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MEET MISSISSIPPI’S FIERCEST ADVOCATE FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

By Rebecca Grant

Laurie Bertram Roberts set out to help women get abortions in the country’s most restrictive state.

So why is her house filled with diapers?

Real choice means becoming a parent—if you want to.

MAINSTREAMING HATE IN AUSTRALIA | BREXIT BREAKDOWN
ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN | GARY YOUNGE
A Question for “The Blob”

Frank L. Friedman
Delanco, N.J.

Generation Climate Strike
Re Mark Hertsgaard’s “The Climate Kids Are Coming” [March 25]: Thank you for this article. I am 73 years old, and that young lady Greta Thunberg and those standing up with her are heroes. Shame on us for not stepping up to the plate with them.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, “To waste, to destroy, our natural resources…will result in undermining in the days of our children the very prosperity which we ought by right hand down to them amplified.” We are infected with a deadly, communicable disease, which is called greed and the lust for power. Until we find a cure for it, nothing will change; it will always be “business as usual.” Until the last gallon of oil, the last ounce of gold, the last fish in the ocean, and the last dollar in a poor person’s pocket are gone, the rich will be focused on only one thing: having it all. Perhaps if those children’s wallets were filled with gold, they might then get some attention.

George Trudeau

Endgame
Re Tim Shorrock’s article “Hammstrung in Hanoi” [March 25]: This fits in with my (perhaps) paranoid theory that the endgame of the bipartisan establishment is the destruction of the world. Look at the resistance to a nuclear deal with North Korea. (You can acknowledge the horrendous nature of the Kim regime and still be in favor of a deal.) Look at the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, when President Kennedy averted nuclear war only by defying his own advisers—and probably paid for it with his life. Look at the reversals of the Reagan-Gorbachev arms reductions and the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Look at the obliviousness of politicians from both parties to the shocking fact that the Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists is now at two minutes to midnight. Look at the foolhardy US-backed coup in Ukraine in 2014, which could have led to war with Russia because of the threat to its main fleet at Sevastopol. Look at the failure to do anything significant against global warming.

I am, of course, only scratching the surface here.

Caleb Melamed

Comments drawn from our website
letters@thenation.com
A Bitter Betrayal

President Trump’s proposed $4.7 trillion budget for 2020 was pronounced dead on arrival upon its release, given almost no chance of surviving a Democratic-controlled House. But it does reveal the breathtaking scope of his contempt for the working men and women who voted him into office.

Trump calls it a “Budget for a Better America.” In fact, it’s a budget for a bitter betrayal.

The first page promises to “protect future generations from Washington’s habitual deficit spending.” But tax cuts for the rich and corporations, not deficits, remain the president’s priority. Deficits do, however, provide an excuse for across-the-board cuts in domestic programs. Here too, working people, the disabled, and the most vulnerable elderly take the biggest hits. The president once more calls for ending the Affordable Care Act, reversing its expansion of Medicaid, and turning the latter into block grants to the states, which would be capped at levels that don’t keep up with rising costs.

Trump would also make college less affordable for tens of thousands and undermine public schools by eliminating after-school programs for low-income students. Student-loan debt now totals a staggering $1.5 trillion—but Trump would reduce funding for Pell grants and work-study programs and eliminate subsidized Stafford loans.

Food stamps, which help lift nearly 4 million kids out of poverty, would be slashed by 30 percent over 10 years. Public-housing subsidies and rental vouchers would be cut, and home-energy assistance would be eliminated. The Job Corps that helps poor kids get started in the workforce would be slashed, and the workers who actually work for President Trump—federal employees—would get another kick, in the form of reduced take-home pay and pension cuts.

Even some of the budget’s increases mock those they pretend to help. The National Park Service, with a backlog of $12 billion in needed repairs for roads and facilities, gets a laughable $300 million. The agency that enforces worker health-and-safety laws gets an additional $300,000 and another couple dozen inspectors, even though there are only enough inspectors now to investigate companies about once every 145 years.

Trump’s budget message proclaims that “we must write the next chapter of the great American adventure, turbocharging the industries of the future.” Yet this budget would concede those industries to other countries. Trump claims he’ll invest $200 billion in our decrepit infrastructure over 10 years—but it needs trillions. And his budget cuts the Army Corps of Engineers by 31 percent, the Transportation Department by nearly 20 percent, and the Interior Department by nearly 15 percent. In its first year alone, Trump’s budget would cut funding for the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Science Foundation by 12 to 14 percent. In a continuing dismissal of the threat of climate catastrophe, he would virtually eliminate investment in R&D programs for renewable energy and energy efficiency. And while subsidies for coal and fossil fuels are increased, those for renewable sources are rolled back.

Trump calls for a “one-time” investment of $1 billion aimed at “stimulating employer investments in child care.” But this gesture doesn’t come close to meeting the child-care needs of millions of families, which exceed the cost of college tuition in some 28 states. The administration also claims that it “has pledged to provide paid parental leave,” but there is neither a plan nor an appropriation to pay for it.

Trump’s budget statement claims that his administration is “absolutely committed to putting the needs of the American worker first.” His numbers, however, put the lie to his words. He continues to posture as the champion of working people, even as inequality grows, public investment is starved, the rich receive tax cuts, and working people get the shaft.

The only question is how much longer Trump can get away with this con.
Mainstreaming Hate
Racism made the Christchurch attack possible.

It was an article with no subtlety, only bile. Australian columnist Andrew Bolt, one of the country's most prominent right-wing voices and a key employee in Rupert Murdoch's media empire, published a column last August with the headline "The Foreign Invasion." In it, he argued that "immigration is becoming colonisation, turning this country from a home into a hotel." Bolt's column was syndicated in many newspapers throughout Australia; accompanying it was a cartoon with racist caricatures of Asians, Muslims, and other new arrivals.

The racism was blunt, and Bolt's facts were wildly incorrect—yet it was just one of many examples of the mainstreaming of hate that has become routine in Australia. In the wake of the recent horrific massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand, where an Australian man killed at least 50 worshippers at two mosques and live-streamed his violence for the world to see, the increased tolerance for and encouragement of bigotry in the Australian media and in Parliament is finally receiving scrutiny. Examples of such bigotry abound: Prominent TV personalities call for an end to Muslim immigration; a political cartoonist at a Murdoch-owned paper draws tennis star Serena Williams with ape-like features; and the nation has become a regular haunt for some of the United States' most notorious alt-right figures, who tour and spew bile at the indigenous population. But while white supremacy has been a major strain in Australia's long history (as well as anti-Muslim hate in more recent years), US-style far-right violent extremism is still relatively rare.

A lack of racial diversity in the media and among political elites goes a long way toward explaining the blinding whiteness of supposedly acceptable commentary on public affairs in Australia. One 2017 study found that "racist reporting is a weekly phenomenon in Australia's mainstream media," with hatred commonly directed at immigrants, Muslims, refugees, indigenous Australians, and other minorities. It's a model that has been perfected by Murdoch's Fox News, although other media companies take part too, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the public broadcaster that is the country's equivalent of the BBC. The racial divide is also reflected in public opinion; in a documentary on free speech that he's currently putting together, the Pakistani-Australian comedian Sami Mah tweets, almost "every white person interviewed...said their biggest fears were Political Correctness or identity politics. Every poc [person of color] said it was rise of Nazis and hate speech leading to attacks."

The poison is not just in the media; the far right has also infiltrated one of the country's major political parties. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has long believed in capitalizing on the electorate's growing unease over Muslim immigration, and the Senate narrowly voted down a motion last year that said it was "OK to be white" (a meme popularized on 4chan and embraced by the white-nationalist movement). Australian Senator Fraser Anning, who once called for a "final solution" to immigration, said after the attack in Christchurch that "the real cause of bloodshed on New Zealand streets today is the immigration program which allowed Muslim fanatics to migrate to New Zealand in the first place." According to reporter Paul Sakkal of The Age, Anning, who is close to forming a new political party, says, "We can win seats on social media."

Yet despite the daily media drumbeat that blames immigrants for crime, the facts prove otherwise: Australian-born citizens are by far the highest number of offenders. The strain of white supremacy that made the Christchurch attack possible has very deep roots. Australia is a settler-colonial state, and, like other cases of settler colonialism, from Israel-Palestine to the United States, its past is bloody. The vast bulk of the country's indigenous population was murdered by the invading British after they arrived in the late 1700s. It's an ugly reality that to this day is still denied by many and defended by others.

Indeed, just recently, a small but vocal political party in the Australian state of New South Wales proposed requiring DNA testing for Aboriginal people who want to claim welfare payments. Much of the media lapped it up, willfully ignoring the scientific challenges of such a test, let alone its racist underpinnings. Indigenous incarceration in some Australian states is higher per capita than it was in apartheid South Africa.

But while the prevalence of racism in Australia unquestionably influenced Brenton Tarrant, the Christchurch killer, his ideology was largely borrowed from white-nationalist websites, theorists, and politicians around the world. Tarrant name-checked Donald Trump as an inspiration, as well as Norwegian extremist Anders Breivik, who massacred 77 people in 2011. Tarrant's manifesto was titled "The Great Replacement," most likely a reference to a 2012 book of the same name by French extremist Renaud Camus, who claims that Europe's white population is being replaced by African and Muslim immigrants.

Revelation over the Christchurch massacre was widespread in Australia, but I remain unconvinced that the country's major media companies have any real interest in taking responsibility for their platforming of hate. It will be much easier to shed faux tears and then quickly get back to demanding that Australian Muslims show loyalty to their country (after the Christchurch killings, Murdoch tabloids found a way to try to humanize the murderer). Conservative media and their political mates have fanned the flames of racism for years, so don't expect them to become self-reflective now. Eradicating this poison will require a sustained grassroots effort.
Indeed, their testimony is the only way to get at the truth. (I would not, by the way, assume that a criminal investigation is “not an option.” After all, if your hope is that the rapist ends up in prison, media alone won’t get him there. But you’re right that it’s not your place to trigger one; that, too, is up to the victims.) You can tell J. what you recently heard about the rape of this second young woman; you can encourage her to contact a news outlet or write an open letter; and you can offer her support in speaking out and (gently) suggest that it might do some good. She may decide that she wants to come forward: In recent years, some women have found it powerful and life-changing to tell the truth about sexual violence, even if the incidents occurred long ago. But if J. wants to keep this trauma private, you must respect her wishes.

Dear Liza,

I have a friend, J., who was raped many years ago by a respected man in the arts. She never reported him, because she was young and, being in the same field as this much older and professionally powerful man, she thought doing so would ruin her career and her life. She’s worked hard to recover and is still in therapy, yet it is something that has affected her in all of her intimate interactions. Recently, another friend in the same field (who doesn’t know about J.’s experience) told me that a young colleague had confided that this same man had raped her, too. I’m furious, but also concerned about all the young women in this man’s sphere of influence.

I know I can’t bring charges against someone who didn’t harm me personally, and I do not want to retraumatize his victims, especially J. But I am certain this man will rape again unless he is put behind bars. Since launching a criminal investigation is not an option, it seems that investigative journalism may be able to help. Seeing that this has turned out to be an open secret, I have no doubt that the right prodding would reveal the truth, and perhaps inspire other victims (I have no doubt there are many) to come forward. Would it be wrong of me to send an anonymous tip to a publication? I wouldn’t name J. or anyone else I know in the tip. I just want to do the right thing and get this man away from potential victims. That said, I do know that J. would suffer somewhat if a story were to come out about this man and his actions. It would surely stir up a lot of trauma and grief. So I honestly don’t know the right thing to do.

—Would-Be Tipster

Questions? Ask Liza at TheNation.com/article/asking-for-a-friend.

Dear Tipster,

While your intentions are good, you are right to be concerned about how your intervention might affect your friend. Many women have been retraumatized simply by having #MeToo in the news, as events like the Brett Kavanaugh hearings bring up experiences they have worked hard to move beyond. To have her rapist become the subject of public discussion, and perhaps even to be called upon to talk about her trauma, could disrupt J.’s life in profound and unwelcome ways. And, most saliently, that’s an experience she hasn’t sought out.

In the end, Tipster, the story isn’t yours to tell. Only the women who have been raped by this man can usefully or ethically make these experiences public.
Going After the Money

On March 5, JPMorgan Chase announced that it would end its business dealings with CoreCivic and the GEO Group, two of the largest operators of private prisons and detention centers in the country. According to The New York Times, private-prison companies operate the facilities that hold about three-quarters of all immigrant detainees. While they receive huge contracts from government agencies, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement, these companies also secure a significant portion of their funding from private investors. The Center for Popular Democracy reports that JPMorgan has provided at least $254 million in debt financing to CoreCivic and GEO, making it the industry’s largest corporate backer by far. However, buckling under the pressure from a growing immigrant-rights movement, JPMorgan recently told Reuters that “we will no longer bank the private prison industry.”

