevada into a place of curiosity. In the former Soviet Union, children trudge through miles of empty oil pipes, and a destitute town insulates its buildings by covering them with old white sheets. In their beauty and their desolation, Mallo’s postindustrial landscapes evoke filmmaker Jia Zhangke’s hallucinatory visions of contemporary China, in which modernity stands toe-to-toe with the future.

Offsetting these bleak geographies, however, are quietly funny moments of speculative fiction. Steve, the “cook, manager, ideologue, and overall ruler at Steve’s Restaurant on Orange Street in Brooklyn,” has achieved the status of a celebrity chef by repurposing found objects. Customers wait months to experience his conceptual meals.

The dishes most frequently served, depending on Steve’s mood, are: forfeit Polaroids of the customers taken through a hole in the kitchen wall, then fried in egg batter; as the batter is parted, the photos, and the people’s transformed faces, are revealed.... Then you have Paperback in Syrup: a pocket book served, curled around inside a jar, in syrup; the sugars adhere to the ink, making crystal formations on the letters. And finally, Carpaceo of Work of Literature in Pepper Marinade, which work depending on what Steve has found at the secondhand market: [1] On the Road by someone called Kerouac, [2] The U.S. Constitution, [3] Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes.

Mallo’s interest in garbage would become the basis of another philosophical essay, “A General Theory of Trash,” which was published in Spain last year, but in Nocilla Experience, it indicates his growing comfort with his sui generis form. As the novel progresses, the stories within it become intertwined. The Apocalypse Now quote ends up in the mouth of a smuggler from Cancún, and characters from one story appear at the periphery of another. Julio Cortázar, the great Argentine novelist, wanders around the novel telling people about his own work of speculative fiction, Hopscotch. There are newspaper clippings that begin to intersect with Wikipedia entries about paranormal phenomena. At times, readers may feel as if they’re standing before a “crazy wall” (that time-tested means for catching serial killers) just when everything begins to add up—even if the point is that nothing does. Yet Mallo’s achievement is to make readers care not just about characters, but also the larger networks in which they’re entangled.

In an interview with 3:AM Magazine, Mallo described his fiction as “complex realism,” an approach that discards the conventional understanding of literary realism and that focuses on the powers of subjectivity and the making of a subject. “Until a short time ago,” he noted, “we knew the world in parts, whereas now we know that those parts are all connected through a system of networks with a very concrete topology.” The ambition of Nocilla Dream and Nocilla Experience is to capture how we might gather and organize information in a world in which our very subjectivity is the result of structures outside our control. But as we make our way through the first two Nocilla novels, something else becomes clear: Mallo’s networks are not distributed, as he suggests, but rather centralized around an invisible author.

Nocilla Lab, the final installment of the trilogy, seems to bring Mallo himself closer to the novel’s surface. It begins with a single-sentence monologue by a man at a combination bar and pizzeria on an island near Sardinia, who is rambling about science and travel and recalling his life: Madrid in the ’70s, a motorcycle accident in Thailand, discovering a copy of Paul Auster’s The Music of Chance in a hotel room in Las Vegas. Mallo, in short, is taunting us to take this fictional version of himself literally, and to look for clues where none may exist.

One has to be very careful about the objects one places inside a text because they affect the story like magnetic poles, they attract the plot, become potential focal points for our attention, and the same happens in life, like for example, when you go to a country and a tree branch reminds you of another tree branch in some far-off place, or when you look in detail at the skin pores of a Sudanese person going past you on a bus and they seem identical to the skin pores of an Inuit person who passed you the salt in a spaghetti joint in San Francisco once....

In chaos theory, such “strange attractors” affect how future events might play out by influencing the state of a system. In
the context of fiction, they have a different effect—rather than heightening a sense of randomness, they call into focus the hand behind it. Far from being dead, the author is impossible to escape.

After the monologist finally falls silent, we next encounter him and his girlfriend on an extended trip through Sardinia. Suddenly, the text begins to resemble a journal, switching into first-person narration. They spend a month at a campsite and make meals with a cookbook from Steve’s Restaurant. They drive through the countryside and eventually end up back where they started, checking into a remote eco-lodge on the site of a former prison. There are shades of *Psycho* and *Solaris* here as the narrator realizes that the proprietor has the same name as his and is working on the same book. Gradually, the seams of reality begin to tear: The narrator becomes hermetic and obsessive, fixated on his situation. After his girlfriend leaves, he spends days watching TV in search of clues to whatever is happening to him. Finally, an altercation ensues. The text gives way to images: photos of a TV screen, a fever dream of a comic strip. The unreliable narrator dissolves into unstable narrative, and then the book is over.

