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AVIVA STAHL
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**A Nation of Elites?**

Katha Pollitt’s trenchant first-person account of the 1969 student strike at Harvard University [“Harvard’s Strike at 50,” May 20/27] raises a question about *The Nation*: Is everyone who works at your magazine a graduate of the Ivy League or the top 25 select liberal-arts schools? Having nothing better to do with my time, I Googled the undergraduate institutions of the 82 people listed on the masthead who contribute as editors, reporters, columnists, writers, or artists. It turns out that very few—about half a dozen—did not attend these types of institutions (and they are mostly graduates of state flagship universities). The coveted internship positions go to students who attended top-echelon institutions as well. There are many talented young people in state and private colleges across the country who contribute to progressive journalism. They deserve an opportunity to work at *The Nation*.

Readers rightfully deplore the clubhouse nature of US Supreme Court clerk appointments; when will *The Nation* examine its own exclusive membership?

**The Once and Future Bernie**

Re Matthew Karp’s “The Long Shot” [May 20/27]: Great article—just what I was looking for to hand out to “progressives” who haven’t made up their minds yet. If Bernie Sanders doesn’t win on the first ballot at the Democratic convention, the neoliberal superdelegates will nominate one of their ilk, and we will be stuck with Donald Trump or full-blown oligarchy right around the corner. I truly believe that this is a defining moment for our country, the Democratic Party, and probably the life of our planet.

Beating Trump is essential but not sufficient. Unless we slow down the rush of wealth to the 1 percent, we will lose what is left of our democracy and any chance to stop climate disaster from destroying our planet. Sanders is the only candidate who beats Trump across several polls and who has a history that shows he will fight for working people (without a split loyalty to Wall Street, fossil-fuel billionaires, Big Pharma, the military- or prison-industrial complex, or white nationalists) and racial, social, and economic justice for all.

Richard Phelps

When I was at Princeton (over half a century ago), one of the first things I learned was that the most basic questions are the ones most worth asking. So I’ll ask one now: If the national debate is suddenly full of subjects that Sanders brought back to life, why is that tired old hack Joe Biden so hopelessly ahead in the polls? Can it be that Americans would rather be practical than renew our national life? Is the stench of hypocrisy and corruption less objectionable than four years of fresh air?

Frederic Smith

The hagiography in this piece is something else. As a person whose ideas are closely aligned with Sanders’s, I found his campaign a huge turnoff. His lack of detail and his inability to expand on his consistent turnoff. His lack of detail and his inability to expand on his consistent inability to expand on his consistent beliefs showed that he was not ready for significant leadership.

Michael Sleet

**Correction**

In Wilbur Wood’s “From Dirt to Soil” [May 20/27], the equation for photosynthesis was mistranscribed. The correct equation: Sunlight + $6\text{CO}_2 + 6\text{H}_2\text{O} = C_n\text{H}_{2n+6}O_n + 6\text{O}_2$. We regret the error.
Amid the daily infamies of Donald Trump’s presidency, his worst dereliction of duty is his decision to accelerate the greatest threat facing this country: catastrophic climate change.

Trump is called a climate denier. He is actually a warrior for climate calamity. In many ways, he is the first president of the climate-catastrophe era. We’ve already witnessed the terrors—the fires that recently ravaged California, the storms that savaged Houston and Puerto Rico, the floods in the Midwest, and the droughts that have forced millions to migrate from what used to be called the Fertile Crescent. Europeans responded to those terrors with action in the recent EU parliamentary elections, rewarding Green parties across the continent with their strongest results ever. Trump, however, has chosen to go all in on the side of worsening this direct security threat to our country and our world.

In a recent speech consisting of a stale stew of lies, exaggerations, boasts, and insults, Trump celebrated his collusion with the furies that threaten us, hailing the United States as the “energy superpower of the world.” He bragged that “American energy independence” would make our nation wealthier and safer. He boasted about getting out of the Paris Climate Accord, “replacing the EPA,” torpedoing Barack Obama’s Clean Power Plan, “unlocking” the Permian Basin in Texas and New Mexico, and more. And he repeated his mockery of the Green New Deal, calling it a “hoax.”

The reality of climate change is no longer disputed by anyone willing to be honest about the science. We are on a path that has already begun to produce horrific casualties and rack up staggering costs. A recent United Nations report warns of the extinction of 1 million species—and the imperiling of humanitity itself—in the next few decades. The conservative scientific consensus is that, to avoid unimaginable losses, we will need to act now.

The stakes could not be higher. As Bill McKibben, the climate expert who first warned about global warming 30 years ago, noted, “The problem with climate change is that it’s a timed test. If you don’t solve it fast, then you don’t solve it. No one’s got a plan for refreezing the Arctic once it’s melted.…” We’re not playing for stopping climate change. We’re playing—maybe—for being able to slow it down to the point where it doesn’t make civilizations impossible.”

Our betrayal by Trump and the Republican Party in this crisis is self-evident. Sadly, the leadership of the Democratic Party has been AWOL, as have too many voices in the news media, particularly on television. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer, 2020 contender and former vice president Joe Biden, and many other Democrats mistakenly seem to think that the best response to extremism is moderation. Rather than seek a mandate for the major structural changes we need, they woo a mythical center with modest reforms. Biden, for example, proposes nothing more than a return to the Paris Climate Accord—a policy that might have been promising a few years ago but represents inadequate moral signaling now.

In the end, as McKibben writes, the fossil-fuel industry and its collaborators will lose this battle. Already, insurance companies are refusing to guarantee against the losses that are coming to coastal properties. The only questions now are how long it will take for the climate destroyers to lose and how much damage will be done in the interim. This is why Trump’s collusion with them is his greatest dereliction of duty.

The change we need will come—as it usually
On May 23, the Federal Reserve released its annual report on the nation’s economic well-being, which showed that despite a growing economy, millions of Americans still live on the edge of financial disaster.

39% American adults who could not come up with $400 in an emergency

17% American adults who are unable to pay the current month’s bills

22% Student-loan borrowers who attended for-profit college and are now behind on their payments, compared with 8 percent who attended public institutions

24% American adults who skipped medical treatment in 2018 because of its expense

26% American adults without any retirement savings

—Edwin Aponte

Save Our Schools

Bernie’s education platform deserves an A+.

On May 18, Senator Bernie Sanders unveiled his plan to reshape public education in a speech in Orangeburg, South Carolina, not far from where the first of five desegregation cases that would eventually be combined into Brown v. Board of Education was filed. Sixty-five years ago, the Supreme Court ruled in Brown that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. But with school segregation getting worse and an increasing number of schoolchildren living in poverty, it will be up to Congress and the next president to usher in an era of integrated, equitable, and child-centered public schools.

Over the years, I have volunteered for and donated to Sanders’s campaigns, and in March I pitched a number of education-policy ideas to his current one, addressing an issue that garnered little attention in the 2016 presidential election. I’ve been eagerly waiting for Sanders to present his vision for public education, and his platform, with its clarity and boldness, surpassed my expectations.

Dubbed A Thurgood Marshall Plan for Public Education, Sanders’s proposal offers the most progressive agenda of any presidential candidate in modern US history. He is making a clean break with the bipartisan consensus that has led to the dismantling of public education under successive Republican and Democratic administrations. It is a clear repudiation of the Arne Duncan–Betsy DeVos era of market-based school “reform.”

It is also an implicit jab at some of Sanders’s Democratic primary rivals. In the 1970s, then-Senator Joe Biden opposed anti-segregation busing programs, and as Barack Obama’s vice president, Biden inherits the pro-charter-school legacy of that administration. Senator Cory Booker, another primary contender, wanted to make Newark, New Jersey, the “charter-school capital of the nation” in his days as the city’s mayor. Then there’s Senator Michael Bennet of Colorado, who served as superintendent of Denver’s public schools from 2005 to 2009. As Jeff Bryant notes in The Progressive, Bennet closed schools, launched charters, and adopted performance-based pay. In 2018 he and Booker were co-sponsors of a Senate resolution celebrating National Charter Schools Week. They were joined by a pack of Republicans, including Senators Ted Cruz, Lamar Alexander, and Marco Rubio.

