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Kirsten Gillibrand wants to fight Trump—and fight for his voters.

JOAN WALSH

“I’m Not Afraid of Anything”
The Case Against the Liberal Case

Although Eric Alterman makes several cogent points in “The Case Against Bernie” [April 15], he makes too great a leap in saying that the Sanders campaign “hurt [Hillary Clinton] in the general election” and that Bernie was responsible for the 12 percent who switched to Trump. Similar charges were brought against Ralph Nader in the disastrous 2000 presidential election.

In both cases, such arguments start from the unstated assumption that all of the people who voted for the challenger would otherwise have voted for the next most left-leaning candidate (Gore in 2000, Clinton in 2016). It is more likely, however, that many people who voted for Nader or Sanders were previously disaffected. One could as easily argue that Nader and Sanders brought new voters into the election, and that Sanders perhaps inspired some voters who would not have originally supported Clinton and who came to recognize the importance of voting Democrat.

Andrew Oram
Arlington, Mass.

Mr. Alterman, have you no sense of decency? If I did not know who wrote this attack on Sanders, I would have thought the author was a propagandist at the Democratic Leadership Council. The article was replete with DLC tropes. I have only one question: How much did the DLC pay you to write this editorial?

John S. Starsiak Jr.
Woodbridge, Va.

Alterman gives voice to concerns that all progressives might share: Will we blow it and give Trump another four years in the White House? I disagree with his arguments that Bernie Sanders is particularly vulnerable to Republican red-baiting. Please recall that the Republican attack machine called the centrist Barack Obama a “socialist.” They will call any Democrat any name they think will scare people. Sanders has demonstrated that he can counter such superficial attacks with clear, genuine responses. He is now the best-known leader of a huge grassroots movement for change. If one of the other candidates (someone younger) emerges as the Democrat we need to win the White House, fine. But as I see it, Sanders is our best hope to win in 2020.

Democrats have lost by behaving too timidly. If Alterman watches videos of rallies for Sanders, he will see that something powerful happens when he campaigns—people “feel the Bern.” We need love to overcome Trump’s hate and fear. Sanders’s campaign is the most powerful source for the kind of love that can overpower the lies and fearmongering.

Will Fudeman
Ithaca, N.Y.

I attended two Sanders rallies and heard nothing antiestablishment. Just good ideas. At a huge rally at the University of Colorado Boulder, when free college was mentioned, the roar was loud enough to be heard in California! During the caucus event, the Hillary Clinton operatives were running around insisting that only Clinton could win, and that a vote for Sanders was a vote for the evil forces.

The sane case for Sanders is much the same as it was in 2016: He is the only progressive who could possibly win. We are living in transformational times. But it seems like the Democrats want to subsidize the old, rather than invest in the future.

Nicholas Vanderborgh
Boulder, Colo.

Alterman makes a poor case that “Sanders, of all the major Democratic contenders, is the one who will...”
Continuity and Change

This year marks my 25th anniversary as editor of The Nation. I first came to the magazine as an intern at the outset of the Reagan years, and after years spent working here in various roles, I followed in the footsteps of remarkable people like Victor Navasky, Carey McWilliams, and Freda Kirchwey—The Nation’s first woman editor.

My tenure as editor has coincided with turbulent times, both for The Nation and the nation: from the Clinton impeachment to the Supreme Court’s selection of George W. Bush in 2000; from September 11 and the invasion of Iraq to Hurricane Katrina; from America’s worst financial crisis since the Great Depression and the escalation of a new Cold War to, in 2016, the election of Donald Trump.

My years at The Nation have only heightened my respect for this extraordinary institution. I’ve savored the debates, both civil and uncivil, on matters of principle, politics, even morality, that fill its pages—and now its website. Yet I’ve also come to understand that it is possible to stay in a job for too long. I am determined that this not happen, either to me or to The Nation. These times demand that the magazine be ever bolder, ever ready to think anew. I am excited to embrace such a challenge. But when our country and the world are undergoing such extraordinary tectonic shifts, I also believe it is time for change.

So I’m delighted to announce that D.D. Guttenplan will become the magazine’s next editor, beginning on June 15. Don has long been an invaluable font of ideas, articles, and energy. He contributed for many years from the magazine’s London bureau and is currently The Nation’s editor at large. I will stay on as publisher and as the magazine’s new editorial director—and in that role, I will continue to chart the strategic direction of The Nation, working with Don and the magazine’s president, Erin O’Marra.

In addition to being one of our lead correspondents for the 2016 presidential campaign, Don is the author of The Next Republic: The Rise of a New Radical Majority, as well as The Nation: A Biography, the definitive history of the magazine. In 2015, we worked closely together as co-editors of The Nation’s 150th-anniversary special issue. Don also wrote the magazine’s powerful call to arms, “Welcome to the Fight,” in the hours after the 2016 election. His book American Radical: The Life and Times of I.F. Stone, about The Nation’s former Washington correspondent, won the 2010 Sperber Prize for biography.

Don is an accomplished journalist and editor working at the intersection of history, politics, and activism—and he is committed to working with a new generation of writers. He has a deep understanding of the critical role of independent journalism in our society. He produced the acclaimed documentary Edward Said: The Last Interview and wrote and presented War, Lies, and Audiotape, a radio documentary for the BBC about the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the origins of the Vietnam War. Don is a former education correspondent for the International Herald Tribune, a former columnist for New York Newsday, and a former senior editor at The Village Voice, and his essays and reporting have appeared in The Atlantic, The Guardian, Haaretz, Harper’s, the London Review of Books, the Times Literary Supplement, and The New York Times.

“I’m thrilled to be taking over at The Nation at such a crucial time in the magazine’s history and in our national life,” Don says. “The Nation is a beacon for progressive ideas, democratic politics, women’s rights, racial and economic justice, and open debate between liberals and radicals.”

Both Don and I believe in expanding the digital reach of The Nation and pushing the boundaries of our growth as a multichannel media company. Through Take Action Now, our weekly newsletter, we’re helping the Nation community take meaningful steps for political change. Through a growing list of podcasts, video projects, and partnerships,
we’re telling stories in new ways. And through social media—including Twitter, where we have more than 1.24 million followers—we’re reaching new generations: Over 30 percent of the traffic at TheNation.com and of users engaging with us on Facebook are readers from 18 to 34 years old. In that spirit, and in addition to the transition in editorship, The Nation will be hiring a new executive Web editor to drive our continued online growth.

Alongside my new role as editorial director, I will edit select writers and contribute regular commentary. I will also continue writing my weekly column for The Washington Post, as well as my speaking engagements and media appearances. I’ll also be working with the Congressional Progressive Caucus and other groups to craft a progressive foreign policy. And I will continue collecting articles and essays for a forthcoming book.

This is a moment of continuity and change. Don has been an important part of The Nation and our success; he will bring bold new ideas and leadership to the magazine. And he understands that while change is inevitable, if there is one constant in The Nation’s history, it has been faith—not in political parties or policies, but in what can happen when you tell people the truth.

Onward. KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

Our Next Revolution

We’re in a struggle for the heart and soul of the nation.

Fifty-one years ago, when Martin Luther King Jr. became a martyr in the struggle for “the beloved community” and multiethnic democracy, few imagined that, within half a century, he would have achieved the status of a founding father on the National Mall in Washington, DC. By the time of his death, King had long been a target of J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI and was no longer on speaking terms with President Lyndon Johnson. He had been put out of his own church denomination and rejected by many civil-rights organizations because he dared to question the violence of the permanent war economy and America’s slaughter in Vietnam. We cannot celebrate him today alongside Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson without recognizing what King showed us: that America’s experiment in democracy has always required radical struggle to move us toward a more perfect union. Indeed, to honor King’s legacy today is to reread our tradition in the light of his radical witness.

King is most famous for the sermonic flourish of “I have a dream,” which he added at the last minute to his address at the 1963 March on Washington. But the central argument of his remarks that day was that the United States had failed to live up to the ideals written in its founding documents. King was not naive: His appeal for constitutional ideals did not depend on a false belief that the white men who signed their names to those documents had ever been faithful to them. But he understood that what any people put down on paper can become a basis for public accountability.

A nation founded in revolution must always remain open to reassessment in order to remain true to itself. King and the fusion movement he led forced the institutions of white supremacy to remember that, as the Declaration of Independence states, “whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive…it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.” Any law or custom that does not recognize the equality of all people under the law must be altered, King argued. This wasn’t an attack on the government, but rather an insistence that it live up to the Constitution’s expressed commitment “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” These were not the hopes and dreams of the downtrodden. It was what America claimed to be for all people.

King’s understanding of American history saw clearly that the nation established in revolution had only survived and improved itself through Reconstruction. Whatever his intentions, Lincoln’s great achievement in the Civil War wasn’t just the preservation of the Union, but also the expansion of democracy to the formerly enslaved. His prayer for a “new birth of freedom” at Gettysburg had been answered in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments and in Reconstruction governments across the South that envisioned access to education, health care, and a living wage for poor black and white workers. The Redemption movement that overthrew Reconstruction was, in this reading, deeply anti-American, just as the resistance to civil rights that King faced throughout the South was contrary to the fundamental promises of democracy.

This is why one of King’s colleagues in the movement, Fannie Lou Hamer, could speak to the nation with moral authority when she asked at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, “Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings?” The coalition of poor black and white people who had come to be seated in Atlantic City that year had more of a constitutional right to represent Mississippi than its official all-white delegation, Hamer insisted. She saw that America needed a moral revolution of values in order to become what it claimed to be.

What King and Hamer named a half-century ago, we must find a way to make clear today. The moral and constitutional crisis we face is not just about Republicans versus Democrats or liberals versus conservatives. It is, instead, about right versus wrong. We are in a struggle for the heart and soul of this nation. And, in a real sense, we face the question of whether America can actually be.

For half a century, the political operatives who paved the way for Trumpism have used Richard Nixon’s Southern strategy to pit black, brown, and white people against one another. They have hijacked our moral narrative to frame narrow cultural differences as the only moral issues in public life. And they have tried to paint the resistance to their consolidation of power as anti-American.

We who are the heirs of King and Hamer know that we cannot remain silent while America’s experiment in (continued on page 8)
Dear Liza,

I can’t stand going to my 8-year-old son’s Little League games. I love seeing him play and cheering him on. But one of his teammates (I’ll call him “Gordon”) has parents who seem to be complete assholes. Every game, every play, they’re screaming at their son: “Pay more attention, Gordon!” “Baseball stance, come on, Gordon!” “Watch the field, Gordon! Stop messing around!” It’s constant and unrelenting. Occasionally, Gordon’s mother will yell at other kids, or the whole team. Once, I heard her threaten to smack Gordon. I’m fine with parents cheering. But when parents coach and make negative comments, it just sucks—most of all for their poor kid.

We saw a lot of coaching from the sidelines when our kids were playing under-6 soccer, but it dissipated as they got older, especially with my wife coaching both my daughters’ soccer teams and taking control. This is something I’ve never seen before.

I’d like to say something to the parents of poor Gordon, but it’s awkward and difficult. Given the “Blue Lives Matter” stickers all over their SUV, the clothing promoting the use of assault rifles, and the behavior I’ve described, I don’t think we have many values in common. They haven’t shown any self-awareness. I am also not entirely certain they aren’t packing heat.

I could talk to the team’s coach, who is a good person. But I’m sure he can bear this constant harassment from Gordon’s parents from the stands. He doesn’t seem to have a problem with it, so it isn’t clear what talking to him about it would do.

—Seething on the Sidelines

Dear Liza,

I’m single, and now that my children are nearly grown, I have the time and desire to go out with friends. But while I was raising children and mostly too busy to go out, something changed. My closest, oldest friends now have significantly more disposable income than I do (mostly due to having a spouse, better jobs, or no children). So when it comes to eating out, getting tickets for performances, planning a weekend away, or whatever, I find that I either have to decline or spend more money than I can afford. If I bring that up, one of the following things happens: Someone offers to pay, which is fine once in a while but can get awkward; or we go someplace cheaper that people aren’t happy with; or plans are made without me. Mostly, I just rack up more credit-card debt so that I can be included and my friends aren’t.

Dear Liza,

Poor Gordon! But indeed, confrontation with angry fans of heavy weaponry is unwise. You don’t say whether you’re white, but if not, the racially hostile “Blue Lives Matter” stickers suggest further cause for caution.

However, you must talk with the coach, Sidelines. He has the authority in this setting, and you don’t. If you interfere, you will (at best) be dismissed as busybodies, but most parents respect and want to get along with their kid’s Little League coach. (Though it might be best if your wife spoke with him; given her own experience, she can empathize with his challenges.)

The coach either hasn’t been paying attention or is hoping that the bad behavior he’s observed isn’t
GREEN NEW DEAL
A Generation Responds

StudentNation asked young people across the country, “How could the Green New Deal affect your future?” Here is one response:

The Fox in the Henhouse

How the Murdochs have used the power of the press to subvert democracy.

T
de New York Times Magazine’s recently published forensic examination of the power and influence of the Murdoch media empire is both a testament to what journalism can accomplish and an indictment of what it has, in the hands of Rupert Murdoch and his two sons, increasingly become. The 16,000-word investigation should quiet anyone who thinks that the survival of that often-infuriating newspaper is of no particular consequence to the future of American democracy.

The GND recognizes that these are also environmental-justice issues and that it is a tragedy that many people across the country—who often do not even have access to health care—have developed illnesses because they live on polluted land.

The GND is necessary and must be enacted.

—Rebekah Barber, a 2016 graduate of North Carolina Central University, currently a researcher at the Institute for Southern Studies

To read more, go to
TheNation.com/GND-forum.

Thanks to the Puffin Foundation for making this forum possible.

Eric Alterman

Murdoch watchers have long argued over whether Rupert Murdoch is motivated more by money or power. The answer, almost always, is “yes.” That’s the man’s genius: In his case, the two travel in tandem. But should they conflict, it is the money that matters. Take the most interesting fact I found related to Fox News’s horrific treatment of the late Democratic National Committee staffer Seth Rich. You may recall Sean Hannity’s and FoxNews.com’s obsessive promotion of a bizarre conspiracy theory that, with the Trump White House’s encouragement, sought to tie Rich’s 2016 killing to allegedly nefarious doings of the committee, though it was always hard to understand exactly how. Rich’s family sued, and the site quietly withdrew the story. It was a rare example of Murdoch caving in to any form of moral public pressure, or so we thought. (The family’s lawsuit was eventually dismissed.)

It turns out it was all business. The Murdochs were in a desperate and ultimately unsuccessful fight to try to win over British regulators for their proposed takeover of the Sky satellite network. Their first attempt to do so collapsed under the weight of the phone-hacking scandal at News of the World, which ultimately forced Murdoch to shut down the 168-year-old tabloid and endure a humiliating parliamentary hearing (along with a dive in the face). Now they were trying again.