After having acclimated his readers to channel surfing, Mallo ends his trilogy by flipping the script and forcing us to face the man holding the remote. Unlike its predecessors, the final installment of the trilogy is more biographical and centered on human agency; it’s about Mallo, or a version of him, and more explicitly engaged with literary creation. By making himself a character, Mallo gives readers another way to connect with the *Nocilla* universe and allows us to see it as not entirely random, but also a product of his own design.

At the same time, the novel remains restless. Fragments overwhelm systems, even if we can now see the three books of the trilogy more plainly as human creations. Mallo also seems ready to end his experiment; after building a world of complex realism, he now invites us to watch him take it apart.

In keeping with the spirit of the books, one is tempted to wonder what might have happened to the *Nocilla* trilogy if things had worked out just a little differently. What if Mallo hadn’t gotten into that accident in Thailand, or come across that article about Route 50? Without the Seville conference, would Spain’s literary culture look as it does today? Obviously, it’s impossible to know—but then, that’s partly the point of the novels.

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**The Parachutist**

I was smoking a cigarette in the backyard after a long day at work, when a man in a parachute fell from the sky, right into the lilac bushes. I tossed the cigarette and ran up to him. “Are you okay?” I said. “I’m fine, just happy to get away from the enemy,” he said. “The enemy? What enemy?” I said. “The enemy otherwise known as the mundane,” he said. “That’s peculiar,” I said. “Be that as it may, the mundane has waged merciless war on me and millions of my fellow Americans for years,” he said. “Would you like some water or lemonade? You’ve been through a lot,” I said. “No, but do you happen to have a helicopter? I’d like to make another jump,” he said. “Another random jump to nowhere? What good will that do?” I said. “It will do a lot of good. So much good, that I will no longer feel absolute pain,” he said. “Surely there are other ways to deal with pain,” I said. “Do you have some whiskey and cola?” the man said. “I’ve got a bottle or two,” I said. “New plan,” he said, “we drink the whiskey and cola and play darts on that maple tree.” “Great idea!” I said, rushing for the drinks. I was beginning to understand his war against the mundane.

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JOSE HERNANDEZ DIAZ
Why Wendell Willkie, and why now? At first glance, the failed 1940 Republican presidential aspirant, corporate lawyer, and advocate of “one world” appears to have left only a glancing trace on the 20th century. Conventional wisdom sees him as an accessory to history, a courageous also-ran, and a fortuitous ally for his 1940 Democratic opponent, then-two-term president Franklin Roosevelt. Willkie is praised as a poignant reminder of a long-lost liberal Republicanism, a great bipartisan spirit who helped banish the party’s so-called “isolationism.”

Walter Lippmann, the ultimate keeper of conventional wisdom, first floated it back in 1944, just after Willkie’s untimely death: “Under any other leadership but his, the Republican party would have turned its back on Great Britain, causing all who still resisted Hitler to feel that they were abandoned.” Willkie had served his purpose, the story went, helping the Allies to defeat fascism and doing his bit to propel the indispensable nation to its rightful role as leader of the free world, and then left the scene. From there, the postwar consensus was all but a fait accompli.

This take, cribbed from the “team of rivals” school of political history, arrives pre-packaged with a built-in appeal, a familiar story of national sacrifice for the “good war.”

Walter Lippmann, the ultimate keeper of conventional wisdom, first floated it back in 1944, just after Willkie’s untimely death: “Under any other leadership but his, the Republican party would have turned its back on Great Britain, causing all who still resisted Hitler to feel that they were abandoned.” Willkie had served his purpose, the story went, helping the Allies to defeat fascism and doing his bit to propel the indispensable nation to its rightful role as leader of the free world, and then left the scene. From there, the postwar consensus was all but a fait accompli. The businessman turned politician, as David Levering Lewis puts it in his rousing new biography, The Improbable Wendell Willkie: The Businessman Who Saved the Republican Party and His Country, and Conceived a New World Order, “save[d] the GOP to save freedom.”

Thankfully, Lewis’s book allows readers to glimpse a more complicated and less predictable Willkie, an “improbable” figure whose ideas laid the foundation for a road not taken in American politics. Best known for his two-volume biography of W.E.B. Du Bois, Lewis is well-placed to offer a fresh view of one of the 20th century’s more neglected figures. His dignified, agreeable, and sometimes ramshackle tome—reminiscent of its subject himself as it tumbles along in high spirits, throwing off insight and wisdom—reveals Willkie as a charismatic and iconoclastic champion of civil rights, free speech, and internationalism.