In contrast, the core of Sanders’s platform is the notion that education should be treated as a public good, not as a private commodity. He is calling for a number of significant reforms, such as adopting desegregation measures, providing a massive federal investment to rectify funding inequalities, raising teacher salaries to at least $60,000 a year and tying pay to the cost of living, investing billions in community schools and after-school and summer programs, plugging the shortfall in special-education funding, making school meals free and universal, and rebuilding school infrastructure.

Sanders’s plan would address our apartheid-style school funding. Currently, school districts are bankrolled by three sources: The federal government contributes 8 percent, state governments 47 percent, and local sources 45 percent. The disproportionate weight of local property taxes means that wealthy white children are educated in gleaming palaces while poor African-American, Latino, and indigenous children are often confined to crumbling schools with crowded classrooms, zero-tolerance discipline, poorly paid teachers and other staffers, and no access to school nurses, librarians, or social workers.

In South Carolina, for example, there is a chain of poor, rural, and largely African-American schools along Interstate 95 called the “Corridor of Shame,” which have been starved of resources by the state. A recent report found that in 2016, majority-minority school districts received $23 billion less in funding than majority-white districts, despite serving about the same number of students.

Sanders’s plan would establish a national per-pupil spending floor, reevaluate the local-property-tax funding model, and triple Title I funding, which since 1965 has gone to districts with the highest percentage of poor children. There is also a provision for the equitable funding of rural and indigenous schools as well as those in Puerto Rico and other territories.

Another striking section of the proposal details his ideas on charter schools. In his speech, Sanders explained that charter schools, which were intended as laboratories of experimentation with progressive pedagogies, have been co-opted: “Wall Street executives, Silicon Valley CEOs, and billionaires like Secretary DeVos and the Walton family have been using charter schools as a way to privatize the public-education system, take money out of public education, and make a profit. That’s exactly what was wrong with common-core math.”

Sanders would ban for-profit charter schools.

(continued on page 8)
Donald Trump, who has long played fast and loose with measurements of his wealth, is no fan of numerical accuracy. But his administration’s latest move to monkey with economic data could have a devastating impact on the poor.

The change is technical: The White House proposes to use a different definition of inflation to update the income level below which the federal government says someone lives in poverty. Right now, a family of four must have an income of $25,750 or less a year to qualify as poor. Instead of using the Consumer Price Index to update that figure, the administration wants to use the Chained CPI, which, rather than measure the price of a fixed set of goods, tries to factor in shifts to cheaper options as prices change.

Boring, right? Except that the official poverty line determines who is eligible for public benefits like food stamps, Head Start, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, parts of Medicaid, and a variety of other programs. The Chained CPI rises more slowly than the regular CPI—ignoring the fact that poor families usually face sharper price increases and have less room to economize their choices. At first, the difference might not be huge, but it snowballs. Over a decade, using the Chained CPI would mean more than 300,000 children would lose access to Medicaid or CHIP and more than 250,000 seniors and people with disabilities would lose help paying for Medicare health coverage. Millions fewer people would be able to take advantage of lifesaving programs.

This is not to say that the way we measure poverty now is working. The current standard is based on a 1955 survey of household consumption, which took a subsistence food budget for a family of four and multiplied it by three to account for the fact that the average family at the time spent a third of its income on food. This is the number that gets increased every year to keep up with inflation.

To say it’s outdated is an understatement. According to Rebecca M. Blank, a former senior fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution and now the chancellor of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, no other economic statistic uses such antiquated data and methods. Today, a typical family spends a lot less of its budget on food than families did in the 1950s. At the same time, other important costs have skyrocketed, such as housing, health care, and child care. Thus, the poverty line ends up being unrealistically low: In the 1960s, it fell at 50 percent of the median income for a family of four; now it’s at 28 percent. That means a whole lot of people have too much money to be officially poor but still experience deprivation.

The Trump administration isn’t proposing to fix this. It wants to water down the definition of poverty so that fewer and fewer people fall under it. It denies this country’s reality, in which more than 15 million experience periods when they can’t afford all the food they need. This is not the first time his administration has tried to use revamped poverty measurements to promote its goals. Last year, the Council of Economic Advisers released a lengthy tome arguing that poverty should be measured by what families spend, not the money they have, as the Census Bureau currently does. This, too, would significantly decrease the number of people counted as poor.

At the time, the change was proffered in support of the idea that poverty had been all but eliminated and that the real problem we face is too many people on public benefits refusing to work. It was an attempt to build support for adding punitive work requirements to a universe of programs, from Medicaid to housing. But that agenda stalled. Congress did not add stricter work requirements to food stamps. No legislation has moved on housing. And judges have so far blocked the work requirements that some states imposed for Medicaid.

The appeal of the administration’s latest move, then, is that it can achieve a similar goal—fewer people getting public benefits—all on its own, without attracting attention because it’s so arcane. But make no mistake: A bureaucratic change like this is designed to deny help to the poor.

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A Man’s Guide to Abortion

You don’t have to be a woman to stand up for our rights.

Saudi ship loaded with weapons found its progress delayed during a stop in May in Genoa, Italy. In protest of Saudi Arabia’s alleged war crimes in Yemen, Italian union workers refused to load two generators onto the vessel, fearing that they could be used for military purposes. “We will not be complicit in what is happening in Yemen,” union leaders said in a statement.

By refusing to comply with Saudi interests, the Genoese unions join a long tradition of anti-war and anti-imperialist actions by dockworkers. In 1920, as opposition to British rule over Northern Ireland boiled over, Irish workers in Dublin refused to unload munitions from British ships. Malaysian, Indian, Australian, and Singaporean dockworkers boycotted Dutch ships in the 1940s, in opposition to Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. In 1950, workers in the French port of Marseilles impeded the departure of the Pasteur for Israeli cargo after Israel in Oakland, California, refused to handle cargo from apartheid South Africa for military purposes. “We will not be complicit in what is happening in Yemen,” union leaders said in a statement.

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Men, too, can have their lives stunted by unwanted childbearing. They, too, suffer when a pregnancy pushes them into marriage, or into marriage with the wrong person. For men as for women, ill-timed or unwanted children can mean giving up ambitions and dreams. It can mean decades of regret for not doing right by children you didn’t mean to have or have no real connection to or perhaps have never even met. These are things women think about all the time. They know the stakes can be very high. But when you consider how few men use condoms every time, it doesn’t seem that nearly enough of them have absorbed the message. Where is the men’s mass
Have you ever said to yourself “I’d love to get a computer, if only I could figure out how to use it.” Well, you’re not alone. Computers were supposed to make our lives simpler, but they’ve gotten so complicated that they are not worth the trouble. With all of the “pointing and clicking” and “dragging and dropping” you’re lucky if you can figure out where you are. Plus, you are constantly worrying about viruses and freeze-ups. If this sounds familiar, we have great news for you. There is finally a computer that’s designed for simplicity and ease of use. It’s the WOW Computer, and it was designed with you in mind. This computer is easy-to-use, worry-free and literally puts the world at your fingertips. From the moment you open the box, you’ll realize how different the WOW Computer is. The components are all connected; all you do is plug it into an outlet and your high-speed Internet connection. Then you’ll see the screen – it’s now 22 inches. This is a completely new touch screen system, without the cluttered look of the normal computer screen. The “buttons” on the screen are easy to see and easy to understand. All you do is touch one of them, from the Web, Email, Calendar to Games – you name it… and a new screen opens up. It’s so easy to use you won’t have to ask your children or grandchildren for help. Until now, the very people who could benefit most from E-mail and the Internet are the ones who have had the hardest time accessing it. Now, thanks to the WOW Computer, countless older Americans are discovering the wonderful world of the Internet every day. Isn’t it time you took part? Call now, and you’ll find out why tens of thousands of satisfied seniors are now enjoying their WOW Computers, emailing their grandchildren, and experiencing everything the Internet has to offer. Call today!