Companies like CoreCivic and GEO have lengthy records of human-rights abuses—including violence and sexual assault. “For years, immigrant advocates have pushed hard in Washington to cut public funding for morally bankrupt immigrant detention,” Javier Valdés of Make the Road, chair of the USC board of trustees, said. “We’ve broken of our parents’ arrest, she was hanging out with friends on the yacht owned by Rick Caruso, and I don’t care either. Before she “got into” USC, she didn’t care about education, and whose children don’t care about what college looks like for entitled parents who can afford to support their families. It’s all-consuming inequality: Instead of leveling class differences, education reinforces them. This is what college looks like for entitled parents who can afford to support their families. It’s all-consuming inequality: Instead of leveling class differences, education reinforces them. 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fair amount of sentimental value, what’s the point of letting it sit in a box? Tell me, Liza: to bling or not to bling?
—Bejeweled and Betrothed

Dear B&B,
To bling, for sure! Don’t let capitalism, while stressing you out about your own survival, also make you feel bad about the few nice things you have.

I once had a dilemma somewhat like yours: My grandmother died and left me her fur coats. The coats were warm, and I loved my grandmother. But this was in the 1990s, and PETA activists had succeeded in inextricably associating fur with cruelty (unfair in the case of inherited fur, since the animals in question would be long dead anyway). Fur, like diamonds, has always attracted an unthinking and low-key misogynist class rage, which is probably why PETA targeted it in the first place. It’s always easier to hate on women’s conspicuous consumption than to, say, expropriate the unseemly wealth of private-equity parasites. But though I didn’t feel that I deserved either class hostility or an animal-rights rebuke, I donated the coats. This isn’t my biggest youthful regret, by any means, but I do think it was the wrong move.

Your ring sounds like a blast to wear, and engagement is a time for celebration, not austerity and guilt. Plus a ring from your grandmother’s time, to people who notice these things, looks markedly different from one that a hedge-fund show-off would buy his affianced today. You’re in love and making big life changes. The one-of-a-kind antique ring—with its connection to ancestral innovation and past family romance—honors the significance of your situation with sparkle.
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**Blackwater in China?**

In Xinjiang, a region in western China about the size of Alaska, the ethnic Uighur population is being tortured, intimidated, and surveilled. Right now, an estimated 1.5 million Uighurs languish in reeducation camps. Facing a growing international backlash, the Chinese government has defended the internments as part of a crackdown on alleged Islamic terrorism and separatism. But one scholar of the region more accurately called the repression “a campaign of cultural genocide.”

The French newswire AFP has noted that the massive surveillance machine erected in the region by the Chinese government has become “a major windfall” for security companies. In early February, Erik Prince—of Blackwater infamy—made international headlines again when the *South China Morning Post* and *The New York Times* reported that his Frontier Services Group, a Hong Kong–listed company, would work with Chinese officials to build a training camp in Tumxuk, Xinjiang. It’s unclear from the now-deleted press release what kinds of training the facility would provide, but *BuzzFeed News* reported in 2017 that Prince had broader plans to train and deploy paramilitary contractors within the region.

“He’s been working very, very hard to get China to buy into a new Blackwater,” a former associate of Prince told *BuzzFeed News*. “He’s hell bent on reclaiming his position as the world’s preeminent private military provider.”

—Rosemarie Ho

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**A Farce to Reckon With**

Brexit has turned the UK’s political class into a laughingstock.

The scene outside Westminster these days couldn’t be more like a theme park devoted to English eccentricity if Basil Fawlty and Mr. Bean were doing a duet on Parliament Square. Tourists snap photos as people either draped in Union Jacks or waving European Union flags shout obscenities at one another. One woman carrying a sign—the Bible says Britain’s future destiny is different to Europe’s—is being asked to move on by police. Hovering nearby, a few hard-right “Leave” voters insist that if her sign had mentioned the Quran, the cops would have left her alone. Meanwhile, a man with a leave means leave banner adroitly dodges traffic, presenting an American dad with the unavoidable challenge of explaining to his kids what Brexit is, or might be.

Inside the House of Commons, members of Parliament are struggling with that very question. On a day when Parliament voted on whether to extend the Brexit timetable or hold a second referendum altogether, MPs could be seen huddling in corridors, trying to figure out what to do. Ask those at the highest levels what they expect will happen next, and they answer with a shrug. Meanwhile, a man with a leave means leave banner adroitly dodges traffic, presenting an American dad with the unavoidable challenge of explaining to his kids what Brexit is, or might be.

By the time this column is published, we will be barely a week away from the self-imposed deadline for Britain to leave the European Union, and the country’s political class is in a state of crisis. The Brexit referendum was called in a bid to settle a generation-long battle within the Conservative Party between nationalists and those who prioritize international capital. It’s the same fight that brought down Margaret Thatcher, crippled the government of John Major, and kept the Tories out of power for the next 13 years. But rather than ease the Tories’ internecine strife, Brexit has inflamed it.

May has spent the last two years seeking a deal with the EU that would unite her party more than the country, and she has failed horribly. With her withdrawal agreement rejected by historic margins, she has simply been running down the clock in the hope that she could spook wavering MPs into backing it. But Parliament has now voted to rule out a no-deal Brexit and extend the timetable for leaving the EU by at least three months.

In the meantime, Conservative Party discipline has broken down almost completely, with cabinet ministers voting against the government; in one instance, the Brexit secretary voted to defeat the government’s own Brexit motion. In December, more than a third of May’s party voted unsuccessfully to remove her. The rules dictate that they can’t try again for another year, but that doesn’t stop them from talking about it. For now, though, most in the party want May to remain, for two reasons: First, if she left, the leadership contest would splinter the Tories even further; and second, no one wants to assume responsibility for this mess.

Labour has its own problems. None of its MPs have left the party amid claims that it was insufficiently robust in its stance against Brexit and institutionally anti-Semitic to boot. (One of the defectors is Jewish.) Eight of them went on form the Independent Group, and three anti-Brexit Tories soon joined them. Given the left turn that Labour has made since Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader—and the antagonistic relationship he has with the parliamentary party—these defections were a long time coming. But for all that, the rebellion has been far smaller than most (including the defectors) had anticipated. After burning brightly at first, the Independent Group has fizzled for now (though it could easily flare up again). But at the moment, the appeal of a pro-austerity “Remain” bloc appears to be limited.

For all the talk of a grand political realignment in which the “centrists” of the two main parties join forces in a bid for national unity, the divisions thus far owe more to strategy than to principle. Despite the excitement around Parliament in the nation as a whole, the general mood outside Westminster is
of tedium. In the run-up to the Brexit referendum, then–Prime Minister David Cameron tried to convince his fellow Tories to push for staying in the EU by warning them that a Brexit vote would snarl up Parliament for years. “You don’t really want three years of Euro-wank, do you?” he allegedly said. If the report is accurate, this was perhaps Cameron’s shrewdest prediction. Two-thirds of the country believe they are not represented by the current parties. The political class is gridlocked and totally incapable of finding a majority for any Brexit option. But mostly, Conservative politicians just look incompetent: wholly unable to work in the national interest, saddled with a leader that few respect, and advocating for a plan that nobody seems to want. However, it’s not obvious that most of these disgruntled voters view their disaffection primarily through the lens of Brexit. With all the mainstream parties supporting membership in the EU during the referendum, Brexit has not so much created the rupture between the population and the political class as it has illustrated it.

Meanwhile, Europe looks askance, eager for Britain to stop negotiating with itself and produce a plan to which it can agree. During the referendum, the Brexiteers’ message was that leaving the EU would let Britain return to the global stage as an independent force to be reckoned with; instead, it has made the country a laughingstock, both on the continent and beyond.

After watching the negotiations between London and Brussels, the French EU minister Nathalie Loiseau reportedly named her new cat Brexit. “He wakes me up every morning meowing to death, because he wants to go out,” she explained to the French newspaper *Le Journal Dimanche*. “And when I open the door, he stays in the middle, undecided, and then gives me evil looks when I put him out.”

**SNAPSHOT / JORGE SILVA**

**A Country Mourns**

A heartfelt drawing of two women embracing in grief was placed among the flowers outside Masjid Al Noor in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 17. Mourners across the country paid tribute at makeshift memorials to the 50 people slain by a gunman at two mosques in Christchurch on March 15.

**THE COLLEGE-ADMISSIONS SCANDAL**

Admissions advantages rich kids enjoy

Were hardly sufficient for one wealthy faction.

Through cheating and bribing they paid to create

Their very own form of affirmative action.
Laurie Bertram Roberts set out to help women get abortions in the country’s most restrictive state.

So why is her house filled with diapers?

Real choice means a parent—if you
The Nation.

The first thing I noticed when I walked into Laurie Bertram Roberts’s cluttered living room was the ceiling-high stack of diaper boxes lining the wall. Initially, our plan had been to meet at the new headquarters of the Mississippi Reproductive Freedom Fund (MRFF), the nonprofit that Roberts co-founded and runs. But just as I exited I-20 into the city of Jackson, Roberts texted me to say that her plans had changed. They would change many more times throughout the afternoon.

I’d become familiar with Roberts’s work some months earlier, at a meeting of a group called New York City for Abortion Rights. The group hosted Roberts on a Skype call, and even from afar she was a riveting speaker: warm, funny, passionate, and blunt. Roberts mentioned that after the 2016 presidential election, the MRFF had received an astonishing $34,000 in donations—up from $3,500 in the years before. Suddenly, Mississippi had become an alarming preview of what abortion access might look like for the rest of the country. So, this past September, I traveled to Jackson to see firsthand how Roberts’s organization was coping with this new influx of attention and money. What I discovered was something even more interesting: that Roberts had a radical new vision for what an abortion fund could do and be.

The front door to her house was open when I arrived, and one of Roberts’s sons, in his early 20s, cleared off a chair for me to sit in while she finished up a task in the back. The four-bedroom house was brimming with people—12, to be exact. There was Roberts, her seven kids, and an assortment of friends, as well as a litter of kittens that had been born a few days earlier.

When Roberts came into the living room, she spotted a pack of emergency contraception on the bookshelf and asked her daughter to put it in the drawer with the rest of the supply. She also found a dental-dam demo in her purse. Nothing in Roberts’s world is separate from reproductive justice. Her home is a reflection, or perhaps a collection, of her work: helping people to parent, or choose not to, whether they need a Plan B pill, money for an abortion, or diapers for their newborn.

“Reproductive justice” is a framework developed by Loretta Ross and the activist group SisterSong, which defines it as “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.” SisterSong was formed in 1997 by women of color to move beyond a pro-choice paradigm that centered around white women of privilege and didn’t adequately address the intersecting issues of race, gender, class, ability, nationality, and sexual orientation.

The MRFF is part of this legacy, along with a growing number of organizations across the country that not only fund abortion access, but also provide support and resources to people who are pregnant or parenting. The MRFF also happens to be one of the few abortion funds in the country founded and led by black women. “I jokingly like to say we are the only ‘hood feminist’–led abortion fund, by which I mean unapologetically hood and black,” Roberts said.

That day, a local woman named Deirdre had just given birth to her third child and needed help: She was recovering from a cesarean section in the hospital and had learned that Child Protective Services would be visiting her house for an inspection. Deirdre didn’t have any family to help with her recovery or prepare for the CPS visit, and she was terrified that her children would be taken away. Her neighbor happened to be an MRFF board member and put her in touch with Roberts. “We see people who are suspected of neglecting their kids, but the issue is actually complex poverty,” Roberts told me.

“The real issue is, they are poor, and because we are community-based and get clients from word of mouth, it’s easy to identify what the problems are.”

Roberts immediately came up with a plan. The first step was buying all the things that Deirdre would need to satisfy CPS, such as a bassinet and a car seat. Roberts, her partner, two of her daughters, and I piled into her handicap-accessible van (Roberts has chronic health issues and often gets around in a wheelchair) and careened through Jackson’s streets to the Salvation Army Store and then on to Walmart. Roberts led the way, grabbing onesies, baby blankets, cleaning supplies, and a stroller with room for three kids. She’d dealt with the stress of CPS visits herself as a poor, single mom and wanted to give Deirdre everything. “I don’t want her to have all hand-me-downs or used stuff,” Roberts said. “Poor people deserve nice things, too.”

Ever chatty, Roberts struck up conversations with shoppers along the way and helped an elderly woman select an outfit for her new grandchild. As we cruised through the toy aisle, we ran into an MRFF board member named Kim and her nephew, who joined our crew, which was now seven people and three cars strong. The checkout girl seemed astonished; while she rang up the items, Roberts explained the MRFF’s mission: “Who celebrates black women having babies? No one.”
Roberts is not originally from Mississippi. She was born in Minnesota and raised in a fundamentalist Baptist church that was overwhelmingly white, and where she encountered racism as a biracial child. Roberts and her mother moved to Indiana when she was 14, and the adjustment to a new place was tough. While she had started off as a good student, she was bullied in high school and dropped out at 15. The next year, she got pregnant and married the father of her twins (the pair split up in 1996.) She stayed in Indiana for the next decade, where she had the rest of her children, who are now between the ages of 15 and 24.