And yet Lewis also underplays Willkie’s most important intervention, hailing him as Roosevelt’s partner in building an American-led “new world order” rather than seeing him for what he was: the largely forgotten but indispensable tribune of an alternative internationalism that did not seek to supplant Old World imperialism with its New World counterpart. With his spectacular, globe-girdling flight in 1942 and his subsequent best-selling book, One World, Willkie urged Americans to transcend their “narrow nationalism” and avoid “international imperialism.” Welcoming the surge of anti-colonial opinion cours-

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ing across the globe, Willkie gave his fellow citizens a vision of an American internationalism in which the United States would put its power to work arranging a wary rapprochement with the Soviet Union, championing multilateral efforts to end European empire, and erecting a postwar world organization granting an equal role for smaller, decolonizing nations. In the end, Willkie’s greatest contribution to history came in service not just to his country, but to the internationalist vision he discovered on his journey around the world.

Born in 1892 in Indiana to a family of longtime Democrats, Willkie traveled an unlikely path to global prominence. Raised with five siblings by freethinking parents—his father was the town’s preeminent populist attorney and his mother one of the first women to be admitted to the Indiana bar—Willkie enjoyed a knockabout boyhood in Elwood, an industrial boomtown on the edge of a fading frontier. In his “Tom Sawyer teens,” Willkie jumped in mudholes behind factories, launched a failed skiff expedition to the Mississippi River, worked in a tin mill, and tramped around out West, taking odd jobs. Meanwhile, his parents kept a library of some 6,000 volumes, and Wendell’s father, Herman, roused his children from sleep every morning by bellowing inspirational quotes up the stairs.

Young Wendell learned politics at the family dinner table, where the Willkie kids had to take and defend a position on the issues of the day: imperialism, race relations, labor and capital, and populist challenges to the bankers. The family backed William Jennings Bryan in 1896 and even hosted him in their home during one of his campaign swings through the state.

When Willkie arrived at Indiana University, he was one part iconoclast, one part hail-fellow-well-met glad-hander. He campaigned for a course on Marx and denounced the university’s nativist fraternities; he also masterminded several successful bids for class office and eventually joined a fraternity himself. After stints as a high-school teacher in Kansas and a lab assistant for a sugar company in Puerto Rico, where he witnessed firsthand the brutality of US rule over the island, he returned to Bloomington in 1915 to attend law school. Newly committed to his studies, Willkie rose to the top of his class and was elected speaker at his graduation. His commencement address, a rousing brief in defense of Woodrow Wilson’s “New Freedom,” advocated a host of reforms for Indiana’s courts, state constitution, and laissez-faire banking and business statutes. It was “the most radical speech you ever heard,” the university’s president later remembered, and while the brouhaha kept Willkie from receiving his diploma for several days, the lasting effect was merely to confirm what Lewis calls his subject’s “life-long susceptibility to principled pugnacity.”

Service in an artillery unit on the Western Front during World War I followed law school, but Willkie saw no combat, arriving in France shortly after the Armistice. Willkie found his battles elsewhere, primarily in the courtroom: In the 1920s, he rose to regional prominence as a liberal lawyer in Toledo and also served as a delegate to the 1924 Democratic convention, where he worked futilely to see the party back Wilson’s League of Nations and campaigned against the influence that the Ku Klux Klan had over the party. Legal work for power companies brought Willkie to Manhattan, and his obvious abilities in both the courtroom and the boardroom lifted him into the executive ranks of Commonwealth & Southern, an electrical-industry holding company.

By 1934, Willkie was the chief executive of C&S, a position that would challenge his commitment to the Democratic Party when President Roosevelt’s Tennessee Valley Authority launched years of public confrontation between the New Deal and the power industry. Since C&S oversaw many of the power companies that the Roosevelt administration hoped to put out of business, the TVA hearings brought Willkie to a national audience as a high-spirited critic of government “overreach.” By the end of the decade, he had failed to stop the TVA—or convince most Americans that the corrupt power industry had their best interests at heart. But he had found widespread acclaim and a reputation as a smart, genial freethinker who was at home in front of a microphone.

Willkie’s performance as the public face of anti–New Deal sentiment also attracted influential admirers. An internationalist from the farm belt who defended “free enterprise” with a brio and verve unavailable to the dour and rigid “economic royalists” that Roosevelt taunted, Willkie found himself in conversation with a coterie of northeastern Republicans. Publishers like Time’s Henry Luce, Fortune’s Russell Davenport, and Look’s Gardner Cowles, along with governors and congressmen from New England and lesser-known lever pullers like the bankers Frank Altschul and Thomas Lamont, wanted Willkie as the face of their insurgent campaign for the Republican nomination in 1940. With war brewing in Europe, these internationalists hoped that he could drive the insular nationalism that everyone called “isolationism” from the cockpit of the Republican Party. Willkie was then still a Democrat, but he relished the idea of a one-on-one debate with Roosevelt over the future of the country.