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“I love this computer! It is easy to read and to use! I get photo updates from my children and grandchildren all the time.”
– Janet F.
movement demanding a male birth-control pill?

Men: With abortion becoming ever harder to access and no doubt with birth control soon to follow, you have to do better. A lot better. For starters, you need to volunteer as clinic defenders and patient escorts, as political-campaign workers and fund-raisers. Support pro-choice candidates. March and demonstrate—and not just once a year. Talk to other men about abortion and get active together. That dollar you earn compared with the average woman’s 80 cents? Put it to work by donating today to an abortion fund in one of the abortion-ban states. For example, the Gateway Women’s Access Fund helps people in Missouri, a state of over 6 million people with only one clinic and where a super-restrictive “heartbeat bill” was just passed. You can find the fund, along with many others, at abortionfunds.org.

At the personal level, use condoms. If you don’t want to be a father or you’ve had all the children you want, get a vasectomy. Do you have any idea how much pain women go through because of their reproductive systems, how much effort they put in to stay un pregnant? Unless you plan a future with (more) kids, your partners have to do that only because of your love of your own sperm.

Oh, and should you impregnate a woman who wants an abortion, pay the whole bill. Not half—half is fake equality. She is going through a not-fun visit to a clinic, with sanitary napkins and follow-up visits and other tiresome stuff. That’s her share. And while you’re at it, make a donation to the clinic, too. The staffers put their lives on the line for you.

I know men like sports metaphors, so here are a few to remember: Step up to the plate. Make a full-court press. Go to the mat. Keep your eye on the ball. Let’s push abortion rights over the goal line together.

(continued from page 4)

schools, and bust teachers’ unions." Since the first charter-school law was enacted in Minnesota in 1991, the corporate school-reform movement has lobbied to expand privately managed charters, close public schools, impose austerity measures, institute so-called merit pay for teachers, and undermine teachers’ unions. There are now 3 million children enrolled in charter schools, or 6 percent of all public-school students. Cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Detroit have suffered mass school closures, and the establishment of charters in their place has siphoned resources from traditional public schools.

Sanders announced that as president he would ban for-profit charter schools and place a moratorium on federal aid for charter expansion until the government conducts a nationwide audit. Such an audit would reveal that there are indeed many student-centered charters, such as High Tech High in San Diego, YouthBuild Charter School in Philadelphia, Compass Charter School in New York City, and the Minnesota New Country School in Henderson. Those types of charters shouldn’t be shuttered. But in DeVos’s home state of Michigan, 80 percent of charter schools are operated by for-profit entities, and charters across the country have been riddled with waste, fraud, and abuse. Since 1994, the Department of Education has forked over more than $4 billion to these schools. One recent report found that “hundreds of millions of federal taxpayer dollars have been awarded to charter schools that never opened or opened and then shut down.” If our public schools were fully invested in, there would be no rationale for charter schools to exist. Of the current presidential candidates, only Senator Elizabeth Warren has joined Sanders in opposing the public funding of for-profit charter schools.

Sanders’s education agenda embodies the demands of the thousands of teachers who have gone on strike and of the students—particularly students of color—in cities like Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Newark, and Providence who have walked out in protest of privatization, high-stakes testing, budget cuts, and school closures. As Sanders has argued, if we can give tax breaks to billionaires and corporations, there is no excuse for not guaranteeing a dignified public education for all. This sets him apart in a crowded primary field.

Nikhil Goyal

Nikhil Goyal is the author of Schools on Trial: How Freedom and Creativity Can Fix Our Educational Malpractice.
WITHOUT ONLINE ACCESS, YOU’RE ONLY GETTING HALF THE STORY.
(SOUND FAMILIAR?)

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W e can identify the high point of Theresa May’s prime-ministerial tenure at just a few minutes before 10 PM on June 8, 2017. It was Election Day, and her Conservative Party was expected to trounce Labour. She had called the election holding a 21-percentage-point lead against a hopelessly riven Labour Party led by the left-winger Jeremy Corbyn. A resounding victory would give her room to maneuver as she negotiated Brexit with the European Union. She had run an awful campaign, but the dead weight of received wisdom still favored her without reservation or equivocation. With the polls scheduled to close at 10 PM, the puntits ran their mouths assuming no risk to reputation. “As exit poll looms, I repeat my prediction: Conservatives to win by 90-100 seat majority,” TV personality Piers Morgan tweeted at 9:53. At 9:57, Steve Hawkes, the deputy political editor of The Sun, wrote, “Rumour Tories could be looking at 400 seats.”

At 10:01 PM, the first exit poll revealed that May had lost her majority and would have only 317 seats. Since that night—when she lost control, authority, and the plot—the nation has been waiting for the other shoe to drop as she stumbled from crisis to crisis. Some were self-inflicted, while others were imposed by her party in a relentless display of artless ineptitude. Her days were numbered; we just weren’t sure what the number would be. On Friday, May 24, she put us all out of her misery, announcing that she would resign as head of the Conservative Party on June 7.

The two main things to understand about May’s departure can be gleaned from that night. The first is that it was ultimately precipitated by Labour’s left turn and the hubris of the political and media class that underestimated it. May had inherited a slender working majority from David Cameron that would have been sufficient to get her EU deal through. The only reason she gambled it by calling a snap election is that she believed it really wasn’t a gamble. The assumption that Corbyn’s Labour would go down to historic defeat was so entrenched that it was not even understood as an assumption. It was simply a fact waiting to happen.
ered the highest vote to the hard-right Brexit Party—newly formed by former UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage to usher in the most extreme Brexit possible—and dropped the Conservatives to fifth place behind the Greens, who had their best result in decades. The Brexit Party favors leaving the EU without a deal, which could cause untold damage to the economy. Tories will be desperate to prevent any further hemorrhaging of their base, which will likely mean that whoever takes over from May will have to be even more right-wing.

But just as Labour’s lurch to the left exposed a fundamental rift between its membership and its parliamentary representatives, so does the Conservatives’ forthcoming shift to the right. The parliamentarians, who overwhelmingly preferred to remain in the EU, get to short-list the top two candidates, who are then put to the members. Many Tory MPs are wary of Boris Johnson, the buffoonish, roly-poly blowhard who was foreign secretary before resigning over May’s proposed deal. They know him as an opportunistic, gaffe-prone self-promoter. If he makes the top two, as current polling suggests, the members would back him; if the MPs don’t short-list him, then the party’s decline could continue.

But whoever takes over will inherit this shattered party without a parliamentary majority and with the task of either keeping the party together and ruining the country or risking a Corbyn government.

May is going, but the Brexit crisis that made her premiership both possible and untenable not only remains but has intensified. One of the most common refrains throughout her premiership was “How bad can this get?” Now that she’s leaving, we’re about to find out.

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**SNAPSHOT / JOHNSON LAI**

**Legal at Last**

Two same-sex couples seal their marriages with a kiss at the registration office in Taipei on May 24. Lawmakers made Taiwan the first place in Asia where same-sex couples can legally wed.

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**Calvin Trillin**

**Deadline Poet**

**WHITE HOUSE STONEWALL**

Subpoenas harass us. We throw them away. More witch hunt! We cannot abide it. We’ve said all along we’ve got nothing to hide, And that’s why we’re trying to hide it.
In America’s most secretive prison, hunger-striking detainees are force-fed and barred from sharing their ordeal with the outside world. A prisoner breaks his silence.

AVIVA STAHL

A striker speaks: Mohammad Salameh was force-fed nearly 200 times in 11 years at a supermax Colorado prison.
IT WAS NOVEMBER 11, 2015, AND MOHAMMAD SALAMEH HADN’T EATEN IN 34 DAYS. THE MORNING WAS stretching toward noon, and he was lying on a concrete platform that served as his bed when a team of guards dressed in riot gear appeared at his cell door and ordered him to cuff up. A week earlier, Salameh failed to comply with that demand—he’d been too weak to stand and walk to his door—so guards had entered his cell and dragged him out. Salameh didn’t want to be manhandled again, so he slowly pulled himself to his feet. He leaned against the wall and struggled slowly toward the guards.