Finding himself in this position was unusual for Murdoch. In the United States, especially with Trump in office, he gets what he wants. That’s why Fox’s sale of its non-news assets to Disney last month went so smoothly, despite the red flags it raised vis-à-vis Disney’s potential monopoly power.

It is also the likely reason that the Sinclair Broadcast Group, a Murdoch competitor, found itself stymied in its attempt to buy up most of Tribune Media’s television outlets. But in the UK, Fox News faced accusations of promoting “unfair and inaccurate content,” and in another investigation, British regulators ruled that Fox’s Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson breached impartiality standards. To help smooth these bumps, Murdoch was willing to pull the channel off the air in the UK—though, even then, his bid for Sky Broadcasting failed.

Australia, meanwhile, has become a veritable Murdoch playpen. Viewers of Fox News’ prime-time lineup in the United States would no doubt recognize the constant warnings populating the Murdochs’ Sky News’ Australia channel about the alleged “suicidal self-hatred” of the West and the dangers of Muslim immigrants; no less familiar would be the ranting of guests with views just this side of Adolf Eichmann’s.

What they may not know is that, working with politicians, the Murdochs managed to facilitate the replacement of the relatively moderate government of Malcolm Turnbull with the more rabid one of Scott Morrison. The Murdochs never made their intentions explicit. Rather, as the Times authors observe, they tend to “convey their desires indirectly,

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Of course, Trump’s success was Fox News’ Frankenstein monster: a product of the channel’s 20-year war on truth.

(continued from page 4)

(continued from page 5)

Of course, Trump’s success was Fox News’ Frankenstein monster: a product of the channel’s 20-year war on truth.

The direction of the nation must be altered when 140 million people live in poverty or near-poverty, and when racist, systemic voter suppression and gerrymandering work in concert to keep extremists in office despite new demographic progressive majorities. We must expand health care to all, provide just immigration policies, and curb our endless militarism. This is why we have relaunched the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 to honor the work that King was doing at the end of his life, by insisting that it is still needed today. Our work echoes the call for radicalism. This is why we have relaunched the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 to honor the work that King was doing at the end of his life, by insisting that it is still needed today. Our work echoes the call for radicalism. This is why we have relaunched the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 to honor the work that King was doing at the end of his life, by insisting that it is still needed today. Our work echoes the call for radicalism.

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(continued from page 5)

Dear Still Poor,

Having a social life is such a gift. Many Americans are terribly isolated, and especially as we get older, friends make all the difference to our happiness—and even our life expectancy. But you shouldn’t have to impoverish yourself to hang out with your friends. I’d recommend bringing the issue up not when everyone is in the midst of making a specific costly plan that they’re already excited about, but when the pressure’s off. Frame it as an ongoing problem that you’d like to address together.

I’ve been on both sides of this problem, Still Poor. Those with more money feel guilty about it, especially if we’re progressive enough to know that our income is a matter of luck and birth rather than brilliance and character. (Perhaps if we were libertarians, being richer than some of our friends would make us feel smug.) Those of us with less money feel a sense of shame, too; even if we know it’s not our fault, we can’t help absorbing capitalist ideology, which tells us that people with money are smarter and more disciplined than others, or just have their shit together in some ineffable way.

I don’t love the way your well-off friends have handled this so far. They certainly shouldn’t respond by excluding you. But you might consider worrying less about their moments of generosity. Intriguingly, the German psychologist Horst Heidbrink studied this problem and found that the friends with more money didn’t mind picking up the tab; it was the poorer friends who felt awkward about letting them. You may feel uncomfortable when they offer to pay, but why not try accepting their offers graciously? You’ll be helping them live their redistributive politics.

It also sounds as if others do the inviting and you react. What if you initiated more of your circle’s social activities? When you find a happy hour at a great bar, or an affordable restaurant that you love, invite your friends to meet up there. Throw BYOB parties if your place is big enough. Depending on your interests, invite friends to lectures, art openings, or on nature excursions (bird-watching, hiking, walking). Organize weekend day trips to the beach. Have a picnic in the park and ask everyone to bring food, along with their dogs and kids.

In my experience, the absolute best way to navigate financial inequality among friends is by creating a culture of entertaining at home. Have small groups of people over; they’ll bring wine, and when you cook, you control the expense of the meal. Better yet, they might even reciprocate by inviting you over more, having realized that people with greater means should play the host more often.

William J. Barber II

The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II is The Nation’s civil-rights correspondent.
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Refusenik

On April 2, followers of Taylor Swift, a parody fan account on Twitter, received a message quite different from the usual speculations about the pop star’s eyebrows or her role in the upcoming film adaptation of Cats. “As most of you know,” wrote @LegitTayUpdates, the account’s 19-year-old creator, “I haven’t been very active in the past couple of months because I was in prison :/” When a follower asked, “omg why,” she replied, “I refused to join the IDF lmao.”

The tweet garnered tens of thousands of likes and retweets, provoking a discussion on the practice of conscientious objection in Israel. Service in the Israel Defense Forces is mandatory for most Israeli youths; refusal is an offense for which the person can be sentenced to prison repeatedly.

These refuseniks are widely stigmatized. They face hiring discrimination and are banned from receiving state-funded scholarships or tuition subsidies. They are also often among the most marginalized of Israeli citizens: Russian and Ethiopian Jews, Mizrahim, and low-income Israelis.

Young people hoping to resist the militarization of Israeli society and the IDF’s role in Palestinian oppression are part of a small but committed community. @LegitTayUpdates, for one, said she hopes her many followers will donate to the Palestine Children’s Relief Fund, even as she continues to investigate whether Taylor Swift will make a cameo appearance on Game of Thrones.

—Isabel Cristo

Stop Expecting Saviors

Focusing all of our energies on the presidency will not deliver effective change.

What are you looking for in a presidential candidate? I want someone with fresh proposals on health care or the environment, you might say. A track record that testifies to experience and effectiveness. Or you might say: Listen, I’m just looking for anyone who can defeat Donald Trump in 2020. Whatever your position, you’re likely to have already gotten into spirited conversations about it with family and friends. And as the race for the Democratic nomination heats up, the debate has become increasingly acrimonious. In fact, it’s threatening to turn into a search for a savior.

This search manifests itself in two ways. The first is the belief that electing the right person will result in immediate solutions to the multitude of systemic problems that plague the country. If only we had the perfect person in the Oval Office, the thinking goes, then we would finally be able to fix our disastrous health-care system, or take serious action on global warming, or counteract the rightward shift of the Supreme Court. But this thinking runs counter to the reality that each president inherits problems from the previous administration, as well as constraints or even obstruction from the legislative branch.

It wasn’t so long ago that a Democrat who was viewed as a savior by millions was elected president. Among other things, Barack Obama promised a public health-care system and an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What he delivered instead were Obamacare, limited engagement in Iraq, and a continuation of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. What he delivered instead was an unaffordable public health-care system and an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What he delivered instead was an unaffordable public health-care system and an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What he delivered instead was an unaffordable public health-care system and an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What he delivered instead was an unaffordable public health-care system and an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What he delivered instead was an unaffordable public health-care system and an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What he delivered instead was an unaffordable public health-care system and an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What he delivered instead was an unaffordable public health-care system and an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What he delivered instead was an unaffordable public health-care system and an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What he delivered instead was an unaffordable public health-care system and an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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One manifestation of saviorism is the belief that scrutiny of the preferred candidate is, at best, ill-advised and, at worst, tantamount to heresy. When I expressed doubt on social media about whether Bernie Sanders supporter led to a similar overreaction. After I suggested that Sanders should release his tax returns, one of his admirers flippantly replied, “The world will be a better place when America elects someone who votes to make rain water private and bombs the shit out of Palestine but who does release their tax returns.” Rather than placing the onus on presidential candidates to show that they don’t have conflicts of interest and won’t enrich themselves from the office, this superfan chose to view my demand as a tacit disregard for concrete policy matters. This person seemed unaware that I supported Sanders in the 2016 primaries and likely had a similar set of goals. But the moment I dared to criticize the candidate, I was disparaged.

One manifestation of saviorism is the belief that scrutiny of the preferred candidate is, at best, ill-advised and, at worst, tantamount to heresy.
Democratic nomination and faces Trump in the general election. Do they expect that he or she will be shielded from criticism? Do they think the GOP will not exploit any flaws, real or imagined, to their fullest? Politicians are neither saints nor saviors; they are fallible human beings who have ambition, political agendas, and a range of policy ideas that may or may not work for the country. The very purpose of the primaries is to learn about the candidates, scrutinize their records, and choose the best one to face the incumbent.

Whatever happens in 2020, expecting transformative change from the top is a recipe for disappointment. If Democrats want to deliver on their big promises, they have to work on the small ones first. Last month, for example, I attended a fund-raiser for the Virginia House of Delegates’ Danica Roem. As far as political events go, this one wasn’t huge or loud or flashy. It was simply an opportunity to hear from Roem, who made history in 2017 as the first trans woman to be seated in a statehouse—and who did so by defeating a 26-year GOP incumbent who has called himself Virginia’s “chief homophobe.” Her winning strategy? Focusing on the needs of her district, specifically traffic issues on State Route 28. It’s this unglamorous work that we need to be doing if we want to have any chance of making serious change.

Let’s leave salvation to the prophets and work on saving ourselves. And that begins by treating our candidates like the public servants we expect them to be.

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SNAPSHOT / BEN CURTIS

**Honoring the Dead**

People commemorate the victims of the Rwandan genocide in a candlelight vigil marking the event’s 25th anniversary, held at Amahoro Stadium in Kigali, the country’s capital, on April 7. Up to 1 million Tutsis and Hutus were murdered by Hutu extremists over the course of 100 days.

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FULLY BOOKED

*Calvin Trillin*

Deadline Poet

“’We’re full,’” Trump said, as if he ran an inn that’s booked up for the night. Those empty rooms you see have been Reserved for patrons who are white.
The New York senator is a Medicare for All, Green New Deal progressive who wants to win over Trump’s voters. Can she convince Democrats to give her a shot?

by JOAN WALSH
"I’m not afraid of anything!" Senator Kirsten Gillibrand tells a crowd in Davenport, Iowa, as she stands on a rickety chair in a packed bar. It’s one of six events she will do over the course of 30 hours here in the first caucus state. The 5-foot-2 New York senator, who’s made “bravery”—her own, her voters’—the centerpiece of her presidential campaign, hops off the chair from time to time and wanders the crowd with her microphone, Oprah-style, then jumps back on it to answer the questions she gets, tall enough for everyone to see. Her staff seems both elated at the way she is working the room, and a tiny bit worried about her safety on that unreliable chair. But Gillibrand can’t be stopped. Here, as elsewhere, she poses for pictures with people until the last voter is selfied.

In Davenport, as in every place I see her, the New York senator talks rat-tat-a-tat fast, knowing she’s got at least 15 competitors for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination and that time—with voters and the media—is running short. Sure, the Iowa caucuses were still 11 months away, but Gillibrand is averaging about 1 percent in most polls. Soon, reporters will skip covering candidates with numbers that low. So Gillibrand opens her stump speech wasting no time: “I want to tell you who I am, why I’m running, and why I can beat Donald Trump.” She has her family story, along with lots of facts and figures and policy points, but her pitch comes down to two key items: She’s a Medicare for All progressive who nonetheless knows how to win in red districts, and perhaps more important in this Democratic primary campaign, she is a Resistance mom, as are most of the women who make up her crowds. Crushed by the 2016 election results—in interviews, Gillibrand admits that she cried for a long time after Hillary Clinton’s loss, then emerged, renewed, by the 2017 Women’s March—she and other women have risen up together, and they’re going after the president, he who is not brave, and whom Gillibrand will famously call a “coward” in her campaign-kickoff speech.

The morning after her packed event in Davenport, I follow Gillibrand south to Muscatine—she is on a Mississippi River tour, visiting some of the Iowa counties that flipped from Obama to Trump in 2016—and she seeks me out to make sure I’ll be at her official campaign kickoff that coming Sunday, outside of the Trump International Hotel & Tower in New York. “We’re gonna punch Trump in the face!” she tells me, smiling broadly, literally jumping up and down. “It’s the New York way!” Then she hops in her car to race to her next event.

For a week, I watched Gillibrand juggle these approaches: Iowa nice and New York nasty, the smart mom and senator with an ambitious plan for a “common-good fund” to provide for family leave, health care for all, and retirement security, but who also hits at Trump hard any chance she gets. Gillibrand rejects the notion that you can’t promote policy and battle Trump at the same time. Just watch me, she says, every day.

In her first congressional race, Gillibrand won a district with a nearly two-to-one Republican registration, and in her most recent Senate race (in which she had only nominal GOP opposition), she flipped at least 17 counties that went for Trump, including 10 rural counties much like those in Iowa she’s now visiting. She pitches herself as a Democrat who is willing to brave Fox News and is also unabashedly progressive. Although Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar, another Democratic contender, can boast of winning a comparable patchwork of swing districts in her state last year, Klobuchar is running as something of a moderate, casting a more skeptical eye on Medicare for All and the Green New Deal, two issues that are quickly becoming litmus tests for the 2020 Democratic candidates. Gillibrand has stepped out on both issues, having supported a version of Medicare for All back when she first ran for Congress in 2006. Now, she embraces a more ambitious transition to a single-payer system. She touts the Green New Deal at every stop, even when she’s not asked about it. Climate change is top of mind for many Iowans, as the worst floods in recent history covered much of western Iowa in March; even in the east, rivers were surreally swollen, making my drive between Des Moines, Dubuque, and Davenport reminiscent of a tour along the Louisiana Bayou.

And while the New York senator touts herself, accurately, as the person who’s voted the most consistently against Trump’s nominees—Cabinet secretaries as well as judges—she also boasts that the president signed 18 of her bills last session, on rural broadband, for example, and help for small businesses. She rages against opioid makers, gun manufacturers, and greedy banks (she voted against the bailouts in 2008), but she steadfastly defends “healthy capitalism” against “corrupt capitalism.”

In short, Gillibrand pitches herself as someone who’s uniquely qualified—brave enough, she would say—to take the fight to Trump, yet also fight for his voters. Will the Democratic primary base thrill to her combination of progressivism and results-oriented pragmatism? Or will it reject this hybrid approach for a purer denunciation of Trumpism, Fox, and capitalism, too?

The big news in Iowa on the week of Gillibrand’s visit was Beto O’Rourke, the former Texas congressman who’d
declared his candidacy and barnstormed the state, jumping on café counters and monopolizing television cameras. It set some women to grumbling. The Washington Post’s Margaret Sullivan called it “potentially dangerous” and “a self-fulfilling prophesy” that the three “B-boys” of the race—Beto, Senator Bernie Sanders, and former vice president Joe Biden (as well as a more recent addition: South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg)—were so far eclipsing the four talented female senators in the race: Gillibrand, Klobuchar, Kamala Harris, and Elizabeth Warren. At least for a while in mid-March, the four women were talking serious policy and working their tails off—which getting a fraction of the media coverage going to the male candidates.