Roberts first got into advocacy work because her twin daughters have autism, and she started attending school-board meetings to ask why there wasn’t more funding for autism education in preschool. Her cousin told me that Roberts has always been a “go-getter,” and activism and advocacy came naturally to her, thanks in part to her upbringing in evangelical churches. “The thing about being a ‘fundie’ is, they pretty much all believe in evangelizing—in going door to door, winning souls, and giving out those tracts to strangers,” Roberts said. “From the time I was 3, I was trained to do that. Community organizing is nothing compared to pushing religion on people. I was taught to have no fear.”

Roberts was pro-life, until one day she found herself in a Planned Parenthood clinic seeking an abortion. An ultrasound revealed that her pregnancy was not progressing normally and that she would miscarry, so the clinic returned her payment and suggested that she seek care through Medicaid, which covered treatment for a nonviable pregnancy. The clinic staff also checked in with her later to see how was she doing.

The experience was completely different than Roberts had expected. “I was taught that Planned Parenthood will give you an abortion even if you’re not pregnant, to take your money,” she said. Her experience at the clinic “didn’t make me super pro-choice at the time, but it opened my eyes... It debunked a lot of lies I was taught as a kid.”

A few years later, she went to a crisis-pregnancy center in Indiana for a free pregnancy test. (CPCs are anti-abortion and usually run by religious groups.) Roberts had given birth to a son—her sixth child—four months earlier and was juggling multiple jobs, mostly in fast food, to support her family. Her mother and grandmother helped out with the child care, but money was tight and her schedule was grueling. The CPC counselor asked Roberts if she was married to the father; when Roberts said no, the counselor lectured her at length about how it was important to drive patients to clinic appointments, both in and out of state. The fund that was able to purchase the handicap-accessible van. It is used, among other things, to drive patients to clinic appointments, both in and out of state. The fund was also able to buy a small house in Jackson, lovingly referred to as the “fundshack,” to serve as the center of operations instead of Roberts’s living room. The team will use the space to run its abortion-funding hotline and to provide free accommodations for patients traveling to Jackson for an appointment. The MRFF also gives away condoms and Plan B pills, and, when it can, offers money to pay birth control; at the same time, the house will provide space for hosting community baby showers, providing abortion doula support, and operating a diaper bank. The diaper mountain in Roberts’s living room will be relocated to the MRFF house once her son has installed new locks on its doors.

The Trump-bump money made a lot of new things possible, but it brought its...
own tensions, too. Last summer, a woman who works at the Pink House—which has a fund to support abortion access connected directly to its clinic—published a blog post titled “The Fleecing of Mississippi Women.” In it, the author claimed that the MRFF wasn’t putting the donation money to its professed use. “To put things in perspective, over the last few years our patients have only very sporadically been assisted by this fund,” the article read. “This year has been a continuation of the same pattern we’ve seen for many years—the fund has given $150, one time, to one patient in our clinic in all of 2018…. Yes, we understand that ‘abortion funds’ say they are assisting patients who may have to go out of state for their abortions; we understand they claim to provide other nebulous, less verifiable assistance such as child care, food, travel, lodging. But our patients, the ones coming in to the only abortion clinic in the state, are not seeing this assistance.”

Roberts openly acknowledged that some donations to the MRFF don’t go directly to funding abortion procedures, which is why it’s called a “reproductive freedom” fund instead of an “abortion” fund. She also said that the MRFF has given far more than just $150 to women going to the Pink House for abortion services, though the clinic may not realize that the cash used to pay for those services came from the MRFF. Finally, she insists that what the blog critic termed “nebulous, less verifiable assistance” is every bit as important for many women—for example, if a woman receives $500 for a procedure but can’t get to the clinic, then abortion care remains inaccessible for her. (The Jackson Women’s Health Organization, which runs the Pink House, did not respond to requests for comment.)

Roberts said it’s important that she can hear a story like Deirdre’s and deploy resources in the moment; for her, buying a stroller for one woman is no less important than paying for an abortion for another, and she says that emphasizing the distinctions between different types of assistance reflects a lack of understanding about the obstacles that poor women face. “Our job is to facilitate wherever people need to go, on their terms,” Roberts explained. “We put the money in their hands because we trust women and poor people. I don’t care if they take that money and put it towards paying their light bill.”

Accountability has been part of this dispute—donors should have a right to know where their money is going—but it’s also about a difference in perspective regarding the scope of the group’s work. As the only member of the National Network of Abortion Funds in Mississippi, the MRFF is in a prime position to capture the adherence of people who want to support abortion access—but the organization is clear that abortion funding is only one part of a larger mandate.

Yamani Hernandez, the executive director of the NNAF, said that her organization fully supports this more expansive approach. “Our work is about more than solely funding abortion,” she said in an e-mail; it’s about “building a movement that is strong enough to fight the systemic issues that make abortion funds necessary. The Mississippi Reproductive Freedom Fund is a visionary abortion fund in the network and are leaders in pushing a reproductive-justice framework.”

In that respect, the MRFF is part of a broader shift among groups that enable abortion access to also provide support for women who are pregnant or parenting: “The shift in the current view of reproductive-health care [is] to be inclusive of policies that would support the ability to better parent, like universal child care, or [to] expand access to reproductive-health care for the most marginalized, like health care for all and certainly the repeal of the Hyde amendment [which bars Medicaid from funding abortions],” said Dr. Leanna Wen, the president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, in an e-mail.

This more expansive approach may not change the minds of people who oppose abortion, but it does undermine the myth that to support abortion rights is somehow to be against having children. In Memphis, a group called CHOICES provides not just abortion care but also adoption referrals, birth and midwifery services, miscarriage management, birth control, and more. In Bloomington, Indiana, the All-Options Pregnancy Resource Center provides comprehensive pregnancy counseling and other resources, whether the woman decides on abortion, adoption, or keeping the baby. All-Options also runs the Hoosier Abortion Fund, as well as a diaper bank.

“We really wanted to open a pregnancy center that was done right, in a way that, frankly, our movement hasn’t done and that CPCs have taken advantage of,” said Parker Dockray, the executive director of All-Options. “Our goal is to support people who want to continue to parent and are struggling, and [to] hold that in the same space as an abortion fund and referrals to abortion providers.” For her part, the NNAF’s Hernandez said that she’d love to see more abortion funds develop in this direction—but one big challenge is that most funds can’t meet the overwhelming demand just for abortion support. Last year, for example, the NNAF fielded 150,000 calls, but was only able to provide support for 29,000 callers.

A fter our troupe finished loading up the van, Roberts’s plan was to visit Deirdre at the hospital, drop the Walmart purchases off at her home, and swing by the MRFF house to give me a tour. But as we were heading out of the parking lot, Roberts spotted a family standing on a grassy median in front of a gas station with a sign that said they needed gas money. (continued on page 24)
The Pentagon plan to overhaul the US nuclear arsenal is as costly as it is dangerous.
THERE IS NO HIGHER PRIORITY FOR NATIONAL DEFENSE,” THE PENTAGON DECLARED LAST YEAR, THAN FOR THE UNITED STATES to “replace its strategic nuclear triad and sustain the warheads it carries.” In plain English, this means spending an estimated $1.7 trillion to rebuild every component of the US nuclear arsenal: the entire three-legged strategic “triad” of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and long-range bombers. Military officials claim the existing force has become obsolete and inflexible, and thus unable to deter potential adversaries. In order to eliminate any doubt that America has the will and the capacity to wreak catastrophic retribution, they argue, we need to replace our current atomic weapons with even more terrifying ones. “To remain effective [as a deterrent force],” explained then-Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis in February 2018, “we must recapitalize our Cold War legacy nuclear forces.”

“Recapitalize,” “modernize,” “replace”: These are the anodyne terms being used by the Pentagon and the Trump administration to describe their exorbitant plans to overhaul America’s nuclear arsenal. With great-power conflict now the defining theme in US military strategy, the administration seeks weapons that can overawe Russia and China. At the same time, White House officials—led by National Security Adviser John Bolton—seek to extinguish any remaining arms-control agreements that might constrain US arms-acquisition efforts. Bolton has already orchestrated the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which covers short- and medium-range missiles, and has reportedly set his sights on scuttling the last remaining curb on intercontinental weapons, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), when it comes up for renewal in 2021.

Refurbishing the nuclear arsenal and exiting arms-control agreements are all part of a White House effort to restore the coercive power of the US stockpile. At the height of the Cold War, no one doubted America’s nuclear forces. From the early 1960s to the late ’80s, this country possessed some 25,000 nuclear warheads—more than enough to eradicate every city, town, and village crossroads in the Soviet Union many times over. But with the Cold War receding farther into the distance, the idea of employing such weapons in combat has become less credible. In 2009, President Barack Obama proclaimed his intent to “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy,” and the following year he signed the New START agreement with Russia, resulting in a 50 percent reduction in the number of deployed US warheads.

While bringing relief to those of us who feared the devastating consequences of nuclear war, the move provoked dismay among hawkish Republicans and military leaders who view nuclear arms as the ultimate tool of national power. These policy-makers believe that vast stores of doomsday bombs and missiles allow the United States to threaten and intimidate countries that either lack such weapons or rely on the US for its “nuclear umbrella”—as do most NATO powers and Japan. American leaders also insist on holding out the threat of nuclear-weapons use to scare off an array of potential non-nuclear attacks on the US and its allies, such as a large-scale conventional Russian assault on NATO. For the United States to retain its status as the world’s paramount power, therefore, it must restore the fear-inducing nature of its nuclear arms.

The Pentagon’s radical approach is spelled out in its most recent Nuclear Posture Review. Released in February 2018, it was the first official statement of US strategic policy since the April 2010 NPR. Whereas the earlier document promised to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in military strategy, the 2018 version reasserted their vital importance. And whereas the Obama-era NPR foresaw a gradual contraction of the US atomic arsenal, the Trumpian iteration calls for its modernization and expansion. Not only does the new NPR envision the replacement of all existing weapons with more capable systems; it also authorizes the acquisition of several new types of “low-yield” munitions, supposedly intended for use against conventional forces.

In making the case for a complete atomic overhaul, the NPR advances two broad claims: first, that the strategic triad’s current components have become old and untrustworthy; and second, that potential adversaries—notably Russia and China—have taken advantage of America’s complacency to modernize their own arsenals and acquire new classes of weapons, including some intended for potential use against NATO forces in Europe. “Over the past several decades,” the NPR claims, “the US nuclear weapons infrastructure has suffered the effects of age and underfunding.” Not so, it continues, for America’s rivals. “While the United States has continued to reduce the number and salience of nuclear weapons, others, including Russia and China, have moved in the opposite direction. They have added new types of nuclear capabilities to
their arsenals, [and] increased the salience of nuclear forces in their strategies and plans.”

One can easily dispute this. To begin with, Russia, like the United States, has reduced the number of its deployed nuclear warheads in accordance with New START, while China has only made incremental upgrades to its relatively small stockpile. More to the point, the Pentagon has steadily improved the accuracy, durability, and destructive capacity of its own arsenal during this period, at a cost of many billions of dollars—spending some $7 billion, for example, on upgrades to the Minuteman III ICBM, and another $15 billion on improved variants of the Trident D5 SLBM. Nevertheless, the perception that the United States has somehow fallen behind in the nuclear-arms race remains pervasive within Washington’s elite circles.

The Strategic Triad

O what exactly are the Pentagon’s plans for rebuilding the US arsenal? To begin with, we are speaking here of “strategic” nuclear weapons—that is, weapons aimed at the homeland of another nuclear-armed power. (The United States also possesses “nonstrategic” nuclear weapons, consisting mainly of gravity bombs stored in Europe for air delivery against enemy ground forces and installations.) This strategic arsenal is supposedly intended to deter an adversary from mounting nuclear or nonnuclear attacks on the US or its allies by threatening cataclysmic vengeance. And if “deterrence fails” (as such a nightmare scenario is usually worded), American weapons are designed to obliterate an adversary, including the destruction of as many of its launch capabilities as possible, thereby minimizing the number of American cities incinerated by retaliatory strikes. Bear in mind that any such outcome, even with reduced US urban annihilation, would result in a nuclear winter—a planet-wide dust cloud blocking the sun for years or even decades, which would likely bring human civilization to an end.