At his door, the force team attached irons to his legs and handcuffed him. They took him to the medical-treatment room, where a physician’s assistant ran tests and weighed the five-foot, eight-inch prisoner at 139 pounds. “Inmate Salameh, will you drink this nutritional supplement voluntarily, by mouth?” the PA asked. Salameh refused. After the guards stepped forward and strapped him into a black chair, the PA took a long tube and inserted it through his nostril and down into his stomach. Then a liquid the color of cream dripped through the tube into his body.

It wasn’t Salameh’s first time being force-fed. He’d been in that black chair nearly 200 times in the past 10 years. After his conviction in 1994 on terrorism-related charges, he had been held in lower-security facilities, where life was tough but rarely so harsh that he felt he had to stop eating. After 9/11, though, everything changed, and by 2002 he was placed for the first time in the highest-security unit of the highest-security prison in the country: what’s known as the H Unit at Florence ADX, or the United States Penitentiary Administrative Maximum Facility in Florence, Colorado. There are only about a dozen people in the H Unit at any given time, but they may be subject to the most extreme conditions of long-term isolation of any jail or prison in the United States. It was in H Unit that Salameh began going on repeated, sustained hunger strikes to demand more humane conditions of confinement.

As with nearly everyone else held in the unit, Salameh’s ability to read, write letters, and make calls was restricted by special administrative measures, or SAMs. The SAMs prohibited him from being in contact with anybody except his lawyer and immediate family members. Speaking to other prisoners was against the rules. He had no access to current news. His hunger strike, he said, wasn’t about getting out of prison or getting transferred out of the ADX. He simply wanted his life to be more bearable.

For most Americans, force-feedings bring to mind what happened at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba in 2005 and 2013. Those hunger strikes and force-feedings were covered extensively by the media; by contrast, the strikes at the H Unit have gotten virtually no attention, and that’s no accident. The SAMs don’t just isolate the men in their cells from the outside. They also wall the outside world off from what’s happening in the prison. Even family members and attorneys in touch with SAMs prisoners can be prosecuted and incarcerated for repeating anything the inmate told them—from accounts as trivial as what the prisoner had for breakfast to ones as substantive as abuses at the hands of guards. What this means is that hunger strikes are “born and [die] inside the institution,” as Salameh put it. During his 11 years in H Unit, he went on eight hunger strikes for a total of 428 days and was force-fed 220 times, he says. By his count, some men in the unit have been force-fed even more.

Decades ago, many medical associations rejected the force-feeding of mentally competent prisoners as a violation of prisoners’ bodily autonomy. Yet the brutal procedures taking place in Colorado, which many countries condemn for deliberately inflicting harm, have been hidden from the US public completely—until now.

I started reporting this story because I wanted to know how the federal Bureau of Prisons operates when it is unshackled from the fear of public scrutiny. Since it’s impossible for anyone to report on what’s currently happening in H Unit, I spent 18 months interviewing men held there in the past, as recently as 2015, alongside defense attorneys and physicians with expertise in force-feeding. I spent about 13 hours on the phone with Salameh, corresponded with four other men, and submitted Freedom of Information Act requests to obtain copies of medical records and other documents.

What I’ve found is grim: Men are driven to hunger strike in the hopes of securing minor concessions like the right to call home twice per month or read or watch the news. Sometimes, the staff at the ADX accede; other times, they retaliate with brutality. During one force-feeding, Salameh was given 16 portions of a liquid meal, only to vomit up each one in turn, he said.

This investigation leaves little doubt that many of the human rights abuses perpetrated against hunger strikers at Guantánamo, often to widespread public outrage, are also occurring on American soil on a regular basis. When
The Nation.

I asked the BOP to comment about the force-feedings in H Unit, a spokesperson cited agency guidelines: “It is BOP’s responsibility to monitor the health and welfare of inmates and to ensure that procedures are pursued to preserve life.” I also sent the DOJ detailed questions about SAMs and force-feeding; the agency declined to respond. But according to United Nations officials and medical experts, by engaging in force-feedings with the apparent intention of inflicting harm and not just providing treatment, the BOP is violating not only medical ethics but also international law.

It’s for this reason that I didn’t ask Salameh to tell me about his crimes. The harm he caused should not be forgotten, but it must be held apart. Under international law, the right to be free from torture is inalienable and absolute—and that protects all of us.

Florence ADX rests at the foothills of the Rockies, about two hours south of Denver. On the way there, prisoners might see snowcapped mountains in the distance. But as soon as a vehicle pulls into the complex, the vastness of the Colorado landscape disappears, sometimes forever.

According to experts, the ADX subjects prisoners to more extreme conditions of isolation and sensory deprivation than any other facility in the country. Architects designed the prison, which opened in 1994, to deter those locked up from plotting an escape. The cells are made entirely of concrete, with narrow windows that barely let in light. The outdoor recreation cages, each about five steps long and 10 steps wide, are built in an enclosure that resembles an empty swimming pool. Every prisoner spends 22 to 24 hours per day alone.

Salameh’s journey to Colorado began in 1994, when he was convicted of participating in the first World Trade Center attack, which killed six people and injured over 1,000. He served time in several high-security prisons without being subject to communication restrictions, but by 2002, he and a number of other men convicted of terrorism offenses were moved to the ADX.

Engaging in force-feedings with the apparent intention of inflicting harm violates not only medical ethics but also international law.

I first spoke to Salameh in 2017, after he’d been transferred to a different prison. He’d heard that I wanted to write an article about force-feeding in H Unit and offered to tell me his story. It took some months to develop a rapport. Phone calls from the prison cut off after 15 minutes, and prisoners must wait another 30 minutes to call back. “Hello, Ms. Stahl,” he’d say in a soft Jordanian accent. “How are you doing today?” If I mentioned members of my family, he’d ask about them in subsequent calls. After I broke my wrist, he always asked about my health.

On Salameh’s telling, it was the communication restrictions, not his three years under the extreme isolation, that drove him to stop eating. In March 2005, without explanation, a group of guards took him to H Unit and handed him the gags he would live under for 11 years. Aside from his attorney, Salameh could communicate only with his parents and siblings. He could make one phone call each month and send one three-page, double-sided letter each week. The FBI monitored everything. He was barred from TV and radio news, and reading material had to be individually approved. The BOP “should call them punishment or torture, not ‘special administrative measures’ like it’s something nice,” Salameh said with a chuckle. “They are really devastating.”

The men convicted alongside Salameh went on hunger strike right away to demand that their SAMs be lifted. He was more cautious and thought it through. Raised in Jordan, Salameh was born in Israeli-occupied Biddiya, a small village in the West Bank, and came of age when Palestinians in Israeli prisons were going on repeated hunger strikes to protest their conditions of confinement. He knew refusing to eat could be an effective means of resistance. Before long, he started his first hunger strike in the depths of the ADX.

The Bureau of Prisons moved to create SAMs in 1996, shortly after the Oklahoma City bombing. The regulations give the attorney general, then Janet Reno, discretion to impose the measures if he or she believes there’s a “substantial risk” that an inmate’s communications could pose a public threat. The regulations do not require the attorney general to consult a judge, and the attorney general usually justifies the measures on the basis of the inmate’s conviction—which in Salameh’s case occurred more than a decade earlier. The Department of Justice has never disclosed what criteria it uses to evaluate risk.
After 9/11, the DOJ changed the rules to allow for harsher restrictions and less oversight. The number of prisoners under SAMs began to multiply, from 16 in November 2001 to 30 in 2009 to 51 in June 2017. The vast majority of these individuals have been Muslim, according to a 2017 report issued by Yale Law School and the Center for Constitutional Rights, which states, “It appears that a major criterion for deciding whom to place under SAMs was not the person’s demonstrated capacity to communicate dangerous information but rather the prisoner’s religion.”