But if O’Rourke drew bigger crowds than Gillibrand in a couple of places in Iowa, he also served as an excellent foil for her. Several voters I met called him “inspiring” but vague. Terri Billingsley Tobias, a biologist married to a farmer, had just seen the Texas political heartthrob in nearby Keokuk. “Beto was exciting, but he gave hardly any specifics,” she told me as we waited to see Gillibrand in Burlington.

“I have a record of doing the brave thing when it’s hard, when it’s not convenient, when it’s things others won’t do. That’s what makes me different,” Gillibrand told the Burlington crowd. That list included lobbying the late Fox News president Roger Ailes (“I’m not afraid of anybody!”) Gillibrand reiterated) to support her bill funding aid for New York City’s 9/11 first responders; voting against bank bailouts; and clashing with the Pentagon on its “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy for gay and lesbian service members as well as the epidemic of military sexual assault. As always, Gillibrand described her long-standing support for Medicare for All and pitched her own plan for such a program, which would let people buy in at any age. “I think all Americans should have access to Medicare,” she said. “And I think if we all buy in when we can, we’ll get to universal health care that is quality, that is affordable, and is a resilient system.” She closes, again, with “I’m not afraid of anything—I stand up to bullies,” and adds, “I will run through fire for you!”

I turn to Tobias, who’d found O’Rourke “exciting” but unimpressive in terms of policy, to ask what she thought. “Gillibrand was so much more specific!” she declares. “She has her ideas very well defined.”

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On the stump: In Iowa, Gillibrand’s specificity on policy earned her voters’ appreciation—and some tough questions.

in the election’s first caucus state, so they cross the river to see every candidate they can.

Coming into the Burlington event, Tobias adds, her top three candidates were “Kamala, Amy K., and Gillibrand—in that order. Now I’d say [Gillibrand] jumped ahead. If it was tomorrow, I’d probably vote for her. But we’ll see.”

Yet Gillibrand’s specificity on policy can cut against her, too. She got a tough question in Burlington, and again that night in Des Moines, about a bill she’s sponsoring with Republican Senator Cory Gardner that would restrict doctors and dentists to prescribing only seven days of opioid medication for “acute pain” after surgery, injuries, or dental procedures. When Gillibrand touted it on Twitter during her Iowa tour, the pushback was swift: In Twitter lingo, she was “tialed,” meaning she got many more comments (almost all negative) than likes or retweets. In Burlington, a woman complained that Gillibrand was ignoring the “root causes” of addiction, while in Des Moines, chronic-pain sufferer Charlotte Sucik confronted her sharply: “I have to rely on medication, and I’m really miffed at one of your solutions to the opioid crisis. Why are you getting between a doctor and patient?”

Gillibrand was firm. “This bill does not deal at all with chronic pain,” she replied, only cases of acute pain where, she says, too many medical professionals overscribe. At the end of the town hall, Sucik wasn’t convinced. “Her answer was solid—I’m open to learning more.” But, she added, “I’m still concerned about any legislation that limits a doctor’s decision on this.” A passionate Clinton supporter in 2008 and ’16, Sucik says she’s staying uncommitted for a while this time around.

Kristen’s never been afraid of working hard,” says Emily’s List communications vice president Christina Reynolds, who worked for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in the 2006 elections. “She was running for a really tough red seat that wasn’t on anybody’s radar, but she put it there.” Gillibrand frequently credits her mother, lawyer Polly Rutnik, with being the only person who believed she could win that first congressional race in 2006, in a red district “where cows outnumbered Democrats.”

But it’s her mother’s mother, Polly Noonan, who provides Gillibrand with her political origin story. Noonan was nominally just a secretary to top Democrats in the state senate in Albany—though former governor Mario Cuomo said flatly, “Polly was the leader”—and Gillibrand talks about her everywhere. “My grandmother was not your typical grandma—she had a salty tongue, she was not afraid of anything, and she worked every day of her life. She never went to college. And as a secretary in our state legislature, she looked around and determined that all of the legislators were men, and all of the support staff were women, and she decided to get involved in politics. She asked all the women in the legislature to participate; she asked all her lady friends to participate; she taught all of them how to go door to door, how to stuff envelopes, how to phone-bank, how to do all the things we do to elect candidates today.” Noonan served as president of the powerful Albany Democratic Women’s Club and became vice chair.
Proudly hailing from three generations of feminists is central to Gillibrand's presidential pitch, though she downplays the way that Noonan's role in Albany's political machine would benefit her granddaughter later. A lawyer who briefly worked for the tobacco giant Philip Morris, Gillibrand felt called to politics in her 30s and began raising money for Democrats. She took a job as special counsel to Andrew Cuomo when he was secretary of housing and urban development, and their history would both help and hurt her over the years. Even progressives who otherwise like her say that Gillibrand has been reluctant to buck the polarizing New York governor. Cynthia Nixon supporters hoped she would at least pause before endorsing Cuomo in last year's gubernatorial primary; she did not. And while Gillibrand accepted the Working Families Party's nomination when some progressives, such as new state Attorney General Letitia James, snubbed it because of Cuomo's enmity toward the group, she has stayed on the sidelines as Cuomo dedicated himself to destroying the party over its challenges to him. Some progressives also question her fund-raising ties to corporate power: While Gillibrand whacks opioid makers and has even suggested prosecuting them, Pfizer executive Sally Susman, who briefly worked for the tobacco giant Philip Morris, has hosted a fund-raiser for her.

It's also worth noting that she wasn't always so progressive; Gillibrand was once conservative on both immigration reform and gun control, reflecting the opinions of her upstate New York constituents. She evolved on both issues very quickly after being appointed to her Senate seat in 2009. “I was maybe a little bit tough with her,” New York Representative Nydia Velázquez told the writer Rebecca Traister for New York magazine in 2017, recalling Gillibrand's request for her help in becoming a leader on comprehensive immigration reform. “She proved me so wrong.” Shannon Watts of Moms Demand Action notes that Gillibrand has become a strong leader on gun issues, as evidenced by “her votes, her not taking money from the gun lobby, her long track record.” In a field with several genuine progressives, MoveOn's Karine Jean-Pierre praises Gillibrand for “raising really important issues in this race, like paid family leave, equal pay, and the urgent need to act on climate,” while noting that the group will stay neutral until MoveOn's full membership votes.

When Gillibrand describes her change of heart on immigration and guns, it's often through the prism of being a mother. She credits meeting parents who lost children to gun violence for her change of heart. “You are literally meeting parents who’d lost their daughter, and I’m a young mother with babies and tons of hormones,” she told Traister. “I was so upset that I hadn’t heard their story.”

Now, she weaves her own status as a mother into almost every issue. When she shares stories of her congressional races in that legendary upstate district, she notes that she was out campaigning, first with her son Theo, a toddler, then later while pregnant with her son Henry “out to here” (she thrusts her arm across the room). Her opponents tried to go negative on her, but they soon learned that “you can’t beat a young mother with a toddler using negative ads.”

A passionate foe of Trump's family-separation policies, Gillibrand tears up almost every time she describes meeting boys her sons’ age—Theo is now 15, Henry 10—detained at the border. One site “looked like a prison; the boys got two hours of ‘outside time.’ A place where brothers can’t hug one another.” Discussing climate change and the Green New Deal, she gets choked up recalling a mother who had her toddlers swept from her arms during New York's Superstorm Sandy in 2012, and again when she notes that childhood asthma rates in the Bronx are among the nation's highest.

Sitting in her Washington, DC, campaign office, Gillibrand explains the way she'll sell the Green New Deal in the face of fanatical GOP opposition and corporate pushback. She breaks it down into three components, all of which should be “bipartisan”: infrastructure, green jobs, and clean air and water. Yes, I reply, infrastructure spending—on roads and bridges, mass transit, sewer systems, railroads—used to be bipartisan, but it hasn’t been since the Republicans became a party of nihilists determined to crush Barack Obama. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is busy unraveling regulations that protect clean air and water, while the entire party mocks the Green New Deal as trying to abolish cows and air travel.

Gillibrand's response is to tout her ability to bypass right-wing ideologues and appeal to Republican voters, as she has since her 2006 congressional race. “Cleaning up brownfields is bipartisan. Everybody has industrial pollution,” she says, comparing the problems she saw in New Hampshire with those in rural New York. Likewise, “Iowa has nitrates in their water because of runoff from agriculture. The Green New Deal is gonna help red and purple places.” As the senator of a blue state with many red patches, she adds, “I understand their economies. I sit on the Agriculture Committee and the Public Works Committee. I’m an expert on rural agriculture and manufacturing.” She believes she can talk about the Green New Deal in a way that makes sense to Republican voters. For better or worse, she reminds me of the way that Obama used to talk about creating “Obama-cans”: Republican voters who would support his agenda and defect from their Koch-addicted overlords. (Spoiler: They did not.)

Similarly, when Gillibrand talks about Medicare for All, it’s as an evangelist. Back when she ran on the issue in her red district in 2006, it was a limited plan that would simply allow people to buy into Medicare. Still, it was radical at the time, since few people were discussing it, and we were two years away from the Affordable Care Act push. Now there’s a very detailed Medicare for All bill, introduced by Representative Pramila Jayapal and over 100 co-sponsors,
that lays out a mandatory single-payer system that would eliminate all co-pays and patient costs; expand benefits to include long-term care and dental and vision coverage; and move all Americans to Medicare within two years.

But while Gillibrand endorses many of the goals of Jayapal’s bill, she does not support the legislation itself. “We’re all trying to get to the place where health care is a right and not a privilege,” she says. “And they believe, as I do, that the best way to do that is single-payer. That has to be our goal. But I think the quickest way to get there is not what Representative Jayapal is suggesting. I’d let people choose [Medicare] for a certain amount of time—maybe a four-year buy-in at 4 percent of income, and your employer then matches it at 4 percent. That’s 8 percent of income in America. That is enough; it will pay for itself. And if you give it a four-year buy-in, I wouldn’t be surprised if 90 percent of Americans buy in. If you offer it at an affordable rate, it is such a better health plan than most insurers are going to offer.” When I ask her office later what she plans to do if a significant number of Americans and their employers continue to prefer private insurance plans, and don’t voluntarily shift to Medicare, I get no answer; Sanders is drafting a new version of his Senate bill, and Gillibrand, apparently, doesn’t want to get ahead of the process.

Unlike some on the left, who would like to see Medicare for All funded by higher taxes on the wealthy, Gillibrand envisions it as an “earned benefit” (as it already is, at least for senior citizens) funded by payroll taxes. She has the same vision for her longtime priority of family leave, which would allow Americans to take 12 weeks of paid leave in a year to care for a new child or a sick family member, and would be funded by another payroll tax of 0.2 percent—an average of $2 a week, she stresses repeatedly on the stump.

Some see a payroll-tax hike as regressive, but Gillibrand disagrees. “No. No,” she insists. “Because if you pay for it with a tax increase on the rich, it can be taken away the second the Congress changes. But if you make it an earned benefit, it’s yours! You bought it. It will never be taken away if it’s yours. An earned benefit is a better model for a social safety net.” Payroll taxes would finance what Gillibrand envisions as a “common-good fund” to provide for health care, paid leave, and retirement security, and she also backs a higher estate tax and a financial-transaction tax.

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I though she mentions her legislative work with “Bernie” at least four times in our interviews, and many more times on the stump, Gillibrand has no problem saying that she’s not a socialist. Indeed, she seems to welcome the question. Where Elizabeth Warren acknowledges she’s a capitalist, too, Gillibrand seems more aggressive in defending the label. Her approach to the financial sector is softer than Warren’s: She hasn’t sworn off donations from Wall Street, as Warren has, and Warren has a proposal to throw bank executives in jail when their companies commit crimes. I don’t hear that from Gillibrand, though she does suggest prosecuting “greedy” opioid manufacturers. At every campaign stop, she pits her version of “common good” capitalism against “corrupt capitalism.” She cites an example of the latter in her home state, when Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos announced his decision to locate a new company headquarters in the New York City borough of Queens. Opposition was swift: Many Queens residents and community groups argued that the city was providing too much in the way of tax breaks and other support, and getting too little back from the largest public company in the world. Gillibrand opposed the structure of the deal but thought it could be improved. Instead, Bezos pulled the plug after public outcry.

“For me, what was frustrating was that Jeff Bezos made statements to the effect of: ‘I want to be in New York because New Yorkers are the greatest workers in the world, they’re great innovators, [and] we want to be part of the community,’” Gillibrand says now. “But the truth is, he never wanted any of that—he wanted a lot of tax breaks. And as soon as the local community wanted to have a voice, they ran away! So my greatest disappointment was in Jeff Bezos’s unwillingness to invest in the community. He chose greed over investment.”

I note that when Gillibrand discusses “greedy” capitalists, it makes voracious profit-seeking a merely personal failing. “Greed is a choice,” she replies. “I am a capitalist—but I think there is a huge difference between capitalism and greed. I don’t think every business is evil, but some businesses are greedy.” She ticks off a long list of malefactors that I will hear about constantly on the campaign trail: “Gun manufacturers who’d rather sell a gun to a teenager in Walmart than raise the age [to buy a gun legally]. Who would rather sell a weapon to someone with a severe mental illness, or with a violent background, than have universal background checks. Opioid manufacturers spewing out opioids and making them more addictive without telling doctors. Every polluter that’s ever polluted. That’s all corrupted capitalism; that’s greed.” In her view, government has a role in protecting capitalism by reining in greed through tight regulation.

While Gillibrand happily runs for president against her “friend” Bernie Sanders as an advocate of “common good” capitalism over socialism, she has been dogged by her issue with another member of Congress she once called a “friend”—former senator Al Franken. The two were squash partners, and Franken once made a video for NARAL New York touting Gillibrand’s toughness. “I got to tell you, she doesn’t want to lose,” Franken says in the video. “She’s a competitor—both in squash and in women’s reproductive rights.” Then she became the first senator to call for Franken’s resignation, after multiple charges of sexual misconduct emerged against him over two months. Many other senators followed her call immediately, but Gillibrand’s role as the first senator to call on...
Franken to resign has stuck with her. The conflict is widely depicted in the political press as a drag on her presidential hopes.

It certainly feels that way on Twitter, but not on the campaign trail. In her dozens of sessions with voters and a half-dozen local press “gaggles,” the Franken issue never came up publicly, although one woman who said she otherwise loved Gillibrand did raise it with me privately, in Burlington, as a factor inhibiting her full support.

But that’s one woman, out of the roughly 100 people I spoke with or listened to in a week of covering the senator. Franken is a factor for the national media, hyperactive Twitter folks, and some big Democratic donors. But out on the stump, Gillibrand’s not hearing about him—much to her relief.

That was true even after Politico revealed, on the eve of her Iowa trip, that one of Gillibrand’s top staffers had been accused of sexual harassment and making derogatory comments about women in the workplace. After an internal investigation, Gillibrand had him demoted but not fired—until Politico found more witnesses. The staffer was then let go, and a few days later, Gillibrand’s chief of staff, who’d handled the internal investigation, left her office as well. Having just begun to emerge from the shadow of her alleged role in Franken’s departure, it was the last thing she needed. When the news broke just a day before our scheduled interview in Washington, I worried that she would cancel. But Gillibrand did not, and she fielded my questions unflappably, if not happily.