To ensure that America’s deterrent capacity is never in doubt, the United States has long relied on the triad, that tripartite combination of retaliatory weapons systems: ground-based ICBMs, submarine-borne SLBMs, and long-range bombers. Even if one or two of these systems were lost to an enemy first-strike attack, the argument goes, the remaining one would still be able to retaliate on a massive scale, hence eliminating the temptation for an aggressor to ever mount such an assault. Missile-carrying submarines are considered particularly effective in this respect, as it’s almost impossible to plot their locations in real time; the locations of ICBM launch facilities and bomber bases, however, are well established.

With the end of the Cold War, some nuclear strategists have questioned the need for a triad of retaliatory systems, arguing that two (or even one) would be sufficient, so long as it includes submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Nevertheless, Pentagon officials insist on the vital necessity of a three-legged deterrent. “Eliminating any leg of the triad would greatly ease adversary attack planning and allow an adversary to concentrate resources and attention on defeating the remaining two legs,” the NPR asserts. This is nonsense; no current or potential adversary possesses the ability to locate and destroy America’s missile-carrying subs while they’re at sea, and so the prospect of “defeating the remaining legs” of the US deterrent—and thereby escaping obliteration—is a total fantasy. Nevertheless, the triad remains an article of faith among US defense planners, and the Pentagon’s plans for nuclear modernization encompass all three of its component systems.

In accordance with New START, the US strategic arsenal (like Russia’s) is constrained in the number of nuclear-armed missiles and strategic bombers that can be deployed. When that treaty came into full effect in February 2018, the United States was limited to a maximum of 700 deployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and nuclear-armed long-range bombers. From the inventories compiled by the Arms Control Association and the Federation of American Scientists, we’ve learned that the Pentagon has allocated these weapons as follows:

§ 400 silo-based Minuteman III ICBMs, each carrying one warhead;

§ Up to 280 multiple-warhead Trident II D5 SLBMs carried aboard 12 Ohio-class submarines, each capable of firing 20 missiles (two additional subs and their missiles are usually out of commission at any given time for repairs and modernization); and

§ 20 B-2 stealth bombers, each capable of carrying 16 gravity bombs, plus up to 46 B-52H bombers, each capable of delivering 20 nuclear-armed, air-launched cruise missiles.

Under the Pentagon’s current plans, every one of these systems will be replaced over the next few decades, at massive taxpayer expense. Preliminary research and design work on some of these replacement systems began during the Obama administration—a concession that Obama made to secure Senate ratification of New START—but full-scale development only commenced after Trump took office, and the real expense of production and procurement lies ahead.
Other Weapons Programs

In addition to seeking upgraded replacements for all existing systems, the Trump administration also plans to acquire an array of so-called low-yield weapons (powerful enough, say, to destroy Hoboken, New Jersey, but not all of New York City) for use against enemy combat formations, command centers, and other battlefield components. Two such munitions were proposed in the 2018 NPR: a low-yield warhead to be fitted on some existing SLBMs, and a nuclear-armed, sea-launched cruise missile.

These weapons are needed, the NPR insists, because Russia has acquired its own low-yield munitions and believes they can be used to defeat superior NATO conventional forces in Europe without provoking nuclear retaliation by the United States, because—or so it is claimed by Trumpian analysts—an American president would hesitate to employ the massively destructive nuclear weapons currently in the US arsenal, and thus risk reprisal in kind. If, however, American leaders possessed slightly less destructive weapons, the Russians could have no such confidence in US restraint and therefore would not be tempted to use their own low-yield nukes. This whole argument is malarkey: No Russian leader could ever assume an American president would refrain from retaliating with nuclear arms against a Russian nuclear strike (however “low yield”), and in any case the US already possesses low-yield nonstrategic bombs in Europe that offer precisely this option.

Aside from its lack of strategic relevance, the administration’s plans to acquire new low-yield weapons is troubling because it suggests an intent to make nuclear weapons more “ usable”—if not in practice, then as a coercive tool. Threats involving smaller nuclear arms may possess greater credibility—or so Pentagon analysts appear to think. As explained by Mattis, the NPR “ calls for the diverse set of nuclear capabilities that provides an American president flexibility to tailor the approach to deterring one or more potential adversaries in different circumstances.” Cut through this gobbledygook, and we’re talking about using nuclear weapons in a wide range of potential circumstances: Among those explicitly cited by Pentagon officials was a cyberattack on US command-and-control facilities.

The pursuit of low-yield nuclear weapons and America’s withdrawal from the INF Treaty also hint at a larger goal of Trumpian strategy: to enable the United States to conduct attacks on critical Russian and Chinese military assets. Prior to the signing of the treaty in 1987, the US possessed ground-based weapons capable of striking Soviet battle formations and command centers with very little warning. Under the INF Treaty, all of these weapons (and their Soviet equivalents) were destroyed. Now, White House officials want new, far more advanced cruise and ballistic missiles with targeting purposes similar to those banned by the treaty. Even if armed with conventional warheads (the Pentagon is vague about the eventual payload of these proposed systems), any attack with these weapons would pose a threat to the Russian or Chinese homeland and so could prompt them to adopt a launch-on-warning posture for their own nuclear missiles. On March 13, the Pentagon indicated that it is preparing to flight-test two such weapons starting in August, assuming (as is expected) that the INF withdrawal has taken effect by that time.

Stopping the Rush to Nuclear Enhancement

The price tag on all of this is staggering, when the bipartisan Congressional Budget Office tallied up the costs of designing, producing, deploying, and maintaining (over a 30-year period) the nuclear weapons and support systems currently sought by the Department of Defense, it arrived at the figure of $1.2 trillion in 2017 dollars. At the current rate of inflation, this will entail public expenditures of at least $1.7 trillion, not including cost overruns, which are always to be expected. Even by Pentagon standards, this is a lot of money.

For some, this will be a debate about dollars: Why spend so much money on new nukes when those dollars are more urgently required elsewhere? Certainly, the extravagant cost of replacing all existing nuclear weapons is a good enough reason to oppose the Pentagon’s plans. But while cost is a significant factor in the debate over nuclear-weapons modernization, it is essential to question the underlying strategic logic for replacing these weapons—or, for that matter, retaining the existing ones.

For many in the United States and around the world, any use of nuclear weapons, however “limited,” would produce a humanitarian catastrophe so vast as to outweigh any conceivable advantage from their deployment. It was (continued on page 26)

Where Is the Money Going?

If Congress approves the Pentagon’s full request for strategic nuclear-weapons replacement, this will involve:

- **A new ICBM to replace all Minuteman IIs**, currently identified as the “ground-based strategic deterrent.” The Air Force expects to purchase more than 600 of these new missiles (400 for active deployment, the rest for tests and spares).
  **Total cost: More than $140 billion**

- **A new fleet of missile-carrying submarines**, the Columbia class, to replace the existing Ohio class. At present, the Navy plans to procure 12 of the new vessels, each of which will carry 16 submarine-launched ballistic missiles.
  **Total cost: $128 billion**

- **A new long-range bomber** with enhanced stealth capabilities, the B-21 Raider, to replace both the B-2 and the B-52. The Air Force plans to procure at least 100 B-21s, at an average cost of from $546 million to $606 million apiece (in 2016 dollars).
  **Total cost: $97 billion**

- **A new air-launched cruise missile**, termed a “long-range stand-off weapon” (LRSO), to be carried by the B-21. The Air Force plans to procure some 1,000 LRSOs, which will have greater range, accuracy, and stealth capabilities than the current air-launched cruise missiles.
  **Total cost: $11 billion**
In early February, as a polar vortex blasted down from the North and temperatures hovered around 2 degrees Fahrenheit, nearly 1,600 men and women locked in Brooklyn’s Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC) pounded on the bars of their darkened windows to call the public’s attention to their utter lack of heat or electricity. Family members gathered outside, demanding help for their loved ones, and media outlets from The New York Times to CNN scrambled to understand what could possibly have led to such a dramatic scene.

What emerged over the course of the next several charged days was a picture of Dickensian cruelty and squalor: people forced to drink tap water that was alarmingly brown and cloudy; one man left to lay on sheets bloody from his untreated ulcerative colitis; another man, who’d been deprived of a nebulizer, lying on the floor of his cell gasping for breath—all while officials from the Bureau of Prisons lied to the public about just how bad the conditions were. What’s more, the people suffering this treatment were overwhelmingly black, brown, and poor, and they were forced to suffer it simply because they weren’t able to secure pretrial release.

The treatment of those inside this federal facility was so ugly that even the judges who regularly sent defendants there to await trial spoke out. They were particularly troubled by the revelations that the people inside were being prevented from seeing lawyers. As Judge LaShann DeArcy Hall told The New York Times, “the wholesale denial” of their right to counsel was unaccept-
Fifty years ago, New York’s jails erupted in rebellion. As protests again rock a New York detention center, their story reminds us how little has changed.

HEATHER ANN THOMPSON

for help, unfurling signs written on bedsheets that could have been written today: “All we want is to be treated like human beings. There are no medications for the sick. Unhealthy cells. Unhealthy food.” And back then, too, journalists, politicians, and even judges rushed to the scene with expressions of outrage and promises of change.

Half a century later, those events have largely been forgotten, scrubbed from the public memory by time, disinterest, and the national love affair with mass incarceration. But placed side by side with the MDC eruption, New York’s 1970 jail uprisings remind us that the conditions that recently spawned so much unrest are neither new nor aberrant. Nor are they limited to the menacing incarceration compound hovering over Brooklyn’s waterfront. They exist in local jails and federal penitentiaries across time zones and time periods—and it is essential not just to marvel when they arise but, instead, to finally address the conditions that lead to such eruptions.

The story of the New York City jail rebellions begins in the early-morning hours of August 10, 1970. As office clerks, maintenance workers, waitresses, and lawyers boarded the subway to work, the Manhattan House of Detention, popularly known as “the Tombs,” erupted. Those on the sidewalk below looked up with curiosity and concern as the sounds of glass breaking and men yelling spilled from the windows above. Soon, these men had penned a list of clearly articulated grievances, ranging from the fact that “many of us have been waiting for a trial date for an average of eight months” to the “unnecessary brutality” being “largely directed against the black and Puerto Rican inmate population.”

Until that moment, most New Yorkers had thought very little about what went on inside this building. Few had likely considered that those who were locked inside the hulking structure had not been found guilty of a crime and were there merely because they couldn’t afford bail. Few were aware that these same people were forced to endure deplorable living conditions and even abuse—in fact, the beating of a black detainee by three white guards had touched off the protest. And few would have known how these men had begged for help—even sending city officials a petition that minced no words regarding just how bad things were.

The Tombs had been designed to hold a maximum of 932 men—and yet, on this hot summer weekend, it was 213 percent over capacity. Three or four men had been jammed into each of the facility’s tiny cells, which were meant to hold no more than two people. Those last into the cells were often forced to sleep on the dirty concrete floor, at times without bedding, alongside the roaches and rats that nested there. Infestations of body lice were com-

Until that moment, New Yorkers had thought very little about what went on inside that building.

able and a clear violation of their constitutional rights.

Yet, as disturbing as the conditions inside the MDC were revealed to be, few of the abuses should have startled us, just as we shouldn’t have been startled by the dramatic protest those abuses sparked. Nor should we have been surprised—or particularly comforted—by the sudden interest from the media or judges. Sadly, we have been here before.

Nearly 50 years ago, in the summer and fall of 1970, dramatic protest rocked the entire New York City jail system—from Manhattan to Queens, Brooklyn, and Rikers Island. Back then, too, inhumane living conditions and the severe overcrowding that results from a deeply discriminatory bail system had created a serious human rights crisis. Back then, too, those inside the prison cried
mon and showers rare, as the jail lacked adequate bathing facilities. As one man who “hadn’t showered in a week” reported, even when the guards finally al-

lowed him to clean up, he still had to put on the same clothes in which he’d
been arrested. “They stunk,” he said. “No matter how clean I was, I still stunk.”

This man, like virtually all the others crammed into this jail, was forced to
live in such squalor because he hadn’t been able to afford bail as he awaited ar-

raignment or trial. By August of 1970, a full 8,000 men had been sitting in New
York’s various city jails for months without ever seeing a judge. One of them, Junius Avery, spent 37 months in the Tombs before learning that his case was
being dismissed. He had spent this time in jail after being charged with burglary,
and only because he had no way of meeting bail, which had been set at $5,000.

If most New Yorkers had no clue about the horror that was the Tombs,
Mayor John Lindsay could claim no such ignorance: He’d been made well
aware of how abysmal the conditions were there, as well as how imposing a
problem the cash-bail system was for so many in his city. One state senator,
John Dunne, had toured nine city jails, as well as 22 county facilities and four
upstate penitentiaries, just a year earlier, and had offered the
mayor his findings: a scathing report on the condi-
tions, alarming rates of suicide, and compromised con-
stitutional rights that had come to define the city’s jails.
And by at least December of 1969, Lindsay had been
thoroughly briefed on the depth of this human-rights
crisis. That month, he had received a follow-up visit from
Dunne, who insisted that the city needed to act imme-
diately on behalf of the thousands of people who were
trapped in one of New York’s many jails.