Willkie still needed a push, however, so his new friends launched a public-relations campaign on his behalf in newspapers and national magazines. A group of young Ivy League graduates started a set of Willkie Clubs across the country and soon had 200,000 names on a nomination petition. By the time Willkie switched parties and declared his candidacy in June of 1940, he had touched off a civil war inside the GOP. Lewis shows in incisive detail how Willkie’s sudden appearance heightened the long-standing tensions between the Wall Street–Rockefeller Center bloc gathered around now-forgotten New England politicians like Connecticut Governor Raymond Baldwin, and the “Old Guard”—isolationist congressmen like Hamilton Fish and Robert Taft, backed by oil and chemical money: the DuPont family, Edgar Queeny of Monsanto, and Pennsylvania oil baron Joseph Pew, the Charles Koch of his day.

The first round went to the internationalists. Willkie’s upstart bid looked dubious heading into the Republican convention, but his popular appeal and some backroom shenanigans by his people put him over the top: Amid deafening cheers of “We want Willkie!” from the balconies, he won the nomination in a floor fight on the sixth ballot. The general election was less dramatic; Willkie’s support was broad but not deep. He appealed to many middle-class Americans, an independent-minded slice of the old WASP elite, and many African Americans, who favored his forthright support for civil rights over Roosevelt’s equivocation in the face of the Southern segregationists in his party. But he lagged with many white working-class voters, and he labored to distinguish himself from Roosevelt on foreign policy—in fact, he backed the president’s preparedness measures, angering many in his own party. Also, given the nature of his chief supporters, Willkie’s homespun charisma and farmer-made-good image, which the newspapers liked to play up, seemed contrived to many, and therefore put off some voters. He was,
The 1940 election unfolded against the grim spectacle of war in Europe, including the blitzkrieg, the fall of France, and the first sorties in the Battle of Britain. The United States was tearing itself apart trying to somehow stay out of the war while also helping the Allies. In the year between his defeat and Pearl Harbor, Willkie found his politics and his public persona reinvented one more time. As Roosevelt’s onetime rival, he now staked out a role as the leader of the loyal opposition, supporting FDR’s attempts to ease the country into the war and jousting with the aggrieved nationalist forces to his right, the most recalcitrant of which had gathered around Charles Lindbergh and the America First Committee. Some of them wanted the United States to let the European powers destroy themselves; others were corrupted by anti-Semitism and the lure of fascism’s dreams of order and wanted to see Germany rule the world. Breaking with most of his party, Willkie testified before Congress in favor of Roosevelt’s Lend-Lease program to send war materiel to the Allies, ruining much of his already tarnished reputation in the GOP. Isolationism would die with the Japanese attack, but Willkie’s renewed commitment to civil rights, internationalism, and labor rights during the war sealed his political fate with the Republican Party. In 1944, when he tried again for the GOP’s presidential nomination, he didn’t get very far, and, when later that year he died suddenly, only a few in the party mourned his loss.

Willkie’s greatest legacy, however, would lie in a more nebulous realm. A fervent believer in the vision of Wilsonian internationalism since his teens, in late 1942 he found a way to renew his advocacy when he made a planet-circling trip to visit neutral nations and the battlefronts in Russia and China. Billed—and too often remembered—as a mere fact-finding and morale-boosting mission carried out on behalf of Roosevelt, the trip was actually Willkie’s idea. And it soon became much more than the stagy demonstration of American unity and resolve that the president had imagined. Greeted with intense fervor at home and abroad, Willkie made the trip a campaign for a fully democratic and global war effort—a plea that Americans see the truly international nature of the struggle against fascism and militarism.

Forced to avoid occupied Europe, Willkie flew south to the Caribbean and Brazil, and then across the Atlantic to Africa and the Middle East. There, he encountered a rising tide of nationalist movements seeking to liberate their countries from European empire and its racial hierarchies. From there he went to Moscow, where he met Stalin and tried to keep the Soviet leader committed to the Allies beyond the war. His last major stop was China and a week’s worth of calculated hospitality served up by Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Party. Willkie embraced a compliant view of Chiang’s corrupt and ill-fated regime, but he nonetheless found a spirit of expansive, anti-colonial internationalism in East Asia as well, one that reflected his own desire to see the imperial world order brought to an end. In Chungking, the Nationalists’ wartime capital, Willkie broadcast a speech declaring that the end of the Second World War had to also “mean an end to the empire of nations over other nations.”

Upon his return to the United States, Willkie wrote One World, the travelogue-cum-manifesto that became the publishing sensation of the war years. Hailed as the fastest-selling book in history when it arrived in the spring of 1943, One World presented the planet as increasingly unified by the technologies of air travel and communications and yet divided by imperial forms of subjugation. The book also included his argument that the war was a chance not only to defeat fascism, but also to banish colonialism from the global stage. With its publication, Willkie made himself a conduit for the anti-imperialist vision that he had encountered abroad and pushed Americans to recognize as one of the true stakes of the war.