Salameh doesn’t know for sure, but he has his suspicions about how he ended up under SAMs. In March 2005, NBC News reported that he had corresponded with some men who were later arrested on terrorism charges. Although he had stopped communicating with the men before their arrest, the story prompted then–Attorney General Alberto Gonzales to take action. By the end of the month, Salameh was living in H Unit and on hunger strike.

His first force-feeding occurred about two weeks later, but the procedures performed on May 5 and 10 distressed him the most. The PA “does not pull the plastic tube after the feeding is completed gently, as a matter of fact, he pulls it out as he is putting it out of a bulls nose!!” wrote Salameh in an official complaint, called an administrative remedy, obtained via a FOIA request. “He was trying hard to force me to stop my hunger strike by any way of means even if he causes me excessive pain.”

Salameh’s 2005 hunger strike lasted 89 days, and he was force-fed 78 times. The feedings stopped when an official pleaded with the men to start eating and asked for 14 days to try to address their demands, Salameh recalled. He and his codefendants decided to give him a chance.

The hunger strike emerged in the late 19th century, as stocks, pillories, and other forms of corporal violence gave way to incarceration. Instead of inflicting physical pain, the state wielded power over the criminal body with control, hoping to compel prisoners to change. European and American reformers saw this as progress, yet prisons remained unhappy places. Almost immediately, their inhabitants devised ways to protest their captivity. Laura Rovner teaches law at the University of Denver and has represented two men held at the ADX’s H Unit. “The one thing you really have control over when you’re in prison is what you put into your body,” she said. “When everything else is taken away from you and you aren’t...
heard in any other way, [hunger strikes] are what you have left.”

A hunger striker isn’t suicidal but is willing to risk his life for the sake of a cause. For medical professionals, this distinction is essential. “A hunger strike is not a medical situation. It is a political act,” said Dr. Sondra Crosby, a professor of medicine at Boston University and an expert on force-feeding. As with any other condition, if a hunger striker is competent and understands the risks of declining care, the physician must respect that wish, even if it means watching the patient die.

One of the first known force-feedings took place in 1909 in a jail in Birmingham, England, when a hunger-striking suffragist named Mary Leigh had a tube inserted into her nose and a pint of milk and eggs poured into her body. Many doctors at the time opposed the procedure. In 1914 a physician named Frank Moxon described force-feeding as a “prostitution of the profession” and argued that doctors were violating the Hippocratic oath in the service of prison discipline. By 1975, the World Medical Association adopted its first resolution publicly opposing the practice, yet in the United States, to this day, most courts have held that force-feeding is constitutional, including if it is done to maintain the security of the institution. (The WMA reiterated its opposition to the practice in a 1991 declaration.) Doctors or PAs who force-feed prisoners are unlikely to lose their licenses, but professional organizations have condemned the practice. During the 2013 hunger strikes at Guantánamo, American Medical Association president Jeremy Lazarus said force-feeding violated “core ethical values of the medical profession.”

After his 2005 strike, Salameh said, the officer who got him to start eating failed to obtain the concessions the strikers asked for. Nothing changed: Every morning, he opened his eyes and found himself trapped in the same small box. His solid door had two slots, one for food deliveries and the other for leg shackles, and metal strips at the bottom to prevent prisoners from communicating. The cell contained a bed, desk, and stool, all made of concrete, along with a stainless-steel sink and toilet and a 12-inch black-and-white TV. His entire living space—where he ate, slept, read, urinated, and defecated—was 8 feet by 10 feet. He could cross it in four steps.

In H Unit, human contact came at the cost of humiliation. In an affidavit, one of Salameh’s codefendants, Nidal Ayyad, said that some men on the unit would put their faces in the toilet and try to talk through the plumbing. “Putting my face in the toilet in order to try to talk with someone is something I’m not willing to do,” he wrote. The men could go years without being touched by someone other than a guard. Besides the rare phone call and visit, months would pass by before they exchanged more than a few words with another person. “How am I supposed to live without speaking to another human being?” another former H Unit inmate, Uzair Paracha, asked me during a phone call.

The harms of solitary are well documented. Studies have shown long-term isolation can lead to paranoia, hallucinations, hypersensitivity to stimuli, and suicide attempts; in 2011, a UN official called for prohibition of the practice in excess of 15 days. According to a lawsuit filed in 2012 and settled in 2016, men at the ADX grew so psychologically unstable from being alone that they smeared feces onto open wounds and swallowed razor blades.

Most prisoners at the ADX—those without SAMs—face fewer constraints on writing letters, accessing news, or communicating with others. The additional layers of isolation weighed on the men. Salameh was granted permission to read USA Today, but for his first few years in H Unit, he could read papers no fewer than 30 days old. The ADX was allowed to take 60 business days to mail out a letter in Arabic and 60 days to process an incoming one, so if Salameh wrote to his mother in Jordan in January, he might not hear back before July. He was prohibited from writing directly to prospective attorneys or legal clinics, making it difficult, though not impossible, for him to fight his conditions in court. In a rare victory in 2014, a federal judge ruled that the DOJ violated a SAMs prisoner’s First Amendment rights in “arbitrarily and capriciously” limiting contact with family and friends. According to attorney Paul Wolf, who fought the case, the ruling helped his client but did not affect conditions in H Unit more broadly.

Salameh’s family went to visit him at ADX just once, in 2012, the year after his father died. His mother came with one of his sisters, whom he hadn’t seen since she was a child. At the time of the visit, she was an adult with a family. When I asked him to tell me about it, he sighed, and when he began to speak, his voice trembled. It was the only time he became emotional during an interview.

Each year around the middle of March, Salameh received a letter stating that his SAMs had been renewed. Despite minor adjustments to the restrictions, there never seemed to be a clear way to get them removed. He filed hundreds of requests and approached guards informally, asking them to intervene. “I received the Special Administrative Measures (SAMs) extension for the third time without any due process or any hearing by [a] Disinterested Committee,” he wrote in an administrative remedy dated July 2007. “These SAMs restrictions are unjustified, unfair, illegal, inhumane, oppressive [and] unconstitutional.” The BOP’s Central Office responded in October, “You may object to the provisions of the SAMs, but as you were appropriately advised, the Bureau merely informs you of the requirements of the SAMs, and ensures the measures are followed,” adding that they would remain in place “until the Attorney General determines it is no longer necessary.”

The men in H Unit were alive, but what did that mean?
were on hunger strike. Soon, the strike grew. Salameh told me, that individual and two others a prisoner on the unit requested a copy of his memoir there. It started after Barack Obama's inauguration, when prisoners participated, according to two men who were taking part in occurred in 2009, when about 10 of 12 H Unit others had started a hunger strike. The biggest one Salameh insisting to one another, they always figured out when someone BOP did not dispute this finding.

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experts believe that force-feedings in the H Unit may surpass those at any other.

Robert Hood, now a national-security consultant, was the warden at the ADX from 2002 to 2005, including when Salameh arrived at the facility. During Hood’s more than 20 years working for the BOP, he worked at nine institutions and served as a warden or associate warden at four. He said there were more hunger strikes at the ADX than at other BOP institutions and that those strikes tended to last longer than elsewhere. “To my knowledge, most involuntary feedings at the supermax would have occurred on an H Unit setting,” he said over the phone. When I asked the BOP for data on force-feeding across its facilities, a FOIA officer insisted no such data was kept. However, CBS News reported that as many as 900 “involuntary feedings” were performed on H Unit residents from 2001 to 2007. The BOP did not dispute this finding.

While the men in H Unit were prohibited from speaking to one another, they always figured out when someone else had started a hunger strike. The biggest one Salameh took part in occurred in 2009, when about 10 of 12 H Unit prisoners participated, according to two men who were there. It started after Barack Obama’s inauguration, when a prisoner on the unit requested a copy of his memoir The Audacity of Hope, along with some Islamic texts. The books were denied on national-security grounds. Within a few weeks, Salameh told me, that individual and two others were on hunger strike. Soon, the strike grew.