That the Tombs erupted less than a year later made it
clear how little had been done despite Dunne’s efforts, as
well as those of countless men and women who had expe-
rienced the city’s criminal-justice system firsthand. Even
so, state and local officials failed to recognize the August
1970 uprising—in which men took their guards hostage
and agreed to release them only after officials promised
to remedy their conditions—as the wake-up call it was.

There were a handful of exceptions, however.
On August 13, 1970, as tensions still simmered,
Dunne announced that he would hold a series of
public hearings to make sure the issues plaguing
the facility would not be swept under the rug. A
lifelong Republican, Dunne could hardly be accused of
being a “bleeding-heart liberal,” and his renewed efforts
to bring attention to the abominable conditions of jails in
the city and the state made headlines.

During Dunne’s hearings, the true scale of the abuse
was finally made public. As the cameras panned the faces
of the many spectators, it was clear that most were hor-
rified. They heard, for example, from five men who sat
handcuffed together what it really meant to sleep, night
after night, without blankets on cement floors. They lis-
tened, visibly recoiling, as they learned what it felt like
to be forced to lie within mere inches of one another,
complete strangers, without any of them having been al-
lowed to shower or given a fresh change of clothes. “Visit
the institutions,” one man beseeched the room, “and then
for yourselves give an honest report of its mentally dying
population who breaks windows in the Tombs, not to es-
cape but to say: ‘Remember me.’”

To underscore the fact that such stories were impor-
tant and needed follow-up, Dunne and his Committee on
Crime and Corrections soon issued another major report
titled, simply, “The Tombs’ Disturbance.” This 55-page
document not only chided the state’s Commission on
Corrections for “failing to utilize the powers it possessed
to compel the city to correct the overcrowding and in-
humane conditions in its institutions,” but also provided
a list of 32 concrete proposals for bringing meaningful
change to the system.

Four days before the report could be issued to the
public, however, on October 1, 1970, the Long Island
City branch of the Queens House of Detention exploded
in a dramatic rebellion. This, too, should have surprised
no one: The 95-year-old facility was also filled far be-

yond its capacity—by nearly 95 percent—and, as one de-
tainee, Victor Martinez, insisted to the crowd of friends
and family that had begun to gather outside, it was “not
fit for animals, never mind human beings.”

Martinez, a member of the Puerto Rican Young Lords
Party, knew well that the conditions that black and brown
New Yorkers experienced in jail closely mirrored those
they endured in the nation as a whole. He and myriad
other activists on the inside, including members of the
Black Panther Party, were determined to overhaul both.
In the service of this goal, they drafted a list of demands
that they then handed to reporters descending on the fa-
cility. These ranged from the basic request that the city
provide every person detained with towels, soap, and
toothpaste to the more controversial demand that offi-
cials take legal action against those prison guards who,
detainees claimed, had stolen from them.

This time, the men inside the jail didn’t trust the mere
promise of reform, and they demanded that officials from
both the city and the state meet with them to discuss
making immediate improvements. Two days later, in an
extraordinary scene, discussions began in the courtyard
of the Long Island City jail between a six-man negoti-
ating committee from inside the prison and the various
luminaries they had insisted come to meet with them, in-
cluding Mayor Lindsay’s counsel, Congresswoman Shir-
ley Chisholm, congressional candidate Herman Badillo,
Minister Louis Farrakhan, and Department of Correc-
tions Commissioner George McGrath. No sooner had
the requested observers taken their seats at the table than
the negotiating committee asked the city to arrange for
some judges to come to the jail as well, so they could im-
immediately begin addressing the scores of long-overdue cases that had kept it so crowded.

Much to their astonishment, three esteemed jurists—Justice James J. Leff, Criminal Court Judge Edward R. Dudley, and Justice Andrew Tyler—or did arrive, and immediately began the most efficient bail-hearing procedure the city had ever seen. As Badillo put it, “The proceedings were becoming embarrassing…. Over two-thirds of [those inside] were being held for less than $1,000 bail.” Indeed, by the end of the day, the judges had given nine men parole and had reduced the usurious bail that had originally been set for four others. But the judges left the jail after hearing only 15 cases, which led to new anger from the men inside. As Badillo noted wryly, “It was perfectly clear that, had the judges stayed to hear all 460 cases, at least 400 of those men would have been released on the spot…. [T]here was no real reason for the constant crisis in our jails…. [T]hey are there because they are poor and can’t afford to put up the bail.”

The judges’ sudden departure was met with such outrage because, by that Saturday afternoon, the Long Island City facility wasn’t the only one that needed their attention. Just the day before, on October 2, the Tombs had erupted again, this time on the 11th floor. After taking hostages, these protesters expressed their solidarity with the men at the Long Island City jail and, like them, insisted on meeting with officials—in this case, Mayor Lindsay himself. By week’s end, more than 900 men at the Queens House of Detention in Kew Gardens, along with hundreds more at the dreaded Brooklyn House of Detention for Men and a group of young people on Rikers Island, had also launched their own protests against the inhumane conditions in the jail system.

Among the many issues sparking discontent at the Kew Gardens facility was the fact that its 1,400 inhabitants had been jammed into a space designed for only 932. Also, as at every other city jail, the men at this facility had been waiting forever to see the inside of a courtroom. Haywood Booth had been imprisoned in D-3, an overcrowded cell on Tier 5 of Kew Gardens, for 197 days on a burglary charge and still had no idea when he would get a trial date. George Colcloughley had been held in the jail since June of 1969. After a full year of imprisonment, Colcloughley begged a judge either to try him or let him go. Three months later, Colcloughley was still there.

Similar injustices prompted the men in the Brooklyn House of Detention to rise up. They had just heard about the bond hearings taking place at the Long Island City jail, and they wanted their cases addressed as well. The Brooklyn House of Detention had been designed to hold only 960 men, yet by October 4, 1970, there were 1,591 locked inside—in fact, of all the city’s jails, this one was the most overcrowded. By 4 PM that day, the facility, located in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood, was surrounded by some 3,000 onlookers as the men inside smashed windows and flung moldy bedding, as well as dead rodents and roaches, to the pavement.

These same onlookers, many of whom were family members of those inside, soon found themselves tangling with the throngs of policemen who had been ordered to surround the jail and keep anyone from entering or leaving it. According to news reports, “rocks and bottles were hurled at passing police cars,” after which police pushed “the crowd back along Atlantic Avenue” and made several arrests. Given that these officers were fully armed, and that “some shots were fired by police at persons throwing objects from roofs,” it seemed entirely likely that the day would end in a bloodbath.

Twelve hours later, things did indeed end violently after police officers stormed the building. In this retaking, as well as the one playing out simultaneously in Kew Gardens, more than 200 detainees were injured. Later, the city would indict 28 men on various riot-related charges, with nine of them facing 35 years in prison. And rather than acknowledge that some 4,000 detainees had risked everything to draw attention to the horrific conditions in the jail system, the city would simply send scores of them to upstate prisons like Attica—far from their family and friends—thus puniting on the overcrowding crisis.

And yet the New York City jail rebellions had mattered. As historian Toussaint Losier has noted, the men in these jails had grown deeply politicized, both by their experiences on the streets and in jail, and over several days they managed to force the city to address the crisis of confinement. These changes, Losier writes, ranged from “a ninety-day limit on pretrial detention” to “regular visits to the Tombs and Branch Queens by pest exterminators,” to “the availability of abortion on request and weekly visits by a gynecologist to the Women’s House of Detention; better training of new correction officers; and establishment of an Investigation Unit to look into allegations of excessive use of force and other violations of Departmental rules.”

The need to continue such reforms, however, was soon forgotten, as New York, and the nation as a whole, chose to double down on the War on Crime that President Lyndon Johnson had launched in the wake of the urban uprisings of 1964. As the city then embraced the new War on Drugs that its governor, Nelson Rockefeller, initiated in the wake of the 1971 Attica uprising, jails grew even more crowded and brutal. The drug war, which intensified as the 1980s and ’90s wore on, meant that by the dawn of the new millennium, more New Yorkers had found themselves locked in a city jail than at any other time in
Gotham’s history—and, though it is hard to fathom, conditions in those facilities had only gotten worse. One need look no farther than the story of Kalief Browder—who was forced, beginning at age 16, to spend three years in Rikers for allegedly stealing a backpack—to grasp the devastating contours of the crisis in New York’s jails.

And so, once again, just a month into 2019, a jail in New York City erupted in rebellion. Once again, family members crowded outside the jail, hoping to see the faces of their loved ones. And, once again, pressure from the media finally compelled judges to leave the comfort of their courtrooms and go see the conditions that await those they remand, in such record numbers, to detention rather than allowing them to stay at home and await trial.

This time, the protest took place at a federal jail—a facility overseen not by New York Mayor Bill de Blasio or Governor Andrew Cuomo, but, ultimately, by officials in Washington, DC. And yet, despite some differences between the two types of facilities (a different way of determining bail, for example), the overwhelmingly black, brown, and poor detainees at this federal detention facility endure the same abuses that the men in the New York City jails suffered almost five decades earlier—and continue to experience now. As Governor Cuomo put it after learning of conditions at the MDC: “No one in New York should live in fear that they may freeze to death alone in the dark.”

But as history shows us, declarations such as these—even when prompted by honest surprise and genuine sympathy—are no longer enough. For decades, the people locked in America’s jails have been treated with a callous disregard for their basic needs and fundamental rights. Now, as before, they are being held there only because they are poor. And now, as always, these same people are standing together to insist that they be treated as human beings.

(continued from page 15)

The family included a father, a pregnant mother, and three young children. Roberts told her partner to pull over, got out of the van, and asked the family if they needed a hotel room for the night. They said yes, not quite believing what they were hearing. While Roberts searched on her phone for an affordable hotel room—one with free breakfast and enough space for the whole family—she told her daughter to use the MRFF debit card to fill up their car’s gas tank. With the room booked and the gas tank full, the family followed us to the hotel.

At this point, it was getting dark, and there was rush-hour traffic to deal with. When we finally arrived at the hotel, Roberts walked into the front office to check the family in and then handed them their keys. She told them she’d have a pizza delivered to their room and gave them a box of Size 4 diapers for the toddler. The mother gave each of us a huge hug, including me.

At this point, it was 8:30 pm and everyone was tired, so we called it a night. Roberts and some other members of the MRFF would go to Deirdre’s place in the morning to get everything ready before CPS arrived.

As her kids unloaded the car, Roberts turned on the van’s interior light and mused about all the things she hopes to do with the MRFF house: a food pantry, a lending library, sex-education classes, parenting seminars, a community doula program. Her mother passed away recently at age 63, and Roberts, now 40, has been thinking a lot about her own mortality and the legacy she wants to leave.

“If nothing else, I raised seven amazing, empathetic, compassionate children, and I showed what a reproductive justice organization can be,” she said. “I can’t help everyone, but the work matters to the ones I can.”
Greece

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Maria Margaronis writes from The Nation’s London bureau. A former associate literary editor of the magazine, she has written for many other publications, including The Guardian, London Review of Books, The Times Literary Supplement, and The New York Times. She writes and presents radio documentaries for the BBC.

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We cannot afford to leave nuclear-weapons policy to the “experts” in Washington or a few dedicated activists.

In the weeks and months ahead, Smith and his colleagues on both the House and Senate Armed Services committees will be grilling Pentagon officials on these issues and introducing bills to block funding for new munitions. On March 12, the Department of Defense handed Congress its proposed budget for fiscal year 2020, including $31 billion for upgrades to the strategic triad. Peace and antinuclear advocates will thus have multiple opportunities to question the cost and morality of US nuclear strategy and to campaign against dangerous additions to the arsenal. Concerned citizens can call or write their congressional representatives to voice support for such efforts. To keep abreast of news in this area, contact the Arms Control Association, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, Peace Action, or the Union of Concerned Scientists.