Shouldn’t she have enlisted outside help with the internal investigation? I asked. “Our office would have loved to have the benefit of someone outside doing it,” Gillibrand replied quickly. In fact, she had tried to expand the authority of independent investigators in the bill on the Senate’s sexual-harassment protocol that she sponsored with Senator Ted Cruz, but she was shot down. “One flaw is, we [in Congress] don’t have access to professional investigators. And let’s just say that I decided to spend my campaign money to hire one—well, that’s not ‘independent,’ because you’re paying for it.”

I asked what she says to people who wonder why Franken didn’t get the benefit of the doubt that she appeared to give her own staffer. Gillibrand stiffened a bit. “The cases are so different because of who I am,” she said. “Senator Franken had eight credible, corroborated allegations brought to light by the press for everyone to see. I said, ‘I do not think that these kinds of allegations are consistent with being able to be an effective senator, and he should resign.’

“That was my opinion on an issue. My opinion. I had no say whatsoever whether Senator Franken would choose to resign, or choose to stick it out and do his six-month ethics investigation. Those were his decisions. My decision was very simple: either remain silent, and defend him with my silence, or not. And it only comes up amongst Democratic elites, a few very affluent donors. If they’re angry about me standing beside female survivors—well, that’s on them!”

I made it home from Iowa in time to get to the Trump International Hotel & Tower, adjacent to Central Park, to see Gillibrand’s campaign kickoff. In her speech, she called the gleaming monstrosity “a shrine to greed.” It is also a spot where New York Women’s Marches have gathered since 2017, so there was a happy, feminist vibe in the mostly female crowd on an unseasonably warm spring day. Elizabeth Blumburg, a young woman wearing a pink pussy hat, told me that she “loves” Gillibrand, who is her senator—though she was currently supporting Kamala Harris for president. “We have so many candidates, whoever it is will be great,” Blumburg added. But she draws the line (continued on page 24)
Presidential contender O’Rourke says we have “completely forgotten” our constitutional duties.

by JOHN NICHOLS

Beto on the Costs of War
Vanderbilt University professor Dana Nelson wrote an important book some years ago: Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People. In it, she warned about a process of constitutional unbalancing that has steered the United States toward “presidentialism,” whereby the unitary executive becomes ever more powerful and ever more definitive when it comes to decision-making about fundamental issues. Nowhere is presidentialism more troubling than in the exercise of war powers. The role of Congress has been severely diminished as successive presidents have claimed ever-greater authority to order bombing raids and drone strikes, dispatch ground troops to distant lands, and spend billions of dollars without clear declarations of war or meaningful oversight.

There are many possible and necessary correctives for presidentialism when it comes to war powers. Congress needs to check and balance presidents regardless of their party. The people need to be brought back into discussions about interventions abroad and the many costs and dangers of the military–industrial complex, which President Dwight Eisenhower warned about six decades ago. These issues should be front and center in all our debates, but especially in our consideration of who should occupy the Oval Office. We need to hear from presidential candidates on issues of war and peace. We need some sense of whether the many Democrats and perhaps several Republicans who will bid for their party’s nomination in 2020 will be prepared to join in a process of dialing back the excesses of the imperial presidency when it comes to the exercise of war powers.

Unfortunately, presidential debates and forums tend to focus on domestic issues or the flash-point international concern of the moment. So I have begun to ask the current roster of declared presidential candidates, during the course of broader interviews, to ruminate on some basic questions about the exercise of war powers. Before the 2020 race is finished, I hope to get all of the major contenders on the record, and to come back to the front-runners as the race evolves. The point here is not to download talking points, but rather to begin conversations that explore the extent to which candidates have thought about the consequences of those actions are being felt and will be felt going forward. Look at [the 1953 CIA-orchestrated overthrow of Mohammad] Mosaddegh in Iran. Coming on 19 years in Afghanistan. Twenty-seven years in Iraq, [five] successive presidential administrations. Tell me that any of those wars or covert actions or interventions have made those countries, the world, or our foreign-policy prospects any better. They haven’t.

On alternatives to military action: I think the much tougher but far more important work to do is to lead with diplomacy, holding the card of military involvement as the last resort. Unfortunately, for far too long, we’ve led militarily and then tried belatedly to follow that up with diplomacy. When you look at the $22 trillion of debt that we have right now, so much of that [extends from] these wars that we’ve sustained, these countries that we’ve rebuilt after we’ve invaded them. And, at the same time, we fail to pay the full cost for those women and men who served in those wars. We’re losing 20 veterans a day by their own hand in this country; [most] of those 20 have been unable or, for whatever reason, unwilling to go into a VA [Veterans Affairs facility] and get the care that might have saved their lives.

We need to bring these wars to a close. We need to follow the lead of [Representatives] Mark Pocan and Ro Khanna, who are trying to prevent us from going into new wars or continuing the wars that we are effectively in, in places like Yemen.

On blank checks for war: This country has completely forgotten its constitutional responsibility to lawfully declare and end these wars, as prescribed in the first article of the US Constitution. I don’t think there’s been a meaningful vote on the wars since 9/11, since the ones we had in 2001 and 2002, and I think that’s desperately needed right now. If we want to have the backs of our service members, there’s no better way to do it than to define victory in the wars that we wage, describe the strategy to achieve that, and have an open-eyed understanding of what the cost is that we will bear to achieve that. If we are unwilling to do that, then we have no business being there, sacrificing American lives and taking the lives of others in this country’s name.

On where he begins when considering issues of war and peace: I’ll try to relate it to something I was just asked yesterday in Independence, Iowa. A gentleman stood up and said, “I’m really anxious that we’re going to use military force in Venezuela. What do you think about that?” I said, “Well, first of all, I would oppose, and as president of the United States would not lead, forces in Venezuela.” But if you look at our involvement in the Western Hemisphere, if you go back to Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in the 1950s, we, through the CIA, literally overthrew a democratically elected government. Those refugees and asylum seekers coming from Guatemala today, you can trace some of that back to our actions in the 1950s. Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1970s and 1980s, the way in which we used Honduras to pursue a military-first foreign policy in the region—the crises of those actions are being felt and will be felt going forward.

Looking at [the 1953 CIA-orchestrated overthrow of Mohammad] Mosaddegh in Iran. Coming on 19 years in Afghanistan. Twenty-seven years in Iraq, [five] successive presidential administrations. Tell me that any of those wars or covert actions or interventions have made those countries, the world, or our foreign-policy prospects any better. They haven’t.

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On a recent Thursday night, thousands piled into Mexico City’s Palace of Mining to attend, of all things, a book festival. Neither books nor mines were the main attraction, however: Just inside the doors, in a chandelier-studded ballroom, some three dozen reporters and a half-dozen network camera crews waited quietly for the 70-year-old writer Paco Ignacio Taibo II, who had recently been appointed to run the storied Fondo de Cultura Económica.

The FCE is a publishing house primarily funded by the Mexican government, with a staggering backlist of some 10,000 titles, as well as some 30 bookstores in Mexico and another dozen or so abroad. Its prominence positions Taibo as a kind of culture minister. With full command of this prestigious and influential institution—which, in the course of its 85-year history, has published 65 Nobel Prize winners—Taibo has tremendous sway over Mexican publishing and, by extension, book culture in all Spanish-speaking countries.

Standing 5-foot-4 and arriving in his signature baggy jeans, an open work shirt over a faded tee covering a bit of a paunch, Taibo received a rock star’s welcome. He had with him his two omnipresent companions: a bottle of Coke (he drinks three liters per day) and a yellow pack of H. Upmann Cuban cigars rolled with a dark, harsh tobacco.

Before landing his new job, Taibo was one of Mexico’s best-known, most irascible, and most prolific writers, with over 80 books under his belt (and surely more to come). He’s known as a radical, profane, and outspoken critic of just about every institution in Mexico. His down-to-earth humor, sarcastic swipes at the privileged,
that mark the Mexican political class.

At the same time, Taibo’s presence is no more or less surprising than the near-daily aftershocks of Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s election. The maverick politician known as AMLO bulldozed the country’s three traditional parties and took 53 percent of the presidential vote; in the process, he rather casually smashed open the Mexican political piñata and left the establishment empty-handed.

López Obrador’s decision to appoint Taibo matters more in the political sense than you might think. Writers, journalists, and books play a significantly different role in Mexican society than they do north of the border. Authors are a source of national pride: They’re nearly as likely to appear on a talk show as a new pop-star singer. They are also targets: More than 70 journalists have been murdered in the last decade, hundreds of others have been threatened, and countless Mexican authors have been intimidated out of the profession.

In this context, Taibo’s tenure at the FCE will be a much more important test of López Obrador’s own principles. AMLO has committed himself to restoring democracy and standing up for the poor; how much latitude Taibo has will serve as a litmus test for the progressivism of Mexico’s new leadership.

In his first 100 days in office, López Obrador was credited with one breakneck “miracle”—or at least a “surprise”—a day. He moved quickly, even brusquely, toward reform, passing legislation that his opponents complained about as loudly as his supporters cheered.

In February, Taibo became a significant object of the public’s attention. First, the opposition tried to use an arcane law that barred foreign-born Mexicans from heading a state-owned agency. (Taibo was born in 1949 into a socialist-anarchist family in Asturias, Spain; the family left when he was 9, and Taibo became a nationalized Mexican as a child.) But the president’s majority in the Mexican Congress legalized his appointment with the so-called “Taibo law.”

By coincidence, that measure went into effect the night that Taibo announced his publishing plans at the Palace of Mining. “How many people would come out in Los Angeles for an event like this?” Taibo asked me before he took the stage. “Would you get 400 people and 40 reporters to hear some guy talk about a publishing plan?” He laughed. “Andrés Manuel has chosen the book as the symbol of culture and of political awareness, and our job is to bring books that are cheap or even free to every corner of the country. Mexicans love to read; they just can’t afford it.” It’s true: Mexicans spend about five hours a day reading—more than most people in the world, and just a few minutes per day less than people in the United States. Yet a Mexican trade paperback can cost $25 or more (in US currency), and many workers make only $8 to $12 a day. “This is why our new fighting slogan is Una República de Lectores.” —Paco Ignacio Taibo II

“Illustration by Tim Robinson

and informal vocabulary laced with street vulgarities make him an unusual choice for public office—imagine a somewhat younger Noam Chomsky being appointed US Secretary of State, and you’ll get the drift.

Before the event, Taibo’s wife of 40-plus years, Paloma Saiz, whispered to me: “I told Paco that now…he’s got to be more careful, as every word he says is scrutinized.”

Indeed, having first met Taibo more than 30 years ago while reporting a story in Mexico City, I was probably as stunned as anybody when his appointment was first floated last fall. Taibo’s one of the most intriguing people I’ve ever met; if you computer-designed a government official, he would be the exact opposite. Taibo is a full-time provocateur—not the loud and clownish type, like Abbie Hoffman, but a relentless literary and political activist who focuses his prodigious talents on the multiple targets of corruption, deceit, and arrogance.
already using them to visit some of the more remote sections of the country, including in the epicenter of narco activity. Taibo has already launched his first series, “Vientos del Pueblo,” a 400,000-copy press run of eight books priced at $2 or less, including authors ranging from Ariel Dorfman to Michel Foucault.

Taibo has also signed agreements with foreign publishers that will cut their book prices in Mexico by half, and he plans on publishing scores of new titles this year, including plenty of fiction. “We are not going to publish a women’s series, an indigenous series, an anything series,” he tells me. “We are simply going to publish good books—no bad ones. We don’t care who wrote them or what country they are from.

“And no political pamphlets, either,” he adds. “When someone is moved by something they read, it’s usually not a newspaper article or even a magazine piece. It’s usually a book—Robin Hood, The Grapes of Wrath, you know. So no didactic pamphlets from Lenin or Trotsky. And Das Kapital! That book is so dense, it’s the best way to get people to quit reading forever.”

This is not to say that Taibo’s politics aren’t squarely on the left—though they are rather eclectic and decidedly nonsectarian. Having become politically active during the 1968 revolutions, Taibo was greatly influenced by Che Guevara and Salvador Allende, but also by national heroes like Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, Mexico’s last progressive president, who nationalized the oil companies on the eve of World War II.

Taibo’s 1968 principles remain intact, though he has opted to fight for what is truly possible without forgetting his more “utopian” ideals. I once asked his father how he defined his own politics. “I guess you can call me a liberal-anarchist-socialist-humanist,” he said with a laugh. I doubt that Taibo’s answer would be much different. Yes, he wrote the definitive biography of Che in Spanish and maintains friendly relations with Havana. But his new smash Patria trilogy is a paean to Mexico’s liberal reformation of the mid-19th century.

“Look,” Taibo says. “We are not going to exclude anything or anybody. But the people of Mexico have voted, and they have voted to end decades of disastrous neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is dead. Dead!”

When I arrived at his apartment in the somewhat gentrified Condesa district, Taibo’s family was in an uproar. Apparently, a lot of people had listened to the launch at the Palace of Mining the night before, and by 10 am, there had been an explosion of tweets in his timeline. Most were to the effect of: “Where the hell are those $2 books you promised? Can’t find them.”

“Looks like we screwed up,” Taibo says. “We ran off 40,000 of them, and they sold out in four days. Got to get the presses running full-time and load up the bookstores.” Taibo’s co-conspirators—his wife, Paloma, and his adult daughter, Marina—were upstairs, attempting to respond to each and every tweet and letting people know where to find the books the following week.

Meanwhile, Taibo would soon be on route to a fact-finding tour of FCE’s bookstores to see if he could really turn them into community centers. He was accompanied by a well-known Mexican playwright and her producer, who wanted to scout locations for live theater. FCE controls over 30 stores, and Educal, a government-backed nonprofit, over 80; they are now being merged under Taibo’s watch. And many are marvelous: bright, clean, modern, and airy, like literary Apple Stores stocked to the rafters.

But while the stores were fully staffed, there were hardly any customers. Taibo was undeterred. “We are going to change the face of the entire industry in Mexico,” he remarked as we stepped into his van. “We are going to have a huge ripple effect. Book prices will go down everywhere.”

We drove through the city’s terrible traffic to the FCE’s headquarters in the south. The complex, inaugurated in the 1990s, when former Mexican president Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado was heading up the FCE, is imposing and impressive: a tree-shaded oasis, a tasteful mishmash of office buildings, libraries, exhibition centers, creeks, and walkways.

“Welcome to the elephant cemetery,” Taibo jokes, referring to the FCE’s reputation as a place where the politically well-connected were put out to pasture as they got older. “This was a machine for dispensing favors,” he adds.