Interdependency, Willkie argued, was the governing fact of modern life. Thus, the Allies had to plan—for the new world body to replace the League of Nations. Here, Willkie did finally distinguish himself from Roosevelt, who favored a limited procedural role for most countries in what would become the United Nations. Smaller nations could “blow off steam” in a legislative assembly, Willkie once commented, while the “Four Policemen”—the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and China—would run things from an executive body.

Willkie, on the other hand, tried to persuade Americans to accept a more egalitarian international body with the power to curb national sovereignty, not just a debating society run by the great powers. A world body dominated by nationalism, Willkie argued in a 1944 Foreign Affairs article, actually endangered American sovereignty: It would allow “other nations to make decisions affecting vital American interests at their convenience and when they choose.”

In the end, Roosevelt’s vision won out. The United Nations was shaped to fit American, British, and Soviet strategic demands. The members of the Security Council, as the executive body came to be called after France was added to the ranks of FDR’s policemen, enjoyed a veto over any initiatives that endangered their interests. Smaller nations looked on from the General Assembly, while the UN had no international police powers that might infringe upon national sovereignty. It would oversee the gradual progress of some colonies toward self-determination, but many others would be left to the whims of their prewar masters.

With the onset of the “great twilight struggle” against the Soviet Union, Willkie-style internationalism went into full retreat, scorned as naive about the strategic realities in a world of competition among nations. The United States helped establish a multilateral “rules based order” designed to contain communism and allow the European powers to fortify their colonial holdings—a decision that would end in tears in Vietnam. Willkie himself was all but forgotten, recalled as a colorful bit player in the drama of American ascendance. Gone altogether was his vision of an American internationalism, one in solidarity with an anti-imperialism from below that demanded greater equality between nations. Gone as well was the idea that the United States might have served as a midwife for that more expansive view of freedom rather than simply as the triumphantist “leader of the free world.”

These days, “one world” may sound like a particularly callow brand of universalism—just another version of globalization hype. And the Willkie show was always something of a high-wire act: As an anti-imperialist who assumed that America’s own empire was likely to simply fade away, he struggled to balance his advocacy for “free enterprise” and “free trade” with his support for political...
freedom from colonialism. Willkie's early death preempted any reckoning with the contradictions that postwar history would have presented to his evolving liberalism and residual American nationalism.

Nonetheless, Willkie still has much to teach us, particularly now, when Donald Trump's presidency has birthed an agitated spate of hand-wringing over his threat to the liberal world order. Trump and his Twitter account threaten to end more than just a half-century of US-led peace and prosperity, the solons of the Global North lament: All the institutions of multilateral, rules-based internationalism created in the wake of World War II, from NATO to the United Nations, teeter on the brink, pushed to the very edge by Trump's return to an America First nationalism. Of course, that world order was always premised on the United States' own complacency about American supremacy. Willkie imagined a different path forward, one that might have averted the weak foundations of the neoliberal global compact and the “Washington consensus” that helped give rise to Trump's presidency. We may not like where Trump wants to take us—his is a dark and vicious view of the world—but those who lament the waning status quo also cloud our ability to understand the true history or possible future of America's role in the world.

First, of course, the US-led liberal order was always, in the eyes of many around the world, simply US imperialism. And American hegemony—designed to win the Cold War as much as to ensure global comity—has been coming apart, in fits and starts, since the Vietnam War and the economic crises of the 1970s. The long-term question is not how to shore up the old world order—whatever its faults and virtues—but how to use the uncertain moment of Trumpian disruption to rethink it altogether.

On the American left, anti-imperial memory often only goes back to the 1960s. But Willkie gives us a chance to remember the 1940s, when dreams of global freedom commanded the attention of a broad swath of the American public. These days, as many Americans retreat into Trump's insular and aggressive nationalism, and the heirs of Walter Lippmann fret that America's decline will unleash the barbarian hordes—witness the title of Robert Kagan's *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World*—we would do well to recall how Wendell Willkie warned us away from that brand of race-tinged fearmongering and called us toward a vision of the United States at home in the world, with no need to dominate or control it.

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**WHAT HAPPENED TO WISCONSIN?**

The fight over the once progressive state

by JOHN B. JUDIS

On election night last fall, I found myself staying up past midnight, even though it was clear by then that the Democrats had taken back the House of Representatives. I wanted to find out who had won the closely contested governor's race in Wisconsin between two-term incumbent Scott Walker and his Democratic challenger, Tony Evers. Walker had not been just any Republican governor: During his time in office, the state—and much of the region—had adopted the agenda of the Republican far right. Although you could find right-to-work and voter-ID laws in the South when Walker was elected in 2011, such policies had yet to spread to the industrial Midwest. Under Walker and his Republican legislature, they took firm root in Wisconsin, and other Midwestern states—including Michigan and Indiana—followed Walker's lead. Even in Illinois, the Republican governor attempted to pressure the Democratic-controlled legislature to enact anti-union measures.