We cannot afford to leave nuclear-weapons policy to the “experts” in Washington or a few dedicated activists. —April 8, 2019

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played a pretty big role in a labor fight noted in Erik Loomis’s entertaining, tough-minded, and strenuously argued new book, *A History of America in Ten Strikes*. Back in the day, I was a “comprehensive campaign” guy—the newish strategic paradigm that was supposed to compensate for labor’s loss of shop-floor power by investigating and pressuring a company’s entire business operation. Loomis describes one such campaign: a lockout of 1,700 members of the United Steelworkers (USW) at the Ravenswood Aluminum Corporation (RAC) in Ravenswood, West Virginia, between 1990 and 1992. Marc Rich controlled the RAC, and as the world’s most powerful metals trader, he was nicknamed “Aluminumfinger,” a nod to the classic James Bond villain Auric Goldfinger. At the time, Rich was a top target of the FBI and Interpol and a fugitive from justice, having been indicted in 1983 for what was then the largest tax-evasion case in US history. (Bill Clinton later controversially pardoned him for his alleged crimes.) The workers were steeped in West Virginian solidarity, and the campaign that we organized spared no expense or effort in attacking Rich’s international empire. The USW sent workers all over North America and Europe to harass Rich—from New York and Vancouver to London, Amsterdam, Paris, Bucharest, and Zug, Switzerland, where Rich lived, protected by the country’s lenient

Rich Yeselson is a former union strategic campaigner and a contributing editor to *Dissent*. He is working on a book about the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act.
money-laundering laws. The campaign disrupted Rich’s business deals and got the US Mint to stop buying copper from a man who had flouted the American system of justice.

Loomis writes only a few sentences about the campaign, and he can’t convey how crazy, often scary, and just damn exhilarating the whole thing was: the “Got him!” thrill that I had in the bowels of the Jackson County, West Virginia, courthouse when I found a loan document signed by a top assistant to Rich, thus confirming Rich’s control of the RAC (pre-Internet research, young’uns!); a risky effort to personally embarrass Rich at the World Economic Forum in Davos; the death threat delivered in person to my boss on a London street by large men emerging from a black BMW; the attempted murder on an Alps ski slope of a business competitor of Rich’s who was one of our informants; the puppet theater in European squares with solidarity support from foreign unions; and the Marc Rich WANTED poster in eight languages distributed all over the world, which drove him crazy.

And the best part is that we won! All the workers got their jobs back; the hated local-plant manager was fired; and, Bond-villain style, Rich hosted the USW’s president and vice president in his Zug hideaway, serving champagne to the union adversaries who had taken him down. But then deindustrialization hollowed out the RAC; the company went through a few new owners, changed its name, and finally stopped production in 2009 (although a more successful segment of the company has modernized its operations and still employs 1,100 unionized workers). So thinking about the best and most interesting work of my union career is bittersweet: The workers and the union were aggressive, stalwart, and inventive, but the nation’s union-density numbers in the wake of our victory only continued to decline, year after year after year. No, this campaign did not mark “the Revival of American Labor,” as the subtitle of Ravenswood, Tom Juravich and Kate Bronfenbrenner’s excellent book on the lockout, hopefully proclaimed.

Loomis, a professor of American history at the University of Rhode Island and a Twitter scourge of revanchist right-wingers, sell-out liberals, and delusional leftists alike, tackles this dilemma head on. And despite some carelessness here and there, A History of America in Ten Strikes, along with two rather different books in method and structure, Nelson Lichtenstein’s State of the Union and Jake Rosenfeld’s What Unions No Longer Do, is one of the best books to give to anyone who wants a relatively quick way into the history and prospects of unions and the working class in the United States.

Loomis is one of a number of contemporary scholars and thinkers whom I would call “pessimistic militants”—embodiments of the Gramscian cliché about pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. The pessimistic militants study American history deeply, and reluctantly conclude that their desired goal—an egalitarian America—is not the likely historical trajectory. But they hope they’re wrong.

At first, one can imagine how A History of America in Ten Strikes might generate an obvious parlor game for the knowledgeable reader: Did Loomis pick the right 10 strikes? Which were the most historically significant, socially complex, and eerily resonant? The eight-hour strikes of 1886 were a critical event in the Gilded Age. So too was the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, which helped demarcate the transition from the war over slave labor to the battle over wage labor, and which anxious moguls compared to the Paris Commune of a few years earlier. But A History of America in Ten Strikes doesn’t actually try to tell all of US labor history and most of US history in just 10 strikes. Loomis has a lucid method, even if he doesn’t announce it in the book’s introduction: Following Theda Skocpol, Marshall Sahlins, and William Sewell, he builds a narrative around the classic relationship between events and the larger structures they refer to and sometimes also transform. Loomis wants to show his readers what leads to and results from the “special moments” when strikes occur and unsettle the quotidian experience of work.

This interaction between event and structure is the book’s organizing principle. Loomis makes one strike narrative the centerpiece of each chapter, beginning with the Lowell Mill Girl strikes of the 1830s and ending with the Justice for Janitors campaign launched by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in the 1990s. As he moves from one episode to the next, Loomis belies the claim in his book’s title; he manages to squeeze in sentences, paragraphs, or pages discussing just about every important labor conflict in American history. (Not quite all, though—he omits two crucial 20th-century strikes: the extraordinary but failed effort to organize the steel industry in 1919 and the 1959 US Steel strike, one of the largest strikes in American history.)

To cover all this ground, Ten Strikes is naturally a work of synthesis, relying mostly on the enormous secondary literature on the American working class of the past half-century. But what Loomis loses in thick description and original research, he gains in constructing a much wider canvas of disparate Americans coming together in solidarity and struggle, fighting to change their workplaces and expand the possibility of self-rule in a capitalist democracy.

The book’s narrative, therefore, is grounded in workplace struggle, but it has wider implications that extend into the national ordering and distribution of economic and political power. In his discussion of the Lowell strikes of 1836, for example, Loomis tells us how the integration of low-paid women workers into the wage-labor workforce at the textile plants in antebellum New England helps to explain the story of how a household subsistence economy became the low-wage factory system of industrial capitalism. The Northern-based ideology of “free labor”—a quasi-utopian vision of independent white–male workers and small businessmen—excluded women and people of color. Yet the exploited young women at Lowell helped to lead the way, as Loomis argues, “in protesting unfair working conditions as the Industrial Revolution transformed the nation.”

Loomis also does a masterful job of weaving together the voluminous scholarly work about slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, refracting it through the prism of labor. He argues that at the precise nexus of class struggle and racial subordination, African-American slaves fled plantations during the war (or resisted and limited their work regimen) in order to deliberately undermine the Southern cause. Borrowing from W.E.B. Du Bois’s Black Reconstruction, Loomis calls this vast action a “strike in the form of self-emancipation.” It can also be called the most politically important strike in American history, and Loomis treats it as such.

Loomis uses the two-day 1946 general strike in Oakland to illuminate labor’s fragility at its moment of greatest social legitimacy. He argues that the strike—the last of the extraordinary citywide uprisings in 20th-century America—captured the enormous power and growth that unions achieved and sustained during and following the Second World War. It also an-
ticipated the end of a more radical current within the labor movement, whose demands sometimes challenged economic and political hierarchies.

The strike began in October, when a local union of workers—mostly women—affiliated with the American Federation of Labor walked out of two downtown department stores. On December 3, after police sought to break the picket line, Oakland's working class responded. The trolley drivers stopped public transportation. Next, 100,000 Oakland workers from 142 other AFL-affiliated unions walked off the job, all hoping to challenge the city's anti-labor Republican machine. But despite the scale of the strike, union leadership ended it soon after when the Teamsters' president, Dave Beck, who despised the "damn general strike," pulled his members off the picket lines. The female store workers who had started the fight stayed out in vain for five months, and, as Loomis points out, were quickly shunted to the sidelines by male trade unionists, mirroring the typical gender hierarchy of unions and workplaces. Moreover, organizational rivalry undermined the vaunted social unionism of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), whose Oakland affiliates refused to join the striking workers of the AFL, the typically more conservative labor federation.

In that same year of 1946, a remarkable 14 percent of American workers struck to defend the gains they'd made during the war, and union leaders took labor's message to the nation via the major national radio networks. Yet within a few years, labor's forward march was halted when anti-labor politicians in both parties passed the Taft-Hartley Act, which rolled back key organizing and union-security provisions of the Wagner Act. Operation Dixie, the CIO's effort to organize the South, collapsed, and the CIO, pressured by corporate, political, and media conservatives, expelled 11 communist-led unions—often labor's most energetic organizers and champions of multiracial solidarity.

Loomis uncharacteristically misses a chance to complicate his reading of these communist-led unions, which—following Moscow's edict to relentlessly facilitate US war production above all else—suppressed rank-and-file activism and wildcat strikes during the war years. (Indeed, communist union leaders further suggested that labor's no-strike agreement with Franklin Roosevelt's administration continue after the war's end.) So the "crushing of labor's radical edge" that Loomis notes can be seen as much in the defeat of Oakland's contentious rank and file, squeezed by companies, politicians, and its own leadership, as in the CIO's anxious amputation of its communist unions. Still, an incorporated labor movement did not mean an incapable one; for more than a generation, unions and millions of workers flourished within the gilded cage of postwar prosperity and interest-group politics, exercising, as Loomis stipulates, "power almost unbelievable to an observer of today's labor movement."

At every point, and whatever their limitations, Loomis ardently supports the working-class struggles he examines. He writes frankly as an advocate, not a detached academic. But as his contempt for the sexism prevalent during the Oakland strike indicates, he also stubbornly refuses to offer a more sanguine analysis of labor's past than he believes the historical record will bear out. He gives the frequently romanticized Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) their due as remarkably and resolutely anti-racist organizers of mining, timber, and textile workers (ignored by the AFL), but he is also critical of the Wobblies' refusal to accept union contracts and stay in one place long enough to build sustainable union organizations. Loomis is willing to point out when union militancy alone cannot compensate for a naive strategy and insufficient power.

Relying on the findings in Joseph McCutcheon's Collision Course, for example, Loomis argues that the 1981 PATCO strike was "the greatest disaster in American labor history." Loomis argues that PATCO—the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, the government union representing these crucial airport workers—made a critical misstep when, after endorsing Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential campaign, it turned down a not-terrible deal offered by the administration and prepared to strike for a better one. The union wrongly assumed that it had enormous economic power—how could planes fly without the air-traffic controllers?—and it also assumed that it had more support from other unions and the public than it had. PATCO's gamble failed: Reagan took the illegal strike as an opportunity to fire more than 11,000 controllers en masse, destroying the union.

The PATCO debacle embodied the decline of the postwar Anglo-American liberal-labor compromise illustrated in the chapter built around the Oakland strike. A few years later, in Britain, Margaret Thatcher extirpated the iconic National Union of Mineworkers. In conjunction with a capitalist class fearful of falling profit rates and increased inflation, the epoch of 'Thatcher and Reagan stood for the decimation of two seemingly impregnable public-sector unions and also much of labor's strength in its central economic sectors of manufacturing, mining, and transportation. Besides the theoretical scaffolding linking strike events to cultural structures, A History of America in Ten Strikes revolves around two conceptual axes much debated in the historical literature. First, on the question of how racism and nativism divided and weakened the American working class, Loomis writes that, however he and others on the left might wish otherwise, the "core problem of the American working class [is] its racism."

Like all subaltern peoples, white workers, Loomis insists, ought to be granted their agency by historians, and in doing so, historians should not gloss over the fact that this agency is at times racist and runs against other egalitarian struggles. Despite capital's deliberate efforts to split workers by race and ethnicity—for example, by using black strikebreakers—"more often than not," Loomis writes, "white workers have prioritized their racial identity over their class identity without any help from their bosses." Even the CIO's pathbreaking organizing and ideological commitment to black manufacturing workers was, as many scholars have shown, mostly driven by those in leadership and against the frequent opposition of rank-and-file white workers.

Loomis also makes a second argument about the strikes he studies: that state power was crucial in either impeding or facilitating the interests of organized labor and work-
ing-class Americans. In weighing whether the militancy of rank-and-file labor activism can be reconciled with the bureaucratization of labor relations by the state, Loomis is, if anything, even blunter than he is regarding the impact of working-class racism:

There is simply no evidence from American history that unions can succeed if the government and employers combine to crush them. All the other factors are secondary: the structure of a union, how democratic it is, how radical its leaders or the rank-and-file are, their tactics. The potent and often interlocking strategies of the state and bosses build a tremendous amount of power against workers. That was true in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and it is true under the Trump administration.... Workers and their unions have to be as involved in politics as they are in organizing if they are to create conditions by which they can win. To stop involvement with the two-party political system would be tantamount to suicide. Having friends in government, or at least not having enemies there, makes all the difference in the history of American workers.

Time after time, Loomis returns to these two interpretive themes: the debilitating prevalence of racism and nativism among America’s majority-white workforce and the necessity of state power to augment labor’s struggle against capital—because, however inadequate, bureaucratic, and biased it is toward those who own the means of production, only the state has the juridical, administrative, and legislative weight to protect and sustain unions (sometimes simply by not using its power against them).