Affidavits from current and former inmates indicate that others have fallen into a similar routine. Two individuals told me another former H Unit inmate, Eyad Ismoil, was force-fed more than 400 times during his time there.

Salameh conveyed his determination to keep protesting with a line from a poem he translated from Arabic: “Make me drink the bitter cup, but with dignity.” Salameh accepted that he would die in prison; wasn’t that enough?

Force-feedings occur in other US prisons, too, though it’s unclear how often and where. State facilities have maintained the practice for decades, and over the past few months, The New York Times reported that detainees in ICE custody were force-fed after refusing to eat in protest of their indefinite detention. Just like the BOP, ICE and state prison systems have hunger-strike policies in place guiding how and when the procedure—which they term “involuntary feeding”—should be conducted. Yet experts believe that force-feedings in the H Unit may surpass those at any other.

Salameh didn’t join in immediately; he was still recovering from his last attempt. But he understood the impulse. He’d been denied many books, including a copy of the 2008 CIA World Factbook. “We were in the worst situation that the BOP could offer,” said Uzair Paracha, another participant. “Things couldn’t get worse for us, and they were not willing to let them get better.”

On May 5, Salameh was ready for another try. He knew what to expect: The first 24 hours would be bearable, until the pain in his stomach began. By the fifth day, he could hardly take it. After a week, his body would adjust. Still, he would grow progressively weaker until all he could do was rest; when he’d stand up, darkness and light would flutter across his vision.

The Bureau of Prisons considers someone to be on hunger strike after they refuse meals for 72 hours. Once it becomes official, many of the prisoner’s personal belongings are taken, and the medical checkups start. Three times a week, a five-person force team amassed in front of Salameh’s cell, along with a lieutenant, a physician’s assistant, two guards with cameras, and another carrying gear. A member of the force team would then say, “Inmate Salameh, are you willing to submit to the restraining measures?” If he had the strength, Salameh would walk to the door to be shackled. Then, it was off to the medical observation room—and perhaps, if the medical staff decided it was necessary, the force-feeding chair.

“[They] should call them punishment or torture, not ‘special administrative measures’ like it’s something nice.”

—Mohammad Salameh

Salameh said the force-feedings in H Unit followed a routine. First, the guards moved him to a black chair. They secured straps around his shins, thighs, and knees and diagonally across his torso to form an X. His wrists were handcuffed behind his back during the feeding, which sometimes lasted hours. Once he was strapped in, the PA would approach with a nasogastric tube, measure
it, and insert it into Salameh’s nostril, attempting to guide it into his stomach, which was always very painful. On some days, the tube would come out of Salameh’s mouth. “Many, many times,” he said, it would enter his windpipe, and he would start “coughing like someone is choking [me] to death” from the inside. (These episodes cannot be corroborated, as they are not noted in his medical records, which are generally sparse.) By the time he left H Unit, his force-feedings tended to occur much later in the course of his strikes, and less frequently.

Force-feeding is dangerous. In hunger strikes as early as 1917 and as recently as 1992, prisoners died as a result. The cause of death was usually from the tube being placed into the striker’s trachea instead of the esophagus, so the liquid entered the lungs rather than the stomach, causing the person to suffocate or develop pneumonia. Other complications include abrasions to the nasal tissue, throat, esophagus, or lungs. The more frequently the procedure is conducted and the more the prisoner resists it, the greater the risks. In order to ensure Salameh did not die in his care, once the PA believed the tube was in place, he blew air into it using a syringe and listened to Salameh’s belly. Then he would start dripping the liquid meal into the tube.

One of the most brutal force-feedings Salameh recalls was on March 20, 2006. As the Novasource, the nutritional supplement, trickled into his body, he tightened his stomach and intentionally caused himself to vomit. The PA put a bowl on his lap so the liquid wouldn’t spill onto the floor but did not stop the procedure. After Salameh vomited the first carton of Novasource, the PA poured a second one into the tube, which Salameh vomited again. At first, he vomited intentionally, but then he lost control.

“I wished at that time that I can stop, but I couldn’t,” he recalled. Every time the bowl got full, the PA took it and poured the vomit into the toilet, then continued his work.

According to his medical records, Salameh stared into the camera that was recording the procedure. “Captain, this is for you,” he said. Then he addressed the PA. “The lion does not want to be fed. I will do the same tomorrow if you try to feed me.” (All use-of-force episodes are videotaped and reviewed by senior management. I requested copies of Salameh’s tapes from the BOP and will be challenging the FOIA denial in court.)

Over the course of 90 minutes, the PA attempted to feed Salameh 16 cartons of Novasource, about a gallon of the liquid, only to have him vomit up each one. About a week later, after several other feedings, Salameh experienced flu-like symptoms and ran a fever—a sign of possible aspiration, which can lead to pneumonia. He was prescribed antibiotics, and the symptoms subsided. Another former H Unit inmate described a similar incident in which he was overfed to the point of becoming ill.

After every force-feeding, the men were taken to an empty observation room, where they waited, sometimes for hours, before being allowed to return to their cells. Unlike at Guantánamo, the medical staff at the ADX would conduct daytime feedings during Ramadan, according to Salameh—a policy that he said was designed to “break [us] down.” Crosby, the Boston University force-feeding expert, reviewed Salameh’s records at my request and said there was no medical rationale behind them. “In my opinion, putting 16 cans of Ensure or some kind of nutritional supplement would not only be clinically inappropriate but, it seems to me, with an intent to punish or to cause physical discomfort.”

At the very least, according to past statements by UN officials, force-feeding as conducted at the ADX would qualify as cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. “When the circumstances of forced feeding include evidence of an intent to inflict pain and suffering for a purpose like punishment, intimidation, or coercion, forced feeding becomes torture,” said Margaret L. Satterthwaite, who teaches international law at New York University. Salameh once told me he would have preferred to be waterboarded rather than force-fed, because the public understands that waterboarding is a form of torture. Force-feeding was done under the guise of benevolence, while its true intent was something far more sinister. “Ask why they torture us. They don’t want to save your life. They want to pressure you to stop your hunger strike.”

In March 2015, Salameh’s SAMS renewal notification arrived, citing his previous hunger strikes as evidence of his “extremist and violent views.” The year before, an FBI agent testified in federal court that the strikes in H Unit constituted an “Al Qaeda conspiracy.”

“That’s baloney,” said Salameh of the allegation. “They are trying to undermine our hunger strike,” to draw attention away from conditions the men were trying to protest, he explained.

The SAMS renewal didn’t stop Salameh from striking again in the fall. After 18 days, he was transferred from H Unit to a medical-observation cell whose walls, he said, were covered in feces. He was force-fed after 34 days and soon resumed eating out of concern the medical staffs weren’t well trained. He didn’t secure his demand for more food rations. “I’m hunger striking for food!” he said, laughing. “It’s funny if you think about it.”

Based on conversations with five former prisoners and a review of medical records, legal documents, and past reporting, from 2005 to 2016, as many as two-thirds of H Unit prisoners participated in
hunger strikes. They were collectively force-fed hundreds if not thousands of times. With assistance from lawyers, they won concessions, including more telephone calls, more recreation time, fewer restrictions on outside media, and the ability to conduct no-contact visits unshackled.

But these hunger strikes in H Unit didn’t prompt investigations into conditions there or condemnations from the American Medical Association or calls from elected officials about the need for change. At Guantánamo, said Pardiss Kebriaei, a lawyer with the Center for Constitutional Rights, attorneys could visit their clients on hunger strike, hand their interview notes to government censors, and get some version back that could be released. Not so at the ADX. There “the hunger strike is buried,” said Salameh. “Nobody will know about it…and that helps the government not to give up anything.”