In *The Fall of Wisconsin*, Dan Kaufman, a journalist and Wisconsin native, offers an account of how his state went "from a pioneering beacon of progressive, democratic politics to the embodiment of that legacy's national unraveling." Kaufman blames this transformation—which culminated in Donald Trump winning the state in 2016—on "powerful conservative donors and organizations across the country [that] had Wisconsin in their sights... helping Governor Scott Walker and his allies systematically change the state's political culture."

Kaufman's book is a valuable contri-
The nation's first workers' compensation act, bills limiting work hours for children and women, industrial health and safety legislation, and a state income tax. The city of Milwaukee, in particular, became a hotbed of "sewer socialism," with the Socialist Party successfully sending a candidate to Congress in 1918 and Socialists ruling the municipality for almost half a century.

But Wisconsin's leading role in American progressivism began to falter in the late 1930s. In 1938, Philip La Follette, Robert's son, was ousted as governor; in 1944, the state voted for the Republican presidential candidate, Thomas Dewey, over Franklin Roosevelt; and in 1946, Robert Jr., La Follette's other son, lost his seat in the US Senate to anti-labor upstart (and later notorious red-baiter) Joseph McCarthy. After World War II, most of the state's Republican progressives became Democrats instead. From that point to the present, Democratic presidential candidates won Wisconsin's electoral votes 10 times. But Republicans won them eight times, held the state's governorship for 47 of the next 73 years, and—in line with the national party—moved ever farther to the right.

Having once dominated the state, progressives were now concentrated in the industrial and heavily unionized southeastern cities, including Milwaukee, Racine, and Madison, and in the northern farm communities that had been largely settled by Scandinavians; the Republicans held much of the rest of the state, including the white-collar suburbs around Milwaukee and the farming towns of southern and central Wisconsin, which had been largely settled by Germans. Democrats had the support of the growing black population in Wisconsin's industrial cities, but the rise of the civil-rights movement sparked a powerful backlash among some white voters, who abandoned the party. In the 1964 Democratic presidential primary, the segregationist candidate George Wallace won 25 percent of the vote statewide and 31 percent in Milwaukee.

Changing economic conditions also pushed the state and its voters to the right. During the 1981–82 recession, much of Wisconsin's industry began closing down, diminishing organized labor's power in the state. Blue-collar whites, who had already begun to move rightward in response to the civil-rights movement, continued to migrate to the suburbs and small towns, making these areas even more Republican. Democrats became heavily dependent on liberal Madison and the surrounding Dane County, which continued to grow, and on Milwaukee. By the 1980s and '90s, La Follette's Wisconsin was looking more like conservative Ohio or Missouri (with their sharp demarcations between the segregated inner cities and suburbs) than Illinois or Minnesota. Democrats, drawing votes from Madison and Milwaukee, found themselves increasingly isolated as the rest of the state—the suburbs, small towns, and rural areas—became predominantly Republican.

Scott Walker was able to exploit these divisions. The son of a Baptist preacher from Colorado, he attended (but did not graduate from) Marquette University in Milwaukee. He was elected to the state assembly from a Milwaukee suburb in 1992. Unlike Tommy Thompson, the state's longtime Republican governor, or former senator Bob Kasten, Walker was not a typical pro-business Republican. Instead, he emerged from the Republican new right that had been forged in the '90s by firebrand congressman (and future House speaker) Newt Gingrich and political strategist Grover Norquist. He was also more attuned to the party's religious right and less amenable to compromising with the Democrats.

This younger, more intransigent right embraced Norquist's program of defunding its opponents, a hallmark of which was the attempt to cripple the political power of public-employee unions like the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Education Association. As Kaufman recounts, Walker was an early recruit to the American Legislative Exchange Council, which drafted legislation meant to weaken unions and discourage Democratic voters.

Walker's political rise was also partly due to good luck. In 2002, he ran for Milwaukee County executive on the heels of a pension scandal that doomed the Democratic incumbent. In 2010, he ran for governor in the wake of another scandal that discredited the Democratic incumbent, Jim Doyle, and after an enormous loss of jobs in the state caused by the Great Recession, which vot-
ers blamed on Doyle and on President Obama. But according to Kaufman, Walker also benefited from the financial support of Charles and David Koch, who contributed more than $40,000 to his race, and from the support of the Koch-funded Americans for Prosperity.

Once in office, and with a Republican majority in the state assembly and senate, Walker set out uncompromisingly to enact the agenda that the new right had devised over the prior two decades. In early 2011, over massive protests from public employees and their supporters, Walker got the state legislature to pass Act 10, which drastically limited collective bargaining for public employees, made union dues voluntary, and forced the unions to seek recertification every year. Walker won support for Act 10, in part, by dividing Wisconsin’s working class, drawing on the perception that public workers had gotten off easy during the recession thanks to their generous contracts, even as other workers had suffered. The measure led to a sharp decline in public-union membership in the state: AFSCME lost two-thirds of its rank and file, and the Wisconsin teachers’ union went from 98,000 to 36,000 members.