At times, Loomis links labor’s institutional racism with its need for state support, such as when he observes that the violent opposition of California’s white workers to competition from the Chinese immigrants hired to build the railroads (under perhaps the most brutal exploitation of the Gilded Age) was to result in Congress passing, in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese laborers from the United States. “A law enshrining racism,” Loomis writes mordantly, “was the American labor movement’s first major legislative victory.” But state power has also been used to push back against white-working-class racism, which undermined the majoritarian decision-making structure of labor unions. Particularly in the postwar and civil-rights eras, African-American activists and legal strategists sought state remedies for racial discrimination not only from companies but from the unions, too. Some unions, notably the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), supported the burgeoning civil-rights movement. But many unions and white-working-class Americans—often through authoritarian community movements in the 1970s—resisted the economic and political struggles of African Americans and other nonwhites.

Loomis mentions the exceptional cases of multiracial solidarity—sometimes the Knights of Labor in the 1880s, sometimes the mine workers and the Wobblies, sometimes the dockworkers—and, today, when labor is at its weakest, there is generally much more transracial and ethnic solidarity. He does not diminish the organizing efforts of nonwhite workers on their own behalf, nor does he doubt that their lives consequently improved. Loomis concludes, however, that racism and nativism have constantly undermined organized labor’s efforts to sustain and galvanize a working-class movement. Though he does not see these conditions as inevitable, inherent, or transhistorical, he does see them as recurrent and destructively pervasive.

The narrative of Ten Strikes thus integrates all the ingredients of a good work of history: events, structures, transformation, and critique, viewed from the perspectives of both the historical actors and the historian. There is, however, a trade-off for this conceptual clarity: Loomis understandably wishes for the book to be accessible to nonexperts, and so he avoids intrascholarly debates. He references seemingly every relevant secondary source, but he doesn’t join the historiographical and interpretive battles over them. For example, Loomis is straightforward about working-class racism: He declares the general theme and brings up example after example spanning 175 years. But readers who wish for a discussion of the multidisciplinary theoretical underpinnings for these examples will be disappointed. Loomis doesn’t quote Stuart Hall about how “race is the modality in which class is lived,” or apply Karen and Barbara Fields’s concept of “racecraft,” or choose sides in Eric Arnzen’s evisceration of David Roediger’s paradigmatic, psycho-analytically informed study of race and class discourse, The Wages of Whiteness.

Loomis notes postwar labor’s lack of organizing energy and political imagination, but he doesn’t discuss the literature about this “business unionism” by post–New Left writers like Stanley Aronowitz, Paul Buhle, Mike Davis, and Kim Moody. And his chapter about the immediate postwar labor movement doesn’t address the central place of “industrial pluralism,” a variant of Gompersian voluntarism. Its most exemplary postwar articulator, the USW’s general counsel (and future Supreme Court justice) Arthur Goldberg, insisted that unions and corporations, with only minimum oversight from the National Labor Relations Board, could privately work out enforcement mechanisms for contracts, grievances, and arbitration without the heavy hand of the state.

Goldberg and Loomis would have a lot to argue about. Loomis extols, but is never satisfied by, mere expressions of working-class defiance. He sees how any protocols that depoliticize union administration weaken the labor movement. He makes the case over and over again that workers must organize and elect politicians who will have their backs, or else they will lose. Almost every chapter has a summary sentence or two reminding the reader that the chronicled strikes either succeeded or failed depending on how the state responded to them. It is no accident that Loomis ends his valuable appendix of “150 Major Events in U.S. Labor History” with Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker signing a “draconian” right-to-work law in that state and, finally, with Donald Trump’s election as a faux pro-worker president who “proceeds to eviscerate labor protections.” Resistance to the boss is necessary, but is not in itself a sufficient exercise of power by labor. Workers must “neutralize the government-employer alliance,” or it will defeat them.

Despite its many strengths, A History of America in Ten Strikes does, at times, have a rushed quality about it and could have used another edit. There are some goofy errors of fact or omission. Henry George advocated a single tax on land, not “property.” The text omits the year of the 1932 march of several thousand unemployed workers from Detroit to Ford’s River Rouge plant in Dearborn. Loomis also claims that the AFL-CIO paid for buses to get people to the 1963 March on Washington. But the federation famously refused to endorse the march (although, as William P. Jones notes in his 2014 book The March on Washington, George Meany pushed through a compromise that allowed individual unions, like the UAW and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, to do so). And the prose, while gen-

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**April 8, 2019**

**The Nation.**
erally energetic and passionate, sometimes becomes slack—Loomis uses the phrase “fat and happy” to describe the modern labor movement three times, which is at least three times too many.

When he arrives at the near-contemporary era, which he represents via SEIU’s signature Justice for Janitors campaign, Loomis can’t honestly give it the historical weight that he has accorded the earlier strikes. Justice for Janitors draws upon the militancy of its mostly immigrant Latino workforce, and Loomis rightly underscores this dramatic change in the composition of the American working class following the Immigration Act of 1965. But the campaign lacked a major impact on the political economy at large, and—unlike the emblematic episodes described in other chapters—the labor movement itself is now so emaciated that even SEIU, its most influential union, is unable to capture the attention of the nation. In comparing it with the strikes of yore, Loomis grades Justice for Janitors on a curve: “By 2005, SEIU represented 70 percent of janitors in twenty-three of the nation’s fifty largest cities. In the twenty-first century, with its newly invigorated attacks on unions and worker power, that’s impressive.”

In the book’s brief conclusion on the present day, there is no strike to serve as a central conceit, which leaves Loomis at a bit of a loss. In fact, he allows himself to concede that “strikes are just a single dramatic tactic in the labor movement,” which somewhat undercuts the point of the book; the Gramscian equipoise of the pessimistic militant falters. Thus, he perhaps misses an opportunity to see yet another turn in the making and remaking of class dynamics and does not discuss what I have called elsewhere the ideology of “laborism.” In the wake of the Great Recession of 2007–09 and the tenuous economics of the media and academic sectors, support for labor activism has exploded among leftist intellectuals, especially younger journalists and academics in urban centers that have large amounts of cultural capital. The laborists organized their own shop floors at digital-media companies and in graduate schools and helped revive the Democratic Socialists of America. As a result, labor’s cultural resonance is arguably as strong today as it has been since the late 1940s.

Yet, paradoxically, despite a rise in laborism among many of America’s millennials, unions lack a strategy and the economic and political power to organize large companies or the disaggregated workers of the gig economy on a mass scale. The Fight for $15, the SEIU drive to substantially raise the minimum wage, has had spectacular success in doing just that for millions of workers across the country, even in red states. The slogan has also become prospective policy for the national Democratic Party. And the laborists have supported this project from their bases in new media and the universities. However, despite these significant achievements, the Fight for $15 has failed to organize any worker into SEIU.

This is not so much a problem for Loomis’s argument as it is a marker for why he’s as stumped by the end of his book as everybody else. We are living through an aggressively ethnernationalist age embodied by the most extremist major-party formation since the antebellum Southern Democrats. Workplaces no longer fit with earlier models of industrial and trade unionism, and a now-anachronistic structure of labor law points backward to its origins in the political economy of the New Deal order. All Loomis can do in the book’s final pages is to urge working people—i.e., the vast majority of Americans—not to be racist, nativist, or sexist and to band together in their struggle for better working conditions. The teachers’ strikes across a swath of red states (occurring too late for inclusion in this book) are a powerful series of rank-and-file actions, but labor has not met the reactionary surge with a commensurate countermilitancy tied to new institutions—or resurgent old ones—that can sustain a multiracial and multigender mass movement originating at work. Loomis coolly asserts that, given the countless social divisions, “class identity will never become a universal sign of solidarity.”

Some will read this remark as a fatal analytical error and others as a truism, but in either case, it leaves Loomis, when looking at the present, with little choice but to abandon historical analysis in favor of the hortatory uplift of the book’s last several pages: “In the past four decades,” he explains, “we have given back much of our freedom.”

What happened? An observation prompted frequently when reading the last half of the book is the devastating consequences that the decline of the UAW has had for labor. This is not just because the UAW, from the 1940s to the ’70s, was the largest left-liberal union and a racially progressive one—after all, SEIU can make the same claims about itself today—nor is this because of a nostalgia for the age of the CIO. It is instead because the UAW controlled what was then the central sector of the mid-century manufacturing economy. No union today is close to having that kind of power in the larger political economy and thus also the confidence to challenge plutocracy and its political courtiers.

Still, a reader can see the possible outlines of a different future. Loomis concludes Ten Strikes by summarizing other recent, nascent episodes of workers’ empowerment: immigrant organizing, alt-unionism, the success of the powerhouse Las Vegas Culinary Workers Union, advances by the Communications Workers of America and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in organizing low-wage workers at Verizon. As worker-rights advocates and socialists win more and more elections as Democrats, and as the Internet facilitates political fund-raising, Loomis insists that the route to state intervention on behalf of unions will go through the porous borders of a major party: “The Democratic Party may be flawed, but today it is our best chance at turning a political party into an instrument of workers’ rights.” Loomis sharply distinguishes the current iteration of the Democratic Party from its Republican counterpart, itself an important departure from those leftist academics who broadly conflate the two parties as complementary pieces of the neoliberal puzzle.

After more than a half-century of theorizing about the “new class” of knowledge workers, we may now be living through a time when a youthful American version of the new class, complete with its laborist politics, seems ready to convert its working-class politics into the institutional might of actual labor unions and Democratic Party power. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the 29-year-old Bronx bartender and DSA member turned congresswoman, is a star born of laborist politics’ swift rise. (The actually existing and sometimes conservative labor movement, however, is already resisting her Green New Deal.)

Loomis is more wired than laconic, but his “cut the crap” writer’s persona has a bit of Philip Marlowe in it. Like Marlowe, a guy with a sharp eye for Depression-era class conflict, Loomis hates the rich, and he also hates bullshit, whether coming from the right or the left, from corporate hacks or labor allies. Yet he, too, retains a bruised idealism, despite exposing the evidence of what Marlowe’s creator, Raymond Chandler, called a “world gone wrong.”

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When studying the past, it is tempting to explore what men and women aspired to: what sorts of societies they envisioned, and what sorts of measures they undertook to make them real. This is a hopeful approach, but often the wrong one. As Thomas Hobbes pointed out long ago, and as current events affirm once again, fear is often a more effective motivator than idealism. The more important questions, therefore, can be the more dismal ones: What are people’s fears? And what crimes are they willing to countenance in their name?

Paul Hanebrink’s magisterial new book, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism*, applies this insight to the history of 20th-century Europe. Not long ago, studies of that ill-starred time and place tended toward cautious optimism. They often focused on the rise and fall of the communist dream. That story of utopian hopes and bloody realities, confined to the past by the end of the Cold War, was well suited to a new Europe that styled itself as a beacon of freedom and human rights. Hanebrink’s book offers us a history more appropriate for our moment. It asks what the story of modern Europe looks like if we take the racist fear-mongering of the present as our end point, rather than the heady proclamations of justice and dignity streaming from Brussels.

Hanebrink’s strategy is to shift our attention away from the specter of communism and toward its rival, anticommunism. This will seem like an odd choice only if we think that anticommunism was a banal and content-free politics defined by what it opposed. On the contrary, anticommunism was itself a significant ideology, animating a vast array of social, political, and military experiments across the globe that sought to justify aggressive warfare, racialized policing, and, occasionally, even social reform. In a dialectic that even Marx could not foresee, it became just as powerful as the specter of communism it was designed to confront.

How is this to be explained? How did anticommunism garner such mass and elite appeal? The traditional answer would be that...
communism is a flawed and violent system, rendering large-scale resistance to it that’s easy to explain. But Hanebrink makes a different argument. By showing how anticommunism was tightly entwined with questions of race and nationalism, he explains how it ended up conjoined with another politics of fear that was remaking Europe in the early 20th century: anti-Semitism. This explosive combination came to be known as “Judeo-Bolshevism”: the idea that there was something “Jewish” about communism, and thus that individual Jews were dangerous because they were committed to violent revolution. The linkage of long-marginalized Jewish communities with the genuinely powerful communist movement was, while mythical, astonishingly successful—and astonishingly lethal. The myth of Judeo-Bolshevism helps account, in Hanebrink’s view, for the ferocity of anticommunism in 20th-century Europe. And yet, for all its influence and power, the history of this myth has not yet been told.

Hanebrink’s geographically capacious and heroically researched book gives us this story in all of its horror. He follows the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism from the Russian Revolution to the present, ferreting out its origins and surprising transformations in both Eastern and Western Europe, and sometimes across the Atlantic, too. This fresh vantage on a familiar time and place leads us to crucial new questions that we still face today. We are buffeted with reminders of the mass graves filled by communism. But what if racialized anticommunism filled even more? What lessons, then, would the horrors of the mass graves filled by communism. But what if racialized anticommunism filled even more? What lessons, then, would the history of this myth have taught us?