That’s largely because hunger strikers rely on the media to convey their concerns—and the SAMs make that task all but impossible. In 2013 nearly 30,000 people incarcerated in California went on hunger strike to protest long-term isolation. After about two months and extensive media coverage, they secured substantive policy changes. (The state successfully petitioned a court for legal permission to force-feed prisoners, but there is no indication force-feedings later took place.)

SAMs gag those best equipped to help prisoners speak out, like lawyers and family members. “It was as if from that moment [when the restrictions were imposed], the government decided that he ceased to exist,” said the sister of a former H Unit inmate. “I could talk about him in the past tense but not in the present tense. I could talk about who he was but not who he is.”

The SAMs also make reporting about life in H Unit extraordinarily difficult. Nearly all the former H Unit prisoners I spoke to worried our conversations could land them back at the ADX. Salameh was put on communication restrictions for a period during my reporting and suspects it was due to our contact. Former SAMs prisoners are not restricted from speaking about their past, but out of caution, most lawyers opt not to talk about what happened to their clients on SAMs, even after the measures have been lifted—which makes reporting on the prisons even harder. Since 9/11, journalists have been denied entry to the ADX facility almost without exception. Not even the UN special rapporteur on torture has been allowed in.

In March 2016, after years of legal challenges from his attorney, Salameh learned his SAMs would not be renewed. The news was a relief: His mental health had started deteriorating, to the extent that he’d asked for psychiatric care. Today he’s at USP Big Sandy, a high-security prison in Kentucky. The trauma of H Unit comes back to him in his dreams. But whatever violence he has endured, and whatever violence he may have caused, life goes on. In November 2017 Salameh’s sister gave birth to twins. When we spoke, he said they were “beautiful babies,” and his voice was full of light. Then came the humor: “I was thinking maybe they can name one of them…after me, but they already named them.”

As the time for the publication of this article neared, Salameh disclosed he’d been advised to use a pseudonym out of concern he might face retaliation from BOP staff. But he decided to risk it; he said there’s intrinsic value in bringing these long-buried truths to light. “For me, it is history,” he once told me. “It needs to be known.”
Renters Revolt
On a mild spring evening in March, not far from the screech of the M train, Martina Romero climbed onto the stoop of her six-story tenement, clamped a microphone, and decried the ever-rising rents that threaten to displace her family of five. “I work to support my family, and I need to pay for my four kids, not just for rent,” she said in Spanish, staring out at scores of fellow renters who had turned out for a rally at her building in southern Williamsburg in Brooklyn. “That is why I am fighting, so that I won’t get any more rent increases.”

As her audience howled and hissed, Romero described how her landlord exploited a loophole in New York City’s rent regulations to hike her monthly payments by hundreds of dollars. She denounced the slithering gentrification that threatens to strangle immigrant families like hers. And she reaffirmed her commitment to an ongoing rent strike that her neighbors launched last November to stop their landlord from pricing them out of their homes. A dozen families in her complex have vowed to withhold their money while they demand repairs to their building and raise awareness about the need to close the rent-regulation loopholes that have pushed the tenants’ housing costs ever higher.

“I know many other tenants like me are struggling, and I know that we will win,” said Romero, an upbeat 35-year-old who hails from San Juan Tejupa, Mexico. “We have to win. We need universal rent control now.”

A few days earlier and hundreds of miles away, a 45-year-old white woman named Maribeth Sheedy sat down in the den of her home in the upstate village of Akron, New York, and condemned the ever-rising rents that threaten to displace her family, too.

“We were bought by [a new landlord] in November 2017,” she said of the mobile-home park where she and more than 100 neighbors make monthly payments to stow their homes. “They marched right in here, decided to raise our rent from a low of $265 a month to $360 a month, and told us if we didn’t pay, we’d be evicted.”

The park where Sheedy lives is a quiet neighborhood of winding streets, ample lawns, and single-story homes that have stood in place for decades. Many residents there are elderly and on fixed incomes, and most of them cannot afford to relocate. She said the park’s inhabitants are terrified that their new landlord, a Florida-based real-estate company called Sunrise Capital Investors, will continue to raise rents, ultimately forcing them into homelessness.

“We can’t sleep at night,” said Ron Barone, a retired auto repairman and one of Sheedy’s neighbors.

The sudden upheaval in her community led Sheedy and other residents to start organizing. They knocked on their neighbors’ doors, wrote letters to state legislators, courted the press, and even traveled to Florida to try to meet with the property’s owners. They were rebuffed. Finally, this past January, she and a few neighbors formed the Akron Mobile Home Park Tenants Association to defend their homes.

“And then we decided, with the rent increase coming, that we were going to do a rent strike,” said Sheedy, a garrulous Akron native who now serves as the tenant association’s president. “And it was probably the scariest moment of my life. We had a meeting last November. I told everyone the risks and asked them what they wanted to do, and pretty much everyone raised their hands, and we have maintained 50 percent of the park on rent strike ever since.”

Sheedy said the tenants’ association will continue to hold its ground until the landlord agrees to meet with residents and negotiate a new rent policy in good faith.

Romero and Sheedy—one a janitor in bustling Brooklyn, the other a mortgage-company employee in a rural area 25 miles from Lake Ontario—are two threads in a sprawling tapestry of tenant revolt unfurling across New York. They are activists in a growing struggle against an acute housing crisis that threatens the economic survival of renters in every corner of the Empire State.

Facts and figures can’t do the crisis justice, but here are a few: Roughly 90,000 people experience homelessness in New York State on any given day. Between 2007 and 2018, the state’s homeless population surged 46 percent, the highest such increase in the nation, according to data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Approximately half of New York’s 3.36 mil-
lion tenant households are rent-burdened, meaning they spend 30 percent or more of their income on rent—and these households exist in all corners of the state. While, as of 2012, the Bronx held the record for the highest proportion of rent-burdened tenants, at 57.6 percent, rural Greene County followed closely behind, with a rent-burden rate of 57.5 percent, trailed by Ulster, Rockland, and Orange counties. There is little sign of relief.

This crisis is not confined to New York City or even to New York State. In *Capital City*, a new book on the spreading urban-housing crisis, author Samuel Stein writes that there is “not a single county in the country where a full-time minimum wage worker can afford the average two-bedroom [rental home].”

The disappearance of affordable rent has many and complex causes. On the one hand, wages in this country have been stagnant for decades. On the other, demand for rental housing is on the upswing, especially since the 2008 financial crisis, which, by 2016, had dragged homeownership in this country to a 50-year low. Meanwhile, corporate capital is on a real-estate buying spree. In 2016, 37 percent of home sales in the United States were made to absentee investors, including “banks, hedge funds and private equity firms like Blackstone—now the world's largest landlord,” Stein writes. The transformation of housing into an ATM for Wall Street at a time when wages are flat and renter demand is high has backed tenants into a corner. “Average move-in rents in the United States have more than doubled over the last two decades.”

In New York, this crisis has been taking shape as the state's rent-stabilization system continues to crumble. Established in the late 1960s and '70s, it limits annual rent increases and offers other protections for hundreds of thousands of tenants in New York City and three surrounding counties. (The rest of the state is out of luck.) In recent decades, landlords and developers have pressured lawmakers in Albany to poke the system full of loopholes, and as a result, the city has hemorrhaged more than 152,000 regulated units since 1993. This deregulation frenzy has helped fuel the rampant gentrification that is spreading across the metropolitan area and now threatens the working-class backbone of our country’s economic and cultural capital.

“The loopholes embedded in New York’s rent-stabilization program today are more than just policy. They are the legalization of fraud,” said Aaron Carr, the executive director of the Housing Rights Initiative, a watchdog group in the state. “New York’s broken laws and weak enforcement have resulted in a culture of real-estate corruption.” Look out your door, he suggested, and you can see symptoms of this corruption throughout the city: unlawful rent hikes, tenant harassment, increasing homelessness, inept government oversight, and a steady influx of real-estate cash into the campaign coffers of powerful politicians, including Governor Andrew Cuomo.