That mentality runs deep. In the past, graduate students and high-level functionaries have cut deals with the FCE to publish their books, which have little to no commercial value, so they could put them on their résumés or hand out copies to friends. “After you leave public service, you get sent here to cash in,” Taibo says. He wants to change the way this place works: By stopping the frivolous production (and storage) of expensive hardcovers that won’t sell, he believes more resources and labor can be dedicated to producing ones that do, and at a lower cost.

We walk down another hallway and both break out laughing when we encounter a row of about a dozen stolid black-and-white portraits. It’s a gallery of all the former leaders of the FCE, and when Taibo leaves, he’ll be hanging there, too. Just imagining this ruffian up on the wall a few feet from Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado is hallucinatory.

At 10 am, it’s time for the first of six meetings. Taibo’s core team is young, fresh, and enthusiastic. Some have a long history in publishing; others are writers themselves. They sit relaxed, legs crossed, papers spread over a round coffee table in one corner, seeming utterly out of place amid the swanky furniture and expensive art. The scene reminded me of those black-and-white photos of the early days of the Cuban Revolution, with armed and mud-spattered barbudos lounging on the floor of some government office they had requisitioned. There were no guns here, though, just collegial discussions over what’s about to be published and what sort of events the plan de choque has coming up.

Any time the enthusiasm flags, Taibo cranks it back up, yelling “I love this!” and waving his arms. It used to take months to get an event approved; now, we sit here and schedule four or five in one morning, just like that.

As we depart the FCE, Taibo pulls me toward a glass door at the front entrance. Taped to it are three very of-
AIBO IS NO NOOCCHEER TO POLITICS. HE WAS ATTENDINNG COLLEGE IN 1968, WHEN THE MEXICAN GOVERNMENT REPORTEDLY SHOT 26 STUDENNTS AND JAILLED MANY MORE. IN 1994, HE WAS A CAMPAIGN SPOKESMAN FOR THE UNSUCCESSFUL LEFTIST PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE CUAUHTÉMOC CARDENAS, AND HE PLAYED A SIMILAR ROLE IN AMLO’S LATEST CAMPAIGN. TAIBO HAS BEEN IN THE PUBLIC EYE SINCE 1976, WHEN HE PUBLISHED HIS FIRST BOOK, DIAS DE COMBATE. IT WAS THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF NINE CRIME NOVELS STARRING THE CYNICAL BUT GOLD-HEARTED PRIVATE DETECTIVE HÉCTOR BELASCAORÁN SHAYNE—A HALF-MEXICAN everyman who, when he wasn’t solving crimes, was being thwarted, harassed, and threatened by federal and state cops. Since then, Taibo has won the National History Prize, among others, for his history of communism in Mexico. He has written about Leonardo da Vinci; published a voluminous biography of Che that’s been translated into 28 languages; and written a biography of Pancho Villa, which has more than 1 million copies in print.

He has also worked on documentaries for Netflix on Che, Villa, and Santana and is currently front and center in the adaptation of his Patria trilogy. “I’ve had to cut back on writing because the Fondo is taking up 15 hours a day,” he says. “But I have never been happier. I’ve already done 80 books, and I have another 40 in me. Right now, I’m working on a history of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and I found that it was really led by a young socialist Jew that history has mostly ignored.” Taibo has honed an inimitable and disheveled style, though I suspect it’s congenital. He doesn’t own a tie or a sport jacket. He doesn’t drive. He doesn’t own a cell phone. He doesn’t socialize with elites, especially the literary elite, which thinks of him as a crude political agitator. And it’s hard to walk a couple hundred yards with Taibo in Mexico City without some stranger or another stopping him to shake his hand or start an argument.

Because, while his work always grapples with injustice and the daily torturous frustrations of the average Mexican, his work, like his personality, has a light touch. He’s accessible: His writing is always free of any dogma, hero worship, preachiness, or grating political correctness. Taibo deeply, madly loves Mexico City, largely because with all its crowded chaos, its no-go districts, its thick pollution and round-the-clock noise, it is a place that’s very easy to dislike.

And then there’s his freakier side—one that reveals just how much he wants to turn reading literature into a popular pastime.

In 1988, Taibo organized one of the most phantasmagorical literary festivals that I have ever seen: Semana Negra, or “Black Week,” an unlikely mix of the Iowa State Fair and Manhattan’s 92nd Street Y, with a Whiff of Woodstock and Burning Man thrown in. Semana Negra was held every July in his hometown of Gijón, Spain. It offered a host of popular attractions—amusement-park rides, food stands, musical performances, even a daily newspaper for the whole week—and then dropped a literary festival right in the middle of it. The concept was simple: attract tens of thousands of people to a pop-up carnival on a week of warm summer nights and then let them wander into the spaces where books were sold and authors and journalists sat 10 feet from you, lecturing and debating.

You could get off the Ferris wheel and hear authors from around the world; you could eat cotton candy while listening to a debate about noir between Cuban author Rodolfo Perez Valero and the now-departed American writer Bob Leuci. The Cold War was still on, so Taibo went out of his way to invite a bevy of Cuban, Russian, and even Bulgarian writers to mix it up. Thus was born the International Association of Crime Writers and its yearly festival of literature, which drew 100,000 people per night for seven nights in a row. Taibo ran this festival for 24 years, until he handed off the job to friends in 2012.

Meanwhile, Paloma was hired by the Mexico City government to run a series of book fairs, back when AMLO was mayor in 2005. Eventually, Paloma and Paco turned the organization into a nongovernmental organization called La Brigada Para Leer, supported in part by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Germany. It has spent the last 10 years bringing books, authors, and entire literary festivals to the very poorest of “book deserts” around the capital.

“I was born to do this new job,” Taibo tells me at lunch one day. “Twenty-four years of running Semana Negra and eight years working with Paloma on the Brigada are two facts that the president noticed very carefully. What I am doing now is just a logical extension of the Semana and the Brigada.”

While Brazil and Colombia may have produced some worker-priests, I think it’s absolutely accurate to describe Taibo as a worker-writer: Whenever he speaks publicly, he directs his words at the poor in the crowd. He is a hero to millions of working Mexicans who know that this is a country in which too much truth-telling can be dangerous, if not fatal.

Oversized: Giant cardboard books welcome visitors to Semana Negra, now one of Europe’s biggest literary fairs.
Barring any major catastrophes, AMLO and Taibo have much to look forward to. The law limits the president to a single six-year term, but there are midterm elections coming up in just about two years, and almost every political observer believes that López Obrador’s MORENA party will sweep them, giving him more power still.

Taibo, for his part, is still trying to wrap his head around his new position—and his new boss, whose policy initiatives, he concedes, can appear disjointed. “I can’t tell you how to describe this government,” Taibo says. “Andrés Manuel has a certain trajectory as a militant and a leftist and as a nationalist, but I think it is impossible to describe his government as other than Rooseveltian. Those who have described him as Mexico’s Trump don’t have a fucking clue as to what he is about.”

“It’s all strange. It’s all contradictory,” Taibo adds in a reflective moment. “The president wants to create a social-welfare state. But he is also intent on sharply cutting the size of the state. The state had become bloated with bureaucrats and people with no-show jobs,” he continues, and to pay for public goods, “AMLO [wants to] invest in people instead of bribes.”

Not all of AMLO’s supporters are that sanguine—or forgiving, for that matter. Corruption, for all of López Obrador’s early efforts, has been difficult to root out, from the police to Congress. The president appointed a National Guard to handle civil policing, disappointing opponents who wanted less of the military, not more. Crime persists. The economy is faltering. Five journalists have been killed since he took office.

Mexico’s intelligentsia leans left, but a large swath of it views AMLO with great trepidation—perhaps because they have been the subject of staff cuts, or have benefited from corruption in the past. Among the middle and lower classes, though, AMLO has certainly engendered hope that real change is coming.

But even some of his more sympathetic critics, including on the left, believe that AMLO is too stuck in the past. Taibo sums up the frustrating reality: “The right wing thinks Andrés Manuel is a communist; the left wing thinks he’s a right-winger. I think he will do well for Mexico.”

(continued from page 17)

at Beto O’Rourke, who reminds her of a “bad boyfriend,” and she confessed to holding a grudge against Sanders for taking more than a month to endorse Clinton after she clinched the nomination in 2016. “But really, my thing is: Let’s just not fight.”

Onstage, Gillibrand was endorsed by a roster of activists championing sexual-assault prevention, LGBTQ rights, protection for Dreamers, and gun-safety laws. For all her outreach to purple-district voters, Gillibrand’s kickoff had drawn a solidly blue #Resistance crowd. There were no union representatives and little talk of economic issues per se. The one man onstage, Gabriel Blau, composed his endorsement as a conversation with his young son, telling him that Gillibrand had “stood up to ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell,’ she stood up on gun issues, she stood up to help me and your father get married. This is what bravery is.”

Jackie Rowe-Adams, a Harlem mother who lost two children to gun violence, talked about Gillibrand’s support for gun-safety legislation “back when we were hopeless, we didn’t think anybody cared.” She revved up the crowd: “ Ain’t no stoppin’ us now! Ladies, you can do it. Yes, you can! Men removed us from the table, but it’s over now. Number 45? We’re comin’ after you!”

Indeed, when it was her turn, Gillibrand did just that, tearing into Trump as someone who “demonizes the vulnerable and punches down. He puts his name in bold on every building. He does all of this because he wants us to believe he is strong. He is not. Our president is a coward. That’s not what we deserve—not what you deserve. We deserve a president who is brave; a president who will walk through fire to do what is right.” As Gillibrand hailed the courage of the activists who spoke before her, she added: “The formerly well-behaved women who organized, ran for office, voted in record numbers, and won in 2018—that, too, is brave.”

Gillibrand is building her campaign on the notion that she best represents that cadre of women—the ones who bravely ran in 2018, and also the ones who worked and voted for them. The middle-aged women, many (though not all) of them white, traumatized by Trump’s victory over Clinton, as Gillibrand was, and vowing to avenge her loss. First-quarter campaign fund-raising totals have not yet been released, though Gillibrand is not expected to be in the top tier. Still, it’s known that Gillibrand has $10 million on hand from her 2018 Senate campaign. She has topped the Democratic field in campaign appearances, with 59 across eight states. “It’s still so early, and name recognition is going to start to matter less as states get to know the candidates,” says Reynolds of Emily’s List, which is staying neutral in a race so rich with female talent.

Gillibrand has the blessing (as well as the curse) of drawing supporters who are ready to consider voting for any of the women running. Every single woman I spoke with who prizes Gillibrand brings up at least one of the other three female senators vying for the nomination. After the kickoff rally, as Gillibrand was taking selfies with everyone who approached her, I talked to Katherine Scheirman, a retired Air Force colonel active in the fight against military sexual abuse, a cause that Gillibrand embraced early.

“She was one of the first who really made it an issue,” Scheirman told me. “ A lot of people blew us off.” Then the military veteran did what every female voter I’ve met on the trail does (honestly, including the female candidates): She praised the other women running for president. “We have a wealth of good candidates,” she acknowledged. Then she caught herself and returned quickly to Gillibrand: “I’ll probably vote for her. She has a special place in my heart.”

To have a chance at winning, Gillibrand needs to close the deal with more women like Scheirman.
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make Donald Trump’s reelection most likely.” He opens with this: Sanders’s criticism of Clinton during the primary “hurt her in the general election.” But Alterman never explains how this bears on who’s most likely to beat Trump.

Afterman then claims that Sanders’s criticism of other Democrats “could conceivably” alienate “most of the electorate.” Why should we think Sanders’s campaign will alienate anyone? Alterman offers only this: “some of the… #Resistance really help reelect Trump because Sanders is critical of other candidates? I doubt they’re that deplorable.”

Alterman follows by noting that Sanders has a higher unfavorable rating than he did three years ago. But every candidate who moves from obscurity to celebrity sees a similar increase. That’s how exposure works.

Next, Alterman says that the “right-wing noise machine” will attack Sanders as a socialist. But it attacks every Democrat as a socialist. Does Alterman really think that Breitbart’s audience is more likely to vote for Biden?

Finally, Alterman never considers the many reasons to think that Sanders is the candidate most likely to beat Trump, as any reasonable exploration of comparative likelihoods must do.

Stephen Biggs
AMES, IOWA

Thanks to Eric Alterman for his honest assessment of Bernie Sanders as a candidate.

The problem with Sanders’s campaign is not really about “electability,” though. The problem is that he misunder-

stands the nature of the propaganda war that the right has been winning for 30 years.

We progressives call out and scorn propaganda, while at the same time accepting the framing that the Republicans have carefully constructed. While we insist that “if you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention,” they happily fling outrages out our way, knowing that this keeps us constantly playing by their rules. While Pete Buttigieg, Elizabeth Warren, Julián Castro, Cory Booker, and others are outline policies or a philosophy of values that reclaim the terms of the debate, Sanders continues to perform the Republican stereotype of the outraged leftist with revolutionary rhetoric and little in the way of a compelling new message. I fully understand that there is plenty to be outraged about. But unless a candidate has a plan for persuading people who don’t already agree with them, outrage solves nothing.

Margaret Speas
AMHERST, MASS.

I have just read Eric Alterman’s column explaining his reasons for fearing a Bernie Sanders candidacy, and I’ve read many of the comments other readers have made, including dozens that accuse The Nation of betraying its progressive mission by publishing Alterman’s views. I’m writing not to support Alterman (though I find his column pretty compelling), but to support The Nation for continuing to publish his work. There is nothing anti-progressive about his argument against Bernie, and those who condemn your decision to publish it are deaf to reason and close-minded in the extreme—not for disagreeing with Alterman, but for insisting that he should be silenced in your pages.

Delbert Shortliffe
NORWALK, CONN.
Literature is fire,” Mario Vargas Llosa declared in 1967, when he accepted a prize commemorating Rómulo Gallegos, the esteemed Venezuelan novelist and former president. Gallegos represented the center-left tradition in Latin America, and Vargas Llosa was determined to challenge his audience from the left. Literature, the Peruvian novelist continued, “means nonconformism and rebellion.... Within ten, twenty or fifty years, the hour of social justice will arrive in our countries, as it has in Cuba, and the whole of Latin America will have freed itself from the order that despoils it, from the castes that exploit it, from the forces that now insult and repress it.”

Nearly 40 years later, in 2005, Vargas Llosa received a very different sort of prize and delivered a very different kind of speech. Accepting the Irving Kristol Award from the American Enterprise Institute, he denounced the Cuban government and called Fidel Castro an “authoritarian fossil,” praised the Austrian School economist Ludwig von Mises as a “great liberal thinker,” and defended calls for privatizing pensions. It was quite a remarkable transformation. In the opening paragraph of Vargas Llosa’s 1969 novel, Conversation in the Cathedral, the protagonist asks: “At what precise moment had Peru f**ked itself up?” It is a question that many people have asked as well of Peru’s greatest novelist.