That same year, Walker and the legislature also adopted a law that required voters to show a photo ID at the polls and to verify their current address. (A University of Wisconsin study found that, in 2016, nearly 17,000 residents of Dane and Milwaukee counties were discouraged by the law from voting.)

Democrats fought back, but their efforts were mostly ineffective. In 2012, the party and the unions launched a recall vote to force Walker from office. Kaufman blames a Koch-funded group and its $400,000 contribution for the recall effort’s defeat. The group ran ads arguing that removing Walker over a piece of legislation wasn’t “the Wisconsin way.” Exit polls suggested that the ads struck a chord with voters: When asked, “Do you think recall elections are appropriate only for official misconduct?,” 60 percent of the voters agreed and only 37 percent disagreed.

After Walker won a second term in 2014—when he received a third of the union vote—his assault on organized labor continued, including a right-to-work law barring union contracts that required workers to belong to the union. While dark money was a factor in Walker’s re-election, his win was also part of the Republican wave that swept over many states in 2014 and had begun building after the disastrous rollout of the Affordable Care Act—better known as “Obamacare”—a year before. That wave carried other Wisconsin Republicans to victory as well.

Kaufman, whose book appeared before the midterm elections last year, took Trump’s 2016 victory in Wisconsin as the culmination of the state’s fall from progressivism—but in retrospect, Trump’s victory may have paved the way for Walker’s defeat in 2018. Trump won the state by breaking somewhat with the pattern of Walker and previous Republican presidential candidates: He carried the northern and central counties that had backed Obama in 2008 and 2012, but he did worse than Walker or Obama’s 2012 challenger, Mitt Romney, in the wealthy suburbs outside Milwaukee. In the 2016 presidential race, Hillary Clinton—who didn’t even visit Wisconsin during the general-election campaign—lost because she failed to turn out the Democratic vote in Dane County and Milwaukee and failed to take advantage of Trump’s unpopularity in the suburbs. In many ways, Clinton lost the state more than Trump won it.

In the 2018 races, the Democrats, with Trump’s assistance, nationalized many of the Senate, House, and gubernatorial seats, and this time, they were able to turn out their base in Wisconsin as well, taking advantage of the growing disillusion with Trump among college-educated suburban voters—particularly women. Thus, as the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported, Democratic challenger Tony Evers did better than Walker’s prior opponents in the wealthy suburbs and also got out the vote in Dane County and Milwaukee, while Walker did better than before in the small, erstwhile Democratic counties that Trump had won in 2016. The 2018 gubernatorial election proved to be a rerun of the 2016 presidential contest—only this time the Democrat ran a much better race.

The contrasts between the 2014 and 2018 results are even more telling. In 2014, Walker defeated Democrat Mary Burke, 53 to 46 percent, among white college-educated voters; in 2018, he lost among the same voters by 52 to 47 percent. (Among white college-educated women in particular, Evers won by 60 to 39 percent.) In 2014, Walker narrowly lost the 18-to-29-year-old vote, 51 to 47 percent; four years later, he lost by a much wider margin, 60 to 37 percent. Walker got most of the Trump vote, but in an election where a significant part of the electorate had been alienated by Trump, an identification with the president insured Walker’s defeat.

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here does all this leave Wisconsin now? The results of the 2018 midterm do not necessarily mean that the state is shifting back to its older, more progressive roots. While the voters’ dissatisfaction with Trump benefited Evers, as well as Senator Tammy Baldwin (who won re-election easily, in part by dramatically increasing her support in Milwaukee’s upscale Republican suburbs) and state attorney-general candidate Josh Kaul, that dissatisfaction did not carry over to the congressional or state legislative races. Republicans continue to hold a five-to-three edge in Wisconsin’s US House seats as well as a majority in both the state assembly and senate. (They even gained a seat in the latter.) And so the battle continues. The election of Evers and Kaul will certainly benefit the Democrats, but even before they took office, the Republican-controlled legislature passed, and Walker signed, bills that will limit the ability of Evers to appoint regulatory officials and of Kaul to challenge Republican legislation; the bills also codified the Republican restrictions on early voting, which have since been struck down by a federal judge. Democrats, as a result, are taking these battles to court. There is already one lawsuit against Republican redistricting, which allowed the GOP to carry the state’s assembly races even though Democrats received 54 percent of the popular vote; and there are already four lawsuits against the bills that Walker signed in December. Wisconsin has, perhaps, halted the rightward lurch that occurred under its former Republican governor. But over the next several years, the state will remain up for grabs. It’s very likely that a reasonably popular Democrat, running against Trump in 2020, could carry the state simply on the basis of suburban anti-Trump voters. But in 2022, control of the state could well shift back to center-right Republicans.