M uch of this will come as no surprise to many readers, even if Hanebrink adds a larger, synthesizing sweep to this terrible history and a host of new details to our understanding of Europe in the years between the Russian Revolution and World War II. The more novel and provocative elements of his argument come in the book’s second half, where he argues that the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism helped inspire thinkers and movements on both sides of the Cold War. By doing so, Hanebrink offers us a crucial insight into postwar political formations. It is often imagined that postwar Europe, at least in the West, had learned the lessons of the global conflagration and embarked on a new course

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**A Specter Haunting Europe**

*The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism*

By Paul Hanebrink

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in support of tolerance and human rights. That story is not wrong, but it is incomplete. In the shadows of postwar prosperity, the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism continued to lurk in the racialized forms of anticommunism that persisted throughout the Atlantic world.

In Eastern Europe, where communism remained a reality, the Judeo-Bolshevik myth survived in multiple guises, despite the near-total eradication of the Jewish population. In the immediate wake of the war, it appeared in its original form: Many Eastern Europeans viewed their new rulers as Soviets impositions and blamed Jews for the flaws of the new regimes. This, in turn, spurred new violence toward the small Jewish populations that had survived World War II. In Poland, for example, pogroms continued after the war, most famously at Kielce, where more than 40 Jews were killed in 1946. The Judeo-Bolshevik myth can be found in both the origins and the aftermath of these events: A report commissioned by the Polish Catholic Church blamed the violence on the Jews, calling them “the main propagators of Communism in Poland.”

The myth also took a strange turn in Eastern Europe from the late 1940s onward, as communists began to deploy it against one another. In the Soviet Union, anti-Semitic propaganda reappeared as Stalin rounded up Soviet Jewish doctors he suspected of conspiring against him. In Czechoslovakia, a series of show trials targeting Jewish communists took place in 1952. Beyond these well-known events, Hanebrink also unearthed a trove of anti-Semitic documents from across Eastern Europe that came from communist governments and that were directed at their Jewish citizens.

The revived racism that swept through communist Europe might seem like a simple and cynical manipulation of residual anti-Semitism, designed to shore up the flagging popularity of the region’s ruling communist parties. It may have been that, but it was also a fateful reprisal of specifically Judeo-Bolshevik themes. As Polish, East German, Hungarian, Romanian, and Czechoslovakian communists labored to cultivate an image as sturdy sons of the nation, they distinguished themselves from the rootless “Jewish” Bolsheviks, who needed to be purged in the name of socialist and national renewal. In Poland, to take just one example, Władysław Gomułka insisted that the party had too many Jewish leaders and that this was keeping it from achieving mass acceptance. His assertions led to ominous threats against many of the Polish Jews who had survived the Holocaust, and who were now publicly disparaged as disloyal “Zionists” and the wrong kind of Bolsheviks.

In Western Europe and the United States, anti-Semitism of this official sort was taboo. That didn’t mean, however, that the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism simply withered on the vine. It flourished, Hanebrink argues, in new form: Dropping the explicit anti-Semitic content of the myth, this racialized form of anti-communism now turned against those “Asian” expressions of communism at war with the West. This was a new myth, to be sure. But it still conjured a connection between communism and the racial other, and it still used the resulting myth to justify appalling violence around the world (most notably in Vietnam). While Cold War anticommunism had multiple origins, Judeo-Bolshevism was perhaps the most important, especially in Europe. Sometimes, the linkages were explicit. Eberhard Taubert, for instance, was a high-ranking member of Joseph Goebbels’s Ministry of Propaganda who spent much of the 1930s disseminating textbook Judeo-Bolshevism in Germany. After the war, he

They Brought Her In

They brought her in to sit in the audience. They brought her in to listen. They brought her in to look pretty and keep her mouth shut. They brought her in to laugh at the right times. They brought her in to pour the wine and eat the crumbs. Do they want her opinion? Do they want to hear her story? Heavens no, they want her to keep her opinions and her stories to herself. Or, better yet, not to have any. How is it that they found her in the first place? She isn’t listed anywhere. She hasn’t joined an agency or put herself on a website, but somehow they found her. They always find her. But why did she say yes, and why did she accept the part? She doesn’t know how to act, never did. She’s always been too real, too hard to take, a pain in the neck/ass/you-name-it. A headache. When she opens her mouth, something harsh comes out, as if she can’t keep the bile down, as if she’s been poisoned and she’s trying to choke the poison back up, trying to save her very life. And maybe she has. Been poisoned, that is, little by little, sitting in the audience for so long, nodding appreciatively at the monologues, the comic routines, the confessions, looking pretty night after night, trying to keep her mouth shut while laughing at the right times. You’ve got to hand it to her, she’s a good audience. Quite the little listener, as they say. But how can she keep pouring the wine without spilling, and how long can she survive on crumbs?

LAUREN K. WATEL
shed the overtly anti-Semitic elements of his thought and founded an anticomunist organization, partially funded by the CIA, that attempted to educate Germans yet again about the supposed foreignness and barbarism of communism in their midst.

Both sides of the Cold War, therefore, created images of fear and subversion with roots in the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism, and which targeted cosmopolitan and borderless troublemakers. In both East and West, the image was redrawn for a new time, but Hanebrink makes a compelling case that it was too deeply entrenched in political ideology and culture to disappear entirely.

In Hanebrink’s telling, it is racial panic, rather than misguided utopianism, that defined Europe’s 20th century. The end of the Cold War marked a turning point, but not a rupture. Even after communism was largely banished from the continent, the Judeo-Bolshevik myth found dark corners in which to grow. As European intellectuals and politicians struggled to interpret the communist experience, the linkage between communist crimes and Judaism emerged once again. In the West, this was largely an academic affair, if an especially heated and regrettable one. In Germany, for instance, where historians revived the idea that Hitler had, as one of them put it, a “rational” reason to fear the Jews: namely, the Jewish devotion to Bolshevism, and therefore to the destruction of Germany.

In Eastern Europe, though, it was a matter of life and death. The necessary reckoning with the communist past could often become racist, as the small populations of surviving Jews found themselves blamed once again for the crimes of their countries’ communist governments. The worst purveyors of Judeo-Bolshevism, such as Romanian dictator (and Hitler ally) Ion Antonescu, were rehabilitated by a new generation of nationalists. Meanwhile, in some places it became legally dangerous to publish clear truths about the Holocaust. (In Poland, for instance, a law was recently passed that makes it illegal to claim complicity between Poles and the crimes of the Third Reich.) So just as the myth finds new forms, its murderous legacy is being swept under the rug.

Hanebrink’s book covers this dark history with insight and skill. He has the linguistic ability to bring Eastern Europe fully into the narrative, and the vision to include American and Western European debates, too. The end result is a major intervention into our understanding of 20th-century Europe and the lessons we ought to take away from its history. One of the shibboleths of the standard historical narrative about the 20th century is that it saw a long contest between various utopian and murderous visions, giving way at last to postideological democracies and the triumph of human rights. Given the current fractures on the European continent, this narrative is no longer plausible. The neo-fascist parties of contemporary Europe are just as deeply rooted in the continent’s history as their liberal opponents, if not more so. Hanebrink’s stated purpose is to unveil the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism, but he ends up casting doubt on the myth of Europe, too.

Despite its significant achievements, Hanebrink’s history leaves some important questions unanswered. For example, he neglects to provide a robust analytical corollary to his stunning collection of evidence. Why, exactly, did this particular image of the Jewish Bolshevik prove so compelling and lethal in the first half of the 20th century? And to whom, exactly, did the myth appeal? (Hanebrink provides enough evidence to discount the easy answers: Communists, liberals, and nationalists all contributed to its popularity and are complicit in the violence it engendered.)

Did it spread equally in different classes, and among men and women alike? Also, did 20th-century nationalism necessarily presuppose Judeo-Bolshevism as its other, or did healthier forms of nationalism exist as well? If so, what distinguished the two?

The lack of analysis along these lines clouds some of the connections that Hanebrink seeks to draw between the past and the present. At the end of his book, Hanebrink argues that the contemporary suspicion of Muslim immigration should be viewed as yet another transformation of the Judeo-Bolshevik myth. The Muslim, too, is viewed as an Eastern invader who brings a dangerous ideology with him. There is a structural similarity; to be sure, but this is only to say that racism is endemic to European history—which is tantamount to saying that the pope is Catholic. Likewise, while anti-Semitism is on the rise in Europe and elsewhere, it seems unlikely that this owes much to the Judeo-Bolshevik myth as such. George Soros, to take one prominent example, is vilified as a liberal nationalist, and sometimes even as a recovering Nazi, but not as a Judeo-Bolshevik in Hanebrink’s sense.

The ideological categories of the past are now being scrambled as those of the Cold War become less and less relevant. We are faced with different specters, not just those of the 19th and 20th centuries. This is not to say that we are no longer conditioned by the past. Rather, it is to point out that the genealogy connecting our century with the one preceding it will be more global than Hanebrink’s Eurocentric version, and it will traverse the former maritime empires of Western Europe in Africa and Asia as much as their great landed counterparts in Eastern and Central Europe. While it is true that we are once again living through a leftist resurgence and a capitalist crisis, nearly everything else has changed. The Judeo-Bolshevik myth made sense so long as global politics were oriented around the Russian Revolution and its aftershocks. That era has, at last, come to a close.

_A Specter Haunting Europe_ provides us, therefore, less with an analysis of our present than with a warning from the past. Misguided fear, not misguided optimism, led to the greatest disasters of the 20th century. Persistent racism was amplified by global political upheaval, leading to genocidal violence. And however much the particulars may have changed, this could happen again. Hanebrink’s book is a reminder of how challenging it will be, in an era of uncertainty and chaos, to sustain the only politics that can sustain us: a politics of hope.
IN FLIGHT
The many journeys of Jessica Pratt’s folk music
by OLIVIA HORN

If Jessica Pratt’s music seems to have been born in a vacuum, it’s because she lives in one of her own making. Recently, speaking to The Fader, she casually disavowed the governing forces of contemporary life: “I’ve always felt like time and space are this sort of unreal thing,” she admitted. On her two previous albums—over the course of which she transformed from unknown San Francisco hobbyist to critically adored, Los Angeles–based folk artist—the singer-songwriter delivered sparse, sophisticated, yet homely songs that felt like relics of an uncertain provenance. Pratt’s take on the genre has most often been sourced to British revivalists, but it feels too idiosyncratic to be self-consciously retro. Her pliant voice adds a special significance on Quiet Signs and abstract. The album’s riveting closer, the quaintly titled “Aeroplane,” assigns some of its most tangible imagery to this experience of an artistic unburdening for Pratt. On it, she seems relieved of the craggy energy that charged up some of 2015’s On Your Own Love Again, making it sound like she was swept up by a faster-than-intended tempo and couldn’t regain her footing.

But the relative tranquility of the album should not be mistaken for passivity. Pratt calls this her most deliberate work yet: her first music to be intentionally conceived as a coherent album, each song written with the others in mind, and her first to be professionally recorded. To make it, Pratt spent a year and a half flying back and forth between her LA home and a studio in Brooklyn, putting countless hours and miles toward expanding and refining her sound, without losing the charming intimacy of her self-recorded tapes.

The album reveals itself to be a true labor of love. Where these songs may be somewhat opaque in terms of their imagery and meaning, they do evince infatuation with their own internal world. Like a painter’s loosely drawn study framed and hung next to her final product, the album opener “Opening Night” sketches out a melody that will surface in the song that follows; the side-by-side comparison points to a fascination with the stages of artistic process. (“Opening Night” also nods to John Cassavetes’s 1977 film of the same name, which depicts the turmoil brought on by making art in the public eye.) The numerous outros filled up with warm, molten “la la”s seem to mark satisfaction with the product, like a contented sigh at the end of a hearty meal. Throughout, instrumental riffs lovingly tail Pratt’s vocal melodies—plucky piano chords chatter with her on “Here My Love”; strings scoop into the bottoms of her phrases on “Silent Song.” When Pratt wonders, “I longed to stay with you / Or did I / Belong to my song?” on the latter, the answer feels self-evident.

Something of Pratt’s bicoastal process has also left its mark on her writing. Flight carries a special significance on Quiet Signs—birds appear in the guise of prophets; boys and girls grow wings and fly. Perhaps it’s Pratt’s aversion to the strictures of space and time, but she does seem to view her subjects from another plane entirely—as if from 35,000 feet in the air, with time zones slipping by and adequate room for her thoughts to expand and abstract. The album’s riveting closer, the quaintly titled “Aeroplane,” assigns some of its most tangible imagery to this experience as Pratt describes gazing over city lights from a plane window. “I don’t wanna touch down,” she frets; airborne, she’s experienced “treasures luminous and divine.”

As the plane descends toward solid ground, the album concludes. It’s all quite self-referential, in the end: Quiet Signs offers a gentle reminder of how pleasant it is to, every now and again—whether by boarding a plane, or slipping on a pair of headphones—evacuate reality.
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