Vargas Llosa is unquestionably one of the most important writers of his generation. He has written 18 novels, at least five...
of them considered by critics to be of great literary significance. His first, _The Time of the Hero_, was published in 1963. It dramatizes an act of rebellion by the cadets at Peru's Leoncio Prado military academy, which led to copies of the book being burned on the school's parade ground. His next novel, _The Green House_, was published in 1966 and proved to be a difficult modernist work which depicted Peruvian reality as a confluence of the Catholic Church, the military, indigenous culture, and the brothel that gives the novel its name. A powerful experiment in form, _The Green House_ has usually been read as a critique of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy, and it helped cement Vargas Llosa's reputation as one of the key writers of the “boom” generation in Latin American letters.

_The Green House_ was followed by _Conversation in the Cathedral_, which described corruption under the Peruvian dictatorship of Manuel Odría. In the 1970s, Vargas Llosa demonstrated a lighter touch with two comic novels, _Captain Pantoja and the Special Service_ and _Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter_. When he returned to more serious themes in 1981, he produced _The War of the End of the World_, a novel depicting the Brazilian Army's efforts to destroy a messianic commune in the country's backlands in the late 1890s, which was hailed by one of the region's foremost literary critics as Latin America's _War and Peace_. In 2000's _The Feast of the Goat_—the most accessible of his major novels—Vargas Llosa examined the brutal legacy of the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2010, with the awards committee praising his "cartography of structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual's resistance, revolt, and defeat."

Whether as a young socialist or an older liberal, Vargas Llosa has always been an engaged intellectual. Born in 1936 to a middle-class family in southern Peru, he began writing when he was still a teenager, publishing in the local newspapers. In the 1950s, he belonged to a small communist cell, and while attending the National University of San Marcos, in Lima, he read Marx, Sartre, and the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui. Observing the corruption of elites and the inequalities of Latin American society led Vargas Llosa to socialist politics in those years. But the socialism he hoped for was one that respected artistic freedom.

In the 1960s, as his writing career began to bring him attention, Vargas Llosa remained committed to socialism and to his role as an engaged intellectual, writing on current affairs and advocating for political change.

**Sabers and Utopias**

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Translated by Anna Kushner  
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Writers, he insisted, had an important role to play in social transformation. Even as he took up residence in Paris and participated in the cosmopolitan circles of the boom generation, mixing with writers like Colombia's Gabriel García Márquez, Mexico's Carlos Fuentes, Chile's José Donoso, and Argentina's Julio Cortázar, he continued to believe that writing great literature was a politically radical act—one that would help bring revolution to Peru and the rest of Latin America.

Over the course of the 1970s, however, Vargas Llosa began to change his mind about the kind of revolution that Latin America needed. There was no moment of sharp rupture, but rather a gradual reconsideration based on his growing sense that the conditions of freedom he valued were not present in Cuba or possible in Marxist regimes in general. For example, Peru's Shining Path, an ultraorthodox Maoist guerrilla group that launched its military campaign in 1980, was renowned for its terrorist brutality. Whatever the left represented for Vargas Llosa, it was not "freedom.”

By the late 1980s, when Peru's President Alan García sought to nationalize the country's banks and financial institutions, Vargas Llosa found enthusiastic audiences with his counterargument that free markets and political freedom were inseparable, and in 1990, he entered the race for the presidency himself. Running on a platform quite at odds with his earlier socialism, he called for the privatization of state-owned industries and the reform of public education.

Vargas Llosa came in first in the initial round of voting, but fell short of a majority in the second round. He lost to Alberto Fujimori, who implemented similar neoliberal reforms, but whose dirty war against the Shining Path involved illegal and undemocratic actions. (In 2009, Fujimori was convicted of corruption and human-rights violations.) After his electoral defeat, Vargas Llosa left Peru and became one of Latin America's best-known and most widely read intellectuals. His syndicated columns in the Spanish newspaper _El País_ commented on political matters from a right-wing liberal perspective. (These days, Vargas Llosa has become tabloid fodder as well, having left his wife of 50 years—his cousin Patricia Llosa—for the Spanish-Filipina socialite Isabel Preysler.) Few people have lived a life in which politics and literature have been so thoroughly entwined. But the question remains: to what end?

_Sabers and Utopias_ collects just a fraction of Vargas Llosa's political writing over the past four decades, much of it derived from his newspaper columns. Some of the pieces are historically significant: For example, the 1987 essay "Toward a Totalitarian Peru" was the foundation of his presidential campaign. Others are more ephemeral, weighing in on topical issues, mostly in Latin American politics. The earliest is from 1971, the most recent from 2014. Translated by Anna Kushner, the collection provides a flattering version of Vargas Llosa's idea of Latin American liberalism, while omitting the complexities of his political evolution.

Even if they amount to a selective guide to Vargas Llosa's thinking, the essays do offer a reasonable representation of the Latin American liberal view of politics, which fears both left-wing radicals and right-wing dictatorships and is particularly troubled by "populist" solutions to political problems. Vargas Llosa defends market liberalization and individual political rights, and warns his readers of the dangers of both the state and the masses. Whatever one might find to agree or disagree with in this collection—and readers to Vargas Llosa's left will find something of both—the worldview that he outlines in these essays also reveals the shortcomings of his political imagination (as well as that of many Latin American liberals). Vargas Llosa's theory of politics does little to account for the conflicts between market economies and political democracy. Like other Latin American liberals who have trouble understanding why their chosen platforms don't produce electoral majorities, he tends to blame the voters when he would be better off thinking about how his preferred programs fail to meet the people's needs.

Even during his Marxist years, Vargas Llosa judged the health of a society by how it treated its writers, and the first essay (if only they had been arranged chronologically here) is the open letter that he wrote in response to the so-called Padilla affair in Cuba, in 1971. More than a decade earlier, the success of the Cuban Revolution had been a moment of serious recalculation in Latin American politics. For the many who assumed that corruption and unaccountable, US-backed dictatorships would remain the norm in the region, Cuba provided evidence that another future was possible. Many intellectuals of Vargas Llosa's generation responded with enthusiasm and
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sympathy, advocating for a similar revolution in their own countries. Even as Castro's government developed a closer relationship with the Soviet Union, Cuba retained a reputation for having a freer strain of communism than its Soviet-bloc counterparts.

One of the things that signaled this difference was the revolution's treatment of artists and writers. Castro assured them that they did not have to be militant revolutionaries, and that there was no prescribed way to produce “socialist” art. Attracted to this vision of a revolution that combined socialism and artistic freedom, intellectuals of the international left defended Cuba and became an important part of the Castro government's international public-relations strategy. Many Latin American writers—Vargas Llosa among them—flocked to the island to serve on the juries of the Casa de las Américas cultural organization.

The Padilla affair, which intensified when the poet Heberto Padilla was arrested by the Cuban government, marked a turning point for many of the revolution's fellow travelers. In the late 1960s, Padilla often explored disenchantment with the revolution in his poems. For a time this was tolerated, but the situation deteriorated in 1968, after Padilla won a Cuban literary prize. Padilla's book was published, albeit with an official disclaimer, and articles attacking him soon began to run in state organs, including the Cuban Army magazine Verde Olivo. After his arrest and imprisonment, Padilla appeared in public and gave a coerced statement of debasing self-criticism, while accusing his friends and associates of similar deviations.

Disturbed by this turn of events, Vargas Llosa penned an open letter in which he decried Padilla's treatment, arguing that it “recalled[ed] the most sordid moments of the Stalinist era,” and demanded that the Cuban Revolution “return to what it was when we considered it a model within socialism.” Vargas Llosa recruited many famous Latin American, European, and US writers who had supported the revolution to sign the letter as well.

It would be tempting to conclude that the Padilla affair led Vargas Llosa toward a more strident and right-leaning liberalism, and Sabers and Utopias does not attempt to avoid that bit of mythology, since the next essay that it includes (in chronological terms) dates from 1979. But, in fact, Vargas Llosa was rejected by the left for criticizing the lack of freedom in socialist states long before he rejected it. Over the course of the 1970s, he began to rethink whether there was a fundamental incompatibility between socialism and freedom of expression. In those years, he discovered Cold War liberals like Raymond Aron and Isaiah Berlin, who argued against the utopian qualities of Marxism and in favor of protecting individual freedom within liberal democracies. In a 1975 essay not included in Sabers and Utopias, Vargas Llosa declared that Cuba and the Soviet Union did not represent the socialist ideal he had hoped for. By 1979, he was arguing that Marxism was devoted to a utopian vision inherently incompatible with liberty. Spending 1980 at the Wilson Center in Washington, DC, Vargas Llosa discovered Friedrich Hayek's The Road to Serfdom, and The War of the End of the World reflects these new preoccupations. In telling the story of the suppression of a millenarian community in Brazil in the 1890s, Vargas Llosa—whose writing once captured the costs of capitalist exploitation—now offered a warning about the dangers of fanaticism, which he increasingly associated with the political left.

Vargas Llosa sometimes attributes a supposed Latin American tendency toward “utopianism” to a peculiarly Latin American psychology. “The rejection of what is real and possible” is a robust tradition in the history of Latin America, he asserted in a 2001 essay, “Down With the Law of Gravity!” Contrasting Latin America with Switzerland, he insisted that perhaps “social and economic progress is in direct proportion to the vital boredom signified by complying with reality and inversely related to the spiritual effervescence that comes from rising up against it.” This argument is not particularly original. (It is reminiscent of the legendary—but factually incorrect—speech made by Orson Welles as Harry Lime in The Third Man: Italy has strife and produces Michelangelo; Switzerland has years of peace and invents only the cuckoo clock.) But it does capture Vargas Llosa's political evolution at the time: He preferred the boredom of prosperity and a restrained liberal order to the enthusiasms of radicalism.

Attaining that prosperity, Vargas Llosa came to believe, required an adherence to “reality,” and his understanding of that reality was essentially identical to the discipline of the market. In the 1980s, Vargas Llosa formed a close relationship with the Hayek-inspired Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto. He wrote the prologue for de Soto's 1986 book The Other Path, whose title refers to the Shining Path guerrillas, then at war with the state; de Soto's “other path” involved distributing formal property titles to the poor, which would in turn give them access to credit. This would have the effect of breaking the state's close alliances with the country's elites, which de Soto and Vargas Llosa deemed obstacles to growth, while also bringing the poor into new markets. Vargas Llosa may have considered this a form of realism, but a belief in the power of the market to solve social problems often rests on its own kind of utopianism. Studies evaluating the success of de Soto's implemented programs have shown that his economic proposals failed to increase the availability of credit. His prescriptions were premised on the idea that people could not direct all of their energy to work if they did not own their own homes. But this fundamentally misunderstood the lives of the poor and their needs: The residents of squatter neighborhoods were still of course integrated into markets, and they also had strong collective organizations that protected their homes while they were at work.

Like many liberals, Vargas Llosa primarily attributes poor economic conditions to internal factors that the economy itself cannot address. Encourage investment and put markets to work, the thinking goes, and any country can be the next Taiwan, South Korea, or even China. This analysis, however, leaves little room for considering the effects of colonialism or neocolonialism. Vargas Llosa is not wrong to assert that a popular version of dependency theory—which holds that rich nations are rich because they have extracted surplus from the periphery—doesn't stand up to rigorous scrutiny. Nevertheless, the explanation for poverty in Latin America cannot ignore the region's place in the world economy, including a recognition that a dependence on the export of raw materials for the global market leaves countries vulnerable to forces they do not control. Vargas Llosa's defense of liberal democracy also elides the fact that none of the “economic miracles” he hopes to re-create began under democratic
conditions. Subsequent developments in his own country might call into question his presumed opposition between free markets and authoritarian politics. Fujimori’s reforms marked a simultaneous “opening” of the market and a closing of civil society and politics. To Vargas Llosa’s credit, he recognized that, while Fujimori’s reforms “put the economy on a sounder footing…they have failed to further justice, because they have not broadened in the slightest the opportunities of those who have less, so as to enable them to compete on equal terms with those who have more.” But the connections between Fujimori’s economic program and his political repression were not some kind of unfortunate accident.

Vargas Llosa’s views of the economically liberal but murderous dictatorship of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet have the same flaws. “There are fools who still believe that a Pinochet is necessary for a backward country to begin to progress,” he wrote in 2006, after Pinochet’s death. Chile progressed, he argued, not because of the dictatorship but in spite of it; specifically, it grew because of the University of Chicago–trained economists who brought their brand of free-market ideas to the country under Pinochet’s regime. But Chile’s real economic ascent happened mainly after Pinochet’s departure from power, and the extreme aspects of that free-market program could only have been put in place under politically repressive conditions. The problem is not that Vargas Llosa favors these conditions, but rather that he is unable to see that his preferred economic prescriptions frequently require them.

In the essays included in Sabers and Utopias, Vargas Llosa does recognize that the right as well as the left can pose great threats to democracy, and he has been willing to endorse leftist candidates to prevent right-wing figures whom he views as more dangerous from coming to power. For example, he endorsed Ollanta Humala in Peru’s presidential elections in 2011 because Humala’s opponent was Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of his old rival. Furthermore, Vargas Llosa’s libertarian inclinations on social issues give him some areas of common ground with many on the left. He opposes the death penalty, favors equal rights for sexual minorities, and advocates for the decriminalization of drugs. He will defend the center-left when it advances those priorities; he has high praise for the social-democratic governments of Uruguay, which have experimented with drug legalization, calling the country in 2012 “a paragon of legality, freedom, progress, and creativity, an example that the rest of the Latin American countries should follow.” But, in directing much of his contempt toward the left, he also has the habits of a Cold War liberal. “Left populism,” he argued in 2018, “is the populism that is most disastrous, negative, ruinous for a country.” Elsewhere, he has attributed the interest of intellectuals in statism to their “vocation for seeking handouts” and “their lack of economic knowledge.” Even in instances where his critiques are warranted, they are not especially insightful, resting heavily on stereotype and caricature.

There are numerous criticisms to be made regarding the failures of “left populist” governments, including deficiencies in both political freedom and economic management, which the left does need to face honestly and forthrightly. Yet Vargas Llosa sometimes goes awry in attributing the defects of populist leaders to their voters and to those on the left not in power—a perspective that he shares with other liberals, who often blame the public for backing populist figures they find distasteful without thinking through what parts of their own politics caused voters to turn to such figures for hope. On the death of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, for example, Vargas Llosa wrote that Chávez “belonged to the robust tradition of caudillos…. It reveals the fear of freedom that is a legacy of the primitive world, prior to democracy and the individual, when man was still mass and preferred that a demigod, to whom he ceded his free will and capacity for initiative, make all the important decisions about his life.”

To observe that this argument is not particularly helpful is not to deny that people can form strong bonds of attachment to figures across the political spectrum, especially to charismatic leaders. Nor is it to ignore that popular enthusiasm can turn sour, be abused, or support repressive projects. And it is true that bad economic management harms the poor and vulnerable. (Though it might be noted that Bolivia scarcely rates a mention in Sabers and Utopias—a country run by a “left populist” government, whose economy has grown faster under President Evo Morales than, say, “neoliberal” Mexico’s did over the same period.) However, one can make all of these arguments without attributing popular discontent to cultural defects or an irrational “fear of freedom.” Voters who turn to populists have often been disappointed by traditional political parties and previous attempts at reform, including the liberal efforts that Vargas Llosa prefers.