Wisconsin’s long-term fate will depend partly on how the parties position themselves: whether Democrats can follow Baldwin’s lead and speak to the small towns as well as the metropolitan areas, and whether Republicans can escape the shadow of Trump’s unpopularity. But it will also depend on how the state develops economically. If Madison’s Dane County continues to grow, and if Milwaukee revives economically and develops a more symbiotic relationship with its suburbs, then the Democrats are likely to benefit—and the state itself may recapture some of the past progressive glory that Kaufman describes in his well-written book.
Puzzle No. 3492
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS
1 Fixed place of exile, with blanket resistance I repelled (11)
7, 27D, 28, and 1D Academic in England or Massachusetts may check equipment with Scotsman, probably (12)
9 Clouds of dust and grease receding in Glasgow? No (7)
10 Heads of old romaine, growing among nasturtiums I cultivated like certain produce (7)
11 Your sled is strange and unreal (8)
12 Confused, I voted for an actor (6)
13 Inverting GPS displays is a modern annoyance (4)
14 Optimist’s only plan: a reorganization (9)
15 Space marsupials packing explosives (9)
17 Jazz, incredibly, incorporates heavy metal (4)
18 First off, connect with ruler making barnyard noises (7)
19 Seafood’s strength on your tongue (6)
20 European aid nihilistically holds back American state (7)
21 A-OK—they sometimes have it (4)
23 Initiator swallows line and fish (8)
24 Shot put involving celebrity parvenu (7)
26 Nervous enchantress replacing central wheel of toy (7)
28 See 7A
29 Sacrifice Dad’s bread, largely, to heartless mob (7,4)

DOWN
1 See 7A
2 Yokel totally reversed infection (7)
3 Suitcase where you might arrange flowers, keeping lid unclosed (6)
4 Spooner describes singer Como with hot drink and dessert (6,3)
5 Stain creating a small change inside a roll of fabric (4)
6 Keep observer of each festivity with you (5,3)
7 Deliver prisoners’ gin cocktail (7)
8 Sorcerer sounds like someone giving a hickey? (11)
11 Put down Chicago paper, and violently rout wholesaler (11)
15 A gull shat at sea—it’s the ultimate triumph (4,5)
16 Ten French infantrymen at the front hoisted dark-red vessel (5,3)
18 First off, connect with ruler making barnyard noises (7)
20 European aid nihilistically holds back American state (7)
21 Seafood’s strength on your tongue (6)
24 A-OK—they sometimes have it (4)
27 See 7A

Solution to Puzzle No. 3491

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At this pivotal moment in US-Russia relations, The Nation continues to believe in the power of direct person-to-person interaction as an essential way to foster productive dialogue and encourage peaceful relations between nations. Join us as we explore St. Petersburg and Moscow on this specially crafted itinerary in which we will meet with a wide range of Russian society, both critics and supporters of Kremlin policy. We’ll gain firsthand insight into the country’s culture, history, politics, and people at this critical historic time.

**THE HIGHLIGHTS**

- Visits to renowned sites in St. Petersburg and its surroundings, from the Hermitage and Nevsky Prospekt to the Grand Palace and gardens of Peterhof
- A private tour of the Kremlin and meeting with Pavel Palazhchenko, Mikhail Gorbachev’s longtime aide and English interpreter
- Visits to the Gulag Museum, the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, Gorky Park, and the famed Novodevichy Cemetery
- A trip to the city of Sergiev Posad and its Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius, a UNESCO World Heritage site that brings medieval Russia to life with its celebrated architecture, iconic paintings, and unique cultural activities
- Meeting with editors of Novaya Gazeta, Russia’s muckraking newspaper, and other independent-media and cultural leaders
- Private concert of the Rimsky-Korsakov String Quartet at a beautifully preserved residence that was once home to a member of the Russian Imperial family
- Lectures with Russian historians, cultural and political figures, and independent-thought leaders, accompanied by top bilingual guides, each specially chosen by The Nation for their exceptional knowledge and experience
- The chance to participate in an exclusive pre-trip conference-call discussion covering the contemporary Russian political landscape and US/Russia relations with Nation editor and publisher Katrina vanden Heuvel and Nation contributing editor Stephen F. Cohen, professor emeritus of Russian studies at Princeton and NYU

The price of this remarkable trip starts at **$7,980** per person based on double occupancy (**$1,670** single supplement).

100% of the proceeds from our travel programs support The Nation’s journalism.

Go to TheNation.com/RUSSIA for the full itinerary and details, or contact Debra Eliezer at debra@thenation.com or 212-209-5401.
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