In holding “populism”—from Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina in the middle of the 20th century, to Hugo Chávez in the 21st—responsible for regional woes, Vargas Llosa makes a mistake common to right-wing liberal thought, which conflates its fear of the populist ruler with the masses to which he is linked. Vargas Llosa also misses why the left is so often critical of the kind of neoliberal reforms that he proposed. A well-managed economy is not a bad goal—but well-managed for whom? Vargas Llosa may have been acutely aware of the deficiencies of government-run enterprises and of power concentrated in the hands of the state, but in making a fetish of the market’s ability to solve social problems, he has overlooked how often it led to a concentration of wealth among the ruling elites. Vargas Llosa is right that the strain of authoritarian socialism he defended in his youth did not guarantee important freedoms. But his right-wing framework ignores the left’s best critiques of liberalism. Confined merely to the field of politics, “democracy” can lead to undemocratic outcomes in the economy and society that ultimately result in oligarchy. Likewise, the achievement of human freedom is a complex goal—one that will never be attained through markets alone.

Though Sabers and Utopias is ostensibly a book of political essays, Vargas Llosa is at his best when he is writing about culture. There, his essays have the specificity and insight born of lived experience. His tribute to his Chilean colleague José Donoso in particular stands out, compressing a great deal of emotion into a few short pages. Throughout their years of friendship, Vargas Llosa teased Donoso for defending Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa and George Eliot’s Middlemarch “simply because his professors at Princeton had forced him to read them.” Donoso’s “knuckles would turn white and his eyes red,” Vargas Llosa recalled of their conversations. When he visited Donoso on his deathbed, Vargas Llosa teased him one last time, telling him: “Henry James is shit.” But Donoso “pressed my hand to force me to lower my head until it was at the same level as his ear,” and then exacted his revenge with three words aimed at one of Vargas Llosa’s literary idols: “Flaubert, more so.”

This exchange, of course, honored their friendship and the writers they jokingly disparaged. It is a measure of Vargas Llosa’s significance that one can imagine a parallel scene playing out in the early 21st century, when a dying writer would whisper to his friend: “Vargas Llosa, more so”—a statement whose meaning would lie not in whether it was true or false, but in whether it still mattered enough to say.
L
ike most nations of the “New World,” Brazil was founded on violence: the subjugation and murder of the land’s original inhabitants and the forced labor of enslaved Africans. The Portuguese arrived at the beginning of the 16th century to extract natural riches for the crown, and the climate proved apt for sugarcane, which dominated Brazil’s colonial economy for the next 200 years. In the 18th and 19th centuries, sugar would give way to gold, and gold to coffee. But slavery was the constant, along with its horrors, as Starling and Schwarz recount: “Public chastisement in the stocks, the use of the whip as a form of punishment and humiliation, the iron collars studded with spikes to avoid escape, the iron masks that prevented the slaves from eating earth as a way of provoking a slow and painful [suicide], the chains with which they were tied to the ground.” Rather than encourage their slaves to raise children, Brazilian plantation owners found it simpler to work them to death and replace them with fresh imports. The country received 4 million slaves from Africa—10 times more than the United States. Brazil was also the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery, in 1888. Brazilians often gloss over this barbarous past. In an interview with the Folha de S.Paulo newspaper, Schwarz said that the book’s chapter on slavery was inspired by the indignation she felt after seeing 12 Years a Slave at a Brazilian theater: “I heard people saying, ‘Good thing it wasn’t like that in Brazil.’”

The violent domination by plantation owners also shaped the nature of power in Brazil. Answerable only to a distant crown, these men ruled like feudal lords, administering both law and religion in the vast lands they controlled. Democracy hardly took root after the country’s unusual independence in 1822, when a son of the Portuguese king declared Brazil his own empire. Even when the country became a republic in 1889, it was mainly the result of a power shuffle at the top, not a revolution from below. Brazil entered the 20th century with a grotesque joke—not even worth mentioning in a chronicle that begins with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1500 and culminates in a comforting series of peaceful transitions between democratically elected leaders in the last generation or so. In their conclusion, the book’s authors, historians Heloísa Starling and Lilia Schwarcz, confidently announce that “Brazil entered the twenty-first century with one certainty: the consolidation of democracy is our greatest legacy for future generations.”

Needless to say, the authors have since had cause to revise their opinion. “We used to think that rights that have been conquered were rights that had been consolidated,” Schwarcz told The New York Times on the eve of Bolsonaro’s victory. “I’ve concluded that we were being foolish.” This realization is not unlike the one that took hold in the United States after Donald Trump’s election. In both countries, there are those who insist that norms and political institutions will constrain their leaders’ worst impulses. The difference is that the United States has had a democracy (imperfect though it may be) for more than two centuries. Throughout Brazil’s history, democracy has existed only in troubled spurts.
arms over taxes; others would aim to emulate the American Revolution and establish a republic, but their movement would be ruthlessly put down. Perhaps the most famous uprising came toward the end of the 19th century, when a millenarian mystic named Antônio Conselheiro founded Canudos, a seditious community of believers. The Brazilian government sent wave after wave of soldiers to subdue it, killing thousands; even the women and children who surrendered were decapitated.

In the context of other New World republics, it is true that Brazil’s political transitions have been relatively bloodless—even when the military carried out coups, as it often did. In 1930, idealistic young officers installed Getúlio Vargas, the country’s most enduring 20th-century leader. A charismatic, contradictory nationalist, Vargas implemented the first minimum wage and other labor reforms, even as he mercilessly cracked down on communists. Overthrown in 1945, he returned to the presidency by popular vote in 1950, only to face another coup four years later. This time, rather than step down, he shot himself in the heart inside the presidential palace.

In 1964, the military took power in a US-backed coup, and a succession of generals ruled for the next 21 years. This is the authoritarian period that Bolsonaro holds up today as his model. Most political parties were disbanded, and protest was outlawed. Still, in the late 1960s and early ’70s, the regime was popular, as it coincided with the so-called “Brazilian miracle” of economic growth. Gen. Emílio Médici, who led the regime from 1969 to 1974, received standing ovations at soccer games. Partly because the generals censored the press, many Brazilians still remember the regime for its sheen of order, believing that the hundreds who were tortured and murdered somehow had it coming. As Bolsonaro put it to me, “There was security, there was education, there was respect, there were family values.” (Never mind that the vast majority of the population remained desperately poor and largely illiterate, and that security and respect were reserved mostly for the upper classes.)

Starling and Schwarcz spend little time on the left-wing movements that percolated throughout the 20th century—whether those that advocated for simple agrarian reform or for a larger dictatorship of the proletariat. But the left that crystallized during the period of military rule would later play a major role in the country’s democratic politics. Three of the regime’s opponents—a professor, a labor leader, and a guerrilla—went on to become president. The most famous is Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who grew up in poverty and made his name leading massive auto-industry strikes in the industrial center of São Paulo in the late 1970s. As a founder of the Workers’ Party, a sprawling coalition of unionists and intellectuals, Lula was an important player in the pro-democracy protests that culminated in the return of power to civilian hands in 1985. Later, as president from 2003 to 2011, he helped to lift more than 30 million Brazilians from extreme poverty.

Though Lula is undoubtedly the most significant figure in Brazil’s recent history, the authors barely discuss his time in office, arguing that it is still too fresh for historians to properly consider. This is a shame, because the failure of the Workers’ Party, with all its democratic promise, helps to explain the rise of Bolsonaro. Under Lula and his successor, the guerrilla turned bureaucrat Dilma Rousseff, the economy boomed and then sputtered into the worst recession in Brazil’s history, while a multibillion-dollar bribery scandal erupted. Rousseff was impeached in 2016, and since 2018, Lula has been sentenced to a total of 25 years in prison for corruption.

While the legality of Rousseff’s removal and Lula’s convictions have been questioned, there is no denying that their party stole a staggering amount of money from the public coffers while both were in office. And this, combined with the economic crisis that began in 2014 and an ongoing epidemic of violent crime, undermined the appeal of democratic institutions in Brazil just as they were taking root. It didn’t help that Rousseff’s replacement—Michel Temer, her former running mate—was himself accused of multiple acts of corruption, even while imposing unpopular austerity measures. As Brazilians lost faith in their young democracy, many grasped at magical solutions; some even called for a military coup. And then came Bolsonaro, who promised to purge the nation’s criminals, high and low, by any means necessary, and to restore a lost morality.

Starling and Schwarcz wrote their book primarily for a Brazilian audience. This often shows in the clumsy, Portuguese-inflected English translation. Often, too, vital context is missing for a foreign reader: There’s no detailed explanation of carnaval, or the favelas, or how corruption works in Brazil. More fundamentally, the book lacks the kind of guiding vision that is essential to justifying a one-volume history. The authors never quite succeed in explaining what they mean when they call their book a “biography.” They frame it as an effort to combine a more traditional chronicle of major political events with bottom-up history. Yet while we read much about the machinations of the Portuguese court, we learn little about the life of, say, a worker in 20th-century São Paulo. And we are frequently presented with lists of important names without any sense of who these people are. If anything, the book is lacking in biographical material.

Starling and Schwarcz might be forgiven for failing to register the ripples of the global alt-right in Brazilian politics. Bolsonaro is partly the product of very recent developments—such as Facebook, where he garnered millions of followers with a US-style culture war, and WhatsApp, where pro-Bolsonaro memes and fake news spread virally. Yet he is also the product of Brazil’s evangelical movement, which has built up its power over the past generation, and of a broader, more enduring social conservatism. In appealing to violence as a means of social control, he also drew on age-old Brazilian traditions. Perhaps most important of all, the antiestablishment feeling that yielded President Trump in the United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom has long been Brazil’s default mode. In 1988, a chimpanzee at the Rio de Janeiro zoo threw feces at a mayoral candidate. Come Election Day, 400,000 voters wrote in the chimp’s name, Tião, on their ballots; he came in third.

The authors’ failure to anticipate the recent backslide reveals a certain Whiggish myopia about Brazilian democracy—to be fair, a flaw they share with almost every other Brazilian intellectual who came of age around the time of the military regime’s end. But this failure is all the more mystifying given that Starling and Schwarcz acknowledge that an all-consuming “indignation over corruption” could lead to “a loss in credibility in the democratic institutions.” Taking stock of Rousseff’s impeachment in an afterword for the English-language edition, they even pose the question: “Is democracy in Brazil at risk?” Ultimately, though, they fall back on a Brazilian vice they themselves criticize in their prelogue—the tendency to imagine that everything will turn out all right because, as a popular saying goes, “God is Brazilian.”
The artist recalled in an interview. Gorey responded, “Oh, for God’s sake, can’t you tell a mummy’s head when you see one? It’s thousands of years old! Good grief! Did you think it took place over the weekend?”

In the end, the police told Gorey that he could have it back, but Gorey never received it—“not that I’m really desperate to get it back,” he added.

This anecdote reads like one of Gorey’s stories. For some reason or other, a person owns a mummy’s head because, in Gorey’s world, we are all on intimate terms with death. He might lose track or possession of it when chance circumstances intervene. But in the end, the person doesn’t really mind that the head is gone. Life goes on, until one day it doesn’t, at which point the person and the mummy become much the same.

Published 18 years after his death, Born to Be Posthumous is the first full-length biography of Gorey. (His friend Alexander Theroux released a shorter, more intimate portrait, which he later expanded, in 2000.) Coming in at just over 500 pages, the book meticulously tells the story of the unconventional author and artist, who amassed an ardent following yet remains unknown to many readers. The fact that Gorey’s work is either fiercely beloved or completely unfamiliar has to do with the type of work it is: His primary output was small volumes that are reminiscent of children’s books in form but tell mostly adult tales of melancholy, mystery, and often sudden death—especially the deaths of children. “Tales” may be too strong a word in some cases, even when the contents cohere; sometimes they’re just collections of limericks or rhyming couplets of assorted words. As an adherent of literary nonsense and surrealism, Gorey was less interested in plot than tone, which he created in part through black-and-white drawings that look like prints.

As Dery sums it up, Gorey’s creations “refuse to be categorized. What are they, exactly? Picture books for grown-ups? Precursors of the graphic novel? Mash-ups of Victorian literature, the comic strip, and the silent-movie storyboard?” The volumes are, in fact, so compellingly original that, in the process of reading them, their referents merge into a tone and aesthetic of casual, impending doom that’s been dubbed “Goreyesque.” Dery’s ability to reverse the effect and break down Gorey’s many influences is one of the most valuable aspects of Born to Be Posthumous, which is as much an analysis of its subject’s work as...
it is a telling of his life.

At the same time, Gorey may also linger in obscurity because he was an intensely private person. He had friends, but he seems to have kept a measure of emotional distance from everyone. “I feel that he was somehow unable and/or unwilling to engage in a very close friendship with anyone, above a certain good-humored, fun-loving level,” the poet John Ashbery, who knew Gorey at Harvard, told Dery. Nor did he have any long-term romantic relationships; “I am fortunate in that I am apparently reasonably undersexed or something,” he once said. Gorey has at times been labeled a recluse, but it seems more accurate to say that he was a loner who experienced the world by proxy, through the culture that he so voraciously consumed and produced.

“He lived much of his life on the page, in the worlds he conjured up with pen and ink, and did most of his adventuring between his ears,” Dery writes. “In large part, the art is the life.”

Born in Chicago in 1925, Edward St. John Gorey (nicknamed Ted) was an only child and a prodigy: He claimed to have started drawing at age 1½ and reading two years later. By the time he was 8, he’d made it through Dracula, Frankenstein, Lewis Carroll’s Alice books, and the collected works of Victor Hugo. He entered high school at 13, enrolling at the private, progressive Francis W. Parker School, where he had an inspiring art teacher and befriended future Abstract Expressionist painter Joan Mitchell (as one might guess, the two got along well but had diametrically opposed ideas of art). He honed his talents by drawing cartoons, designing sets and costumes for the senior play, and art directing the yearbook; he also refined his tastes, attending the ballet, theater, and classical-music concerts in the city.

Gorey was accepted to Harvard with a scholarship, but before he could go, he was drafted into the Army. He spent almost two years at the Dugway Proving Ground, a biological- and chemical-weapons-testing facility that would become notorious in 1968, when thousands of sheep turned up sick or dead nearby. While at Dugway, Gorey wrote plays that, although they were affected, artificial, and over-the-top, introduced many of the core themes of his work: mortality, death, children as both victims and perpetrators, and melancholia. (Notably, they also feature gay characters and overt references to homosexuality.) He hadn’t yet found his form or even his voice, but he had hit upon his subject matter.

When he got to Harvard in 1946, Gorey befriended a group of mostly gay men, with whom he “formed a two-man counterculture” against the strait-laced (and predominantly straight) environment of the school at that time. The two became suitemates and installed an old tombstone to serve as their coffee table. They read and worshipped the early-20th-century gay English novelist Ronald Firbank, who relished dialogue over plot—to the point where his books are largely series of conversations—and was known for his wit, eccentricity, and sometimes perversity. (A 1969 New York Review of Books piece called him “the most fantastic of all English dandies and decadents.”) Firbank in turn influenced Ivy Compton-Burnett, another Gorey and O’Hara favorite, who also used dialogue as a primary vehicle to tell stories of dysfunctional upper-class families.

Fittingly, Gorey began to develop his signature, flamboyant fashion style around this time: a bushy beard, sneakers, rings, jewelry, and a flowing coat (in New York he would wear long fur coats that were sometimes dyed bright colors). Although he majored in French, he continued to write and make art: starting a novel, experimenting with limericks (some of which were early versions of those in his second book, The Listing Attic), and exhibiting watercolors. He even submitted his drawings to The New Yorker, which rejected them in a letter that is almost Goreyesque in its deadpan tone: “The people in your pictures are too strange and the ideas, we think, are not funny…. By way of suggestion may I say that drawings of a less eccentric nature might find a more enthusiastic audience here.” Gorey’s work would appear on the cover of the magazine 42 years later, in 1992 (one month after The New Yorker ran a profile of him), though it represents his quirkier, more family-friendly late style rather than his much weirder and darker early work.

Gorey remained in Boston after graduation, living with a former professor, the poet John Ciardi. At Harvard, Ciardi had encouraged his darkly comic limericks, which mocked the moralizing nature of most children’s literature at the time. Ciardi also helped him land his first book-illustration gig by connecting him with a psychiatrist and writer, for whom Gorey drew a series of pictures showing a personified sick sonnet visiting the doctor (both of them squat, bald, long-faced men). Gorey also collaborated with the experimental Poets’ Theatre during this period, designing everything from its logo to the promotional materials to the sets, as well as writing two plays. His involvement foreshadowed his embrace of the theater later in life, after he moved to Cape Cod, where he’d been visiting his cousins for years.

In 1952, thanks to a classmate who knew his talents, Gorey was offered a job in New York at Anchor Books. A new imprint, Anchor aimed to use the inexpensive paperback format to make modern classics more accessible to the public. Gorey worked as an artist and designer, creating covers for books by Henry James (whose work he loathed for its wordiness), Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, and many others. The Anchor job birthed the hand lettering that looks like a softened version of print and would become a staple of Gorey’s own books; he began doing it because he lacked a traditional designer’s knowledge of typefaces. As Dery points out, some of Gorey’s “psychological motifs” are evident, too: In many of his cover designs, a figure stands alone, either alienated from those around him or dwarfed by a landscape.

Dery devotes ample space to Gorey’s underappreciated commercial work, and rightfully so. But something more important happened not long after the move to New York: In 1953, Duell, Sloan and Pearce published the first small book of Gorey’s own making, The Unstrung Harp; or, Mr Earbrass Writes a Novel, a funny and moody meditation on the painful process of writing. At 60 pages (long by future Gorey standards) and with a fairly straightforward story (also by Gorey standards), The Unstrung Harp perhaps comes the closest in his oeuvre to conventionality. Still, it inaugurates the distinct format that Gorey would use for most of his 80-plus books: text and image appearing in poised symbiosis, each a distinct entity but always working in tandem to create an imaginative space for the reader to fill. In one of my favorite spreads, we see Mr. Earbrass standing in the kitchen, reading his manuscript; in one hand, he holds a sandwich. The accompanying text reads: “The jelly in his sandwich is about to get all over his fingers.”
Dery delves as well into Gorey’s worship of one of the most influential figures in the history of ballet, the choreographer George Balanchine, who was known for creating a neoclassical style that emphasized traditional ballet techniques and form while stripping away theatrical trappings, like elaborate sets and plots. Gorey called Balanchine “the great, important figure in my life… sort of like God,” and between 1956 and 1979, he attended almost every single performance of the New York City Ballet, which Balanchine co-founded and led as the company’s artistic director for 35 years.

Gorey’s books did not sell well when they were first published; few people knew what to make of them. But those who did were hooked: Sendak compared Gorey with Mozart, and Edmund Wilson wrote an insightful essay about him in The New Yorker (“he has been working perversely to please himself and has created a whole personal world, amusing and somber, nostalgic and claustrophobic, at the same time poetic and poisoned”). But fame and commercial success came slowly—and when they arrived, it was largely due to the efforts of Andreas Brown, the proprietor of the Gotham Book Mart, a vital landmark and gathering place for New York City’s literary community for almost a century. Brown not only published some of Gorey’s books but had the idea for the collected Amphigorey volumes; he also mounted exhibitions of Gorey’s art and essentially turned him into a brand, creating Gorey calendars, jewelry, and other merchandise. (Notably, Brown would not sit down for an interview with Dery for this book.)

Gorey moved further into the mainstream—and financial security—thanks to a 1977 Broadway production of Dracula featuring his sets. He was “anointed a demicélébrity” by the media, Dery writes, and his work was adapted for the stage (the musical revue Gorey Stories) and for television (the animated opening credits for PBS’s Mystery!). And then he left it all behind: After Balanchine died in 1983, the seasonal spell of the New York City Ballet was broken, and Gorey began the process of moving to Cape Cod. He spent the final 14 years of his life in a 19th-century house in Yarmouth Port—one that, despite the interior renovations he’d made, looked derelict from the outside. (His cousin says the artist “was attracted by the unkempt yard and air of genteel decay.”) Gorey cohabitated with his cats and surrounded himself with his collections—of art, books, rocks, rusting metal objects, salt-and-pepper shakers, stuffed animals—which he arranged and rearranged in what Dery calls “an evolving work of installation art… for an audience of one.” He also watched television obsessively—Golden Girls, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, All My Children—and sewed little rice-filled dolls.

Gorey still made books that were experimental in their own way, but they lacked the intricacy of his earlier, better work—“the spiderweb delicacy of his classic style,” as Dery puts it. Mostly, he indulged his ever-growing passion for theater by mounting amateur, often nonsensical productions that were far more experimental than one would expect at the local Cape Cod playhouses. As in his books, the action in his plays was usually a series of non sequiturs, and he insisted, “There is no motivation, just read the lines.” At the same time, he would try to extract more feeling from inanimate objects. One actor recalled him directing another, who was puppeteering a clothespin, saying, “I want to see this clothespin emote.”

Dery’s book is filled with many such delightful stories and snippets. Along with the context that he lays out for Gorey’s work, such details make Born to Be Posthumous an engrossing read despite its flaws, which include a fondness for cliché and over-the-top language, as well as an overreach on Dery’s part when it comes to Gorey’s sexuality. (This has also been a point of contention for other critics, who have objected to Dery’s treatment of it as an unsolvable, trauma-induced mystery, rather than taking Gorey at his own word that he simply wasn’t that much interested in sex.)

The vignettes are valuable not just as entertaining stories, but also because they extend the reach of Gorey’s transfixing spell. He was self-actualized in a way that most of us can only dream of: He lived how he wanted and made the work that called to him. “More and more, I think you should have absolutely no expectations and do everything for its own sake,” he once said. “That way you won’t be hit in the head quite so frequently.”

That could be read as an expression of hedonism, but I think for Gorey it was simply a statement of his commitment to the integrity of his vision, which extended to everything in his life—his creative work, his collections, his cats, his clothing. In the end, Dery’s accumulation of details disproves the thesis that he proposes early on, that Gorey’s art was his life. In truth, it seems to be the other way around: Gorey’s entire life was his art.
DECONSTRUCTED SOUL
The many Solanges
by MARCUS J. MOORE

Eading up to the release of her fourth album, When I Get Home, the vocalist, producer, and artist Solange Knowles decided to promote it with a series of photos and looping videos on the long-since-forgotten BlackPlanet, a social-networking site for African Americans that had lain dormant for several years. The images were especially elegant, celebrating black femininity and black cowboys with a stark simplicity. The notion that Solange had resurrected the site became a running gag; on Twitter, black thirtysomethings joked about finding their log-ins and dusting off their old accounts.

Solange has come into her own in the past three years, from a decent musician to someone who holds serious weight in the mainstream market to a burgeoning cultural beacon. Now, she can no longer be contained to just music or compared to her older sister, Beyoncé, who easily racks up chart-topping hits that soundtrack our pop culture. When, in 2012, Solange released True, a critically acclaimed EP of new wave, downtown funk, and ‘80s-inspired R&B produced by Dev Hynes (aka Blood Orange), for the first time in her career, Solange sounded free, untethered to contrived sounds designed simply for commercial appeal.

In September 2016, Solange released A Seat at the Table, a landmark album that spoke directly to what it meant to be black and aware in modern-day America. Blackness was under attack; unarmed people of color were being murdered by law enforcement in a seemingly endless cycle. Seat was a gentle touch at a time of intense anger, full of anthems that emphasized self-care (“Cranes in the Sky”) and unflinching black pride (“Don’t Touch My Hair,” “F.U.B.U.”). New Orleans rap legend Master P narrated the album, urging listeners to find inner peace and know their financial worth. Seat was a communal effort, carried equally by the icon’s sage advice and Solange’s astute stewardship. The album displayed her mastery of creative subtlety; her whispery timbre and use of stripped-down R&B compositions proved to be a hypnotic mixture.

When I Get Home is the rightful heir to A Seat at the Table, though the focus isn’t so broad. It is trained on Houston, Solange’s hometown, and as it plays, we hear the sampled voices of fellow natives Debbie Allen and Phylicia Rashad and contributions from hip-hop icons Scarface and Devin the Dude, all of whom help Solange craft a loving homage to her city’s creativity. This is Solange’s Houston, and by incorporating R&B, free jazz, and trunk-rattling bass music into the mix, she presents it as a bustling hub of artistic rule-breakers with uncompromised vision.

This album isn’t about stand-out features, though; instead, you have to dig deep into these tracks to notice Earl Sweatshirt’s modulated vocal loop at the end of “Dreams,” or the New York ensemble Standing on the Cor-

ner’s down-tempo funk-jazz hybrids on “S McGregor,” “Nothing Without Intention,” and “Exit Scott.” These guests and others—including rappers Gucci Mane and Playboi Carti, and producers Panda Bear and Tyler, the Creator—are layered into the album’s vast collage of deconstructed soul. When I Get Home is ambient groove music, taking sonic cues from new-age icons Laraaji and Brian Eno, cosmic-jazz paragons Sun Ra and Alice Coltrane, and soul-music luminary Stevie Wonder. Where A Seat at the Table sought to empower its listeners verbally, When I Get Home is carried by its instrumentals, leading to a compelling mosaic of carefully crafted sketches. As Solange told art curator Antwaun Sargent at the album’s release party in Houston, words would have gotten in the way of what she wanted to express this time around. Indeed, there’s a feeling of exploration in the lyrics, a notion that Solange is searching for an epiphany that never quite arrives.

Running 39 minutes across 19 tracks, When I Get Home is shorter and more disjointed than its predecessor, unpacking fluent streams of thought through mantra. If there is an anthem here, it would have to be “Almeda,” a triumphant Southern-rap-influenced track at the album’s center that celebrates people of color. Conversely, on “Things I Imagined,” Solange uses just one line (“I saw things I imagined”) as a slogan for declaring her aspirations and seeing them all the way through. The same goes for “Dreams,” where she recollects the goals she once had growing up in Space City. Her voice relays sincerity, longing, a yearning for yesterday.

We get a sense of Solange the Houston native, the upstart musician who once had big plans beyond her immediate surroundings. Compare that with the fully realized Solange we get on “Can I Hold the Mic,” a quick interlude near the album’s beginning. “I can’t be a singular expression of myself,” she declares. “There’s too many parts, too many spaces, too many manifestations.” In that way, When I Get Home reminds me of New Amerykah Part One (4th World War), the fourth studio album from the vocalist and producer Erykah Badu, which conveys a scattered range of emotions using similar genres of music without losing its way. Songs fade in and drop out suddenly, yet Solange’s record presents a fully developed picture of its protagonist, albeit through a refracted lens. With When I Get Home, we see more of the person behind the resonant music and splendid visual art. We get the insecure upstart and the confident iconoclast taking triumphant leaps toward a greater vision of herself, while nudging her listeners to do the same.
Puzzle No. 3496
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS
1 Curry specialty: pintos, cooked and spicy (5,4)
2 Flip about knight (one getting out of bed) (5)
3 Progressive, say, confused 6A with UN (7)
4 Risk for addict involves falsifyin’ a poker hand (2,1,4)
5 Tart is cute, sporting professional attire (5,4)
6 Stewed, um, escarole for appetizer, entree, and dessert? (6,4)
7 Pierce’s saliva (4)
8 Too much hair in kinky Irish smut (9)
9 Absorbent cloth mostly seemed to contain top-quality rope (4,5)
10 Where you can drink outdoors, youth takes a street uphill (3,6)
11 In container for peas, kale salad moved rhythmically (7)
12 Drunk with fur turned the wrong way round is protecting France’s leader, in retirement, ate cheese (4)
13 Absorbent cloth mostly seemed to contain top-quality rope (4,5)
14 In retrospect, I must include article on “second waves” (8)
15 Novel applications, with sly, funny content (7)
16 In container for peas, kale salad moved rhythmically (7)
17 Franklin chapter to exclude team member (5)
18 Test odd characters in Tarrytown (3,2)
19 Christmas travelers, with archenemy almost sent back (4,3)
20 Where you can drink outdoors, youth takes a street uphill (3,6)
21 Dine in the midst of Lawrence’s demise (5)
22 Hits a boy on the head with picnic food (4,5)
23 Stewed, um, escarole for appetizer, entree, and dessert? (6,4)
24 Christmas travelers, with archenemy almost sent back (4,3)
25 Dine in the midst of Lawrence’s demise (5)

DOWN
1 Dress up very quietly to gain an edge (5)
2 Examine bug on either side of park (7)
3 Here and there, garbled a word that should precede eight symmetrically placed Across entries (5)
4 Too much hair in kinky Irish smut (9)
5 Colorful extended-play disc’s the thing to put more money in the bank (9)
6 Coffee preparer swallows first of drip in car (8)
7 At last, waiter comes in to promote fish (5)
8 Cook breaking Crazy Luis’s spurs (7)
9 Test odd characters in Tarrytown (3,2)
10 Pierce’s saliva (4)
11 Risk for addict involves falsifyin’ a poker hand (2,1,4)
12 Drunk with fur turned the wrong way round is protecting France’s leader, in retirement, ate cheese (4)
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SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3495

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1. Candide Bergen
2. Petal Anchorite
3. Thorough Strode
4. Are U A B Y
5. Lakes Landslide
6. Idaho
7. Bamboozle Earns
8. Oi We’re A E
9. O Box Set Zer
10. Shredder

CAND IDE BERGEN
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THOROUGH STRODE
ARE U A B Y
LAKES LANDSLIDE
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PAPERSHREDDER

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