Crisis and corruption—together they’ve ignited an inferno of tenant anger. In Brooklyn and Buffalo, in Kingston and Queens, in Albany and Akron, one witnesses the outrage in rent strikes, at rallies, and in a surge of radical organizing. A movement is on the march. Under the auspices of a newly formed coalition called the Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance, more than 60 progressive grassroots groups have launched the most daring renters’-rights campaign to hit the state in decades. The organizers have dubbed it Housing Justice for All, and they’re calling on the state legislature to pass a slate of bills that would supercharge rent protections in New York.

The eight bills in the package span a range of interventions. Among other things, they would permanently close loopholes in New York’s rent-stabilization system, allow the system to expand to the entire state, and offer basic universal rights to tenants everywhere, including protections against arbitrary eviction. If such bills passed in Albany, “evictions would go down, homelessness would start to go down, entire communities would be stabilized in the face of gentrification,” said Cea Weaver, the alliance’s campaign coordinator. “It would be so good.”

Of course, solving the housing crisis will require more than mere government regulation, and activists across the country are also keen to promote more visionary solutions. But strengthened rent protections are an essential element in their struggle to put an end to mass evictions, gentrification, and other social ills. They see such measures as a front-line defense against predatory landlords and profiteers, and a corrective to the power imbalance that so often characterizes the landlord-renter relationship.

The Upstate-Downstate Alliance is pushing the state to pass its reforms by June 15, before the state’s rent-stabilization laws expire—and for the first time in years, tenant advocates have reason to hope, in part because Democrats gained control of all three branches of government in the state this year. Hope also stems from the hard-won resurgence of a muscular progressive movement in New York, where grassroots activists in the space of a single year have helped pass what some are calling New York City’s own Green New Deal and defeat Amazon’s bid to build a second headquarters in the borough of Queens.

Yet even amid these changes, the alliance faces towering obstacles. Preeminent among them is the mighty political muscle of New York’s real-estate industry. From 2000 to 2016, the industry doled out more than $80 million in campaign contributions to state-level politicians in New York. In 2018 alone, real-estate interests poured nearly $5 million into Cuomo’s reelection campaign, according to the research organization Vote Smart, and landlords and developers are consistently among his top donors. Apart from their influence at the governor’s mansion, industry trade groups like the Real Estate Board of
New York and the Rent Stabilization Association spent more than $200,000 to lobby members of the state legislature during the first two months of 2019—an uptick from previous years. Most recently, an industry front group called Taxpayers for an Affordable New York, which is backed by REBNY and the RSA, has started running a pricey social-media and TV ad campaign that vilifies the rent reforms being considered in Albany.

Still, New York’s housing-justice movement is undeterred. Its leaders say they are prepared for the political brawl of a lifetime.

“We can’t underestimate the real-estate industry’s ability to pour in cash to buy up legislators and block the tenants’ movement,” said Jonathan Westin, the executive director of New York Communities for Change, a key group in the alliance. “The industry is going to spend as much as it can to stop the expansion of rent regulations in New York. It will be a huge fight.”

Well before dawn on an icy Wednesday in January, two dozen renters piled into a bus near the Barclays Center in Brooklyn and embarked for the Empire State Plaza, an austere steel and concrete complex in Albany where Cuomo and the state legislature conduct the people’s business. As the bus rolled north on Interstate 87, tenants from Rochester, Buffalo, and Kingston were loading into cars, vans, and buses of their own, preparing to converge on the state capital and deliver their demands to New York’s most powerful politicians.

By noon, loud chants filled the vaulted lobby outside Cuomo’s executive suite as roughly 100 tenants with the Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance pressed their government for new protections.

“Whose housing crisis?” the crowd chanted. “Cuomo’s housing crisis!”

“Fight, fight, fight! Housing is a human right!” the demonstrators yelled, as organizers with groups like Make the Road New York, VOCAL New York, the Kingston Tenants Union, the Rochester Tenants Union, and the Akron Tenants Association gave impassioned speeches. After delivering a pro-renter petition with more than 3,000 signatures to Cuomo’s office, the tenants fanned out across the Capitol to call on key political leaders to sign on to the full slate of Housing Justice for All legislation.

Every Tuesday since then, the tenants have returned to Albany to lobby the legislature. And they have been making noise at other venues as well, trying to make themselves ubiquitous, whether by marching in the streets or persuading city councils across the state to pass resolutions in support of new rent regulations.

“There is a real hunger to see tenant protections opened up to people across the state, especially in upstate New York,” said Juanita Lewis, an organizer with the group Community Voices Heard who recently worked to persuade the City Council of Newburgh, in the Hudson River Valley, to pass a resolution supporting strengthened rent regulations in the state.

Housing advocates say they have rarely seen a grassroots effort like it—a class-based, community-centered movement for housing justice that is organized across racial, gender, and geographic lines.

“I have been [organizing for renters’ rights] since 1970, but this is the first time there has ever been a real push for rent control from actual grassroots groups that represent both upstate and downstate tenants,” said Michael McKee, a longtime housing organizer and the treasurer of the Tenants Political Action Committee. “It is just an incredibly exciting development.”

The alliance’s housing-justice campaign has not emerged in isolation. It is best understood as one front of a national uprising against predatory landlords and for tenant protections. As The Nation previously reported, this movement is on the march in cities and states across the country: in California, where a statewide tenant-led campaign is pushing the legislature to enact a package of bills that would prohibit exorbitant annual rent increases and prevent tenants from being evicted arbitrarily; in Oregon, where Governor Kate Brown signed a bill this year that caps how much landlords may raise rent each year, among other provisions; and in Illinois and Colorado, where tenant activists have attempted to pass new legislation that would repeal their states’ long-standing bans on rent control.

Still, New York’s housing movement stands apart, and a victory for the tenants’ movement there could supply a much-needed boost to other activists nationwide. Set in the very heart of real-estate power in the United States, the movement is up against a lobby unlike any other in the nation; just this past March, privately held companies and individual developers helped kill a popular proposal to tax luxury second homes in New York City. At the same time, New York State has an unusually high concentration of renters—nearly half its residents are tenants—and it boasts a vibrant history of housing activism.

Rent stabilization was one of the fruits of this long activist history. According to Michael McKee, a prominent New York tenant advocate, rent stabilization grew out of sustained organizing campaigns by tenants in the mid-1960s to mid-70s. In those years, tenants in and around New York City were experiencing drastic rent increases, rampant evictions, and low vacancy rates, and they wanted protections. Specifically, they wanted New
York City to expand its vigorous rent-control system, which imposed strict limits on rent increases in buildings built before 1947 and contained strong protections against eviction. But then-Mayor John Lindsay had other ideas. He didn’t want to expand the city’s strict rent-control system and instead, with the support of the City Council, established in 1969 a much weaker form of rent regulation that we know today as rent stabilization. The Republican-controlled state government soon embraced the city’s new rent-stabilization system and, in 1974, in response to a new outburst of tenant organizing, passed the Emergency Tenant Protection Act (ETPA), which regulated hundreds of thousands of apartments and expanded New York City’s rent-stabilization system to nearby Nassau, Rockland, and Westchester counties.

At the time, tenant advocates weren’t thrilled with the legislation, which they deemed “too weak,” McKee writes in an unpublished history of New York’s rent-stabilization system. Yet in retrospect, he adds, the “ETPA must be seen as a huge tenant victory.”

The ETPA, like New York’s earlier rent-stabilization bill, was crucial in establishing the system of rent regulation that is still in place. There are about 1 million rent-stabilized apartments in the New York metropolitan area, the vast majority of them in the city in buildings built before 1974. Approximately 2.5 million tenants in the city benefit from the protections. On average, according to the Housing Rights Initiative, tenants in rent-stabilized units save 30 percent on their rents, compared with tenants in market-rate apartments.

“When people think about rent regulation, they often think of it only as a way to limit rent increases, but it does much more than that. It also protects people from arbitrary evictions, because it requires a landlord to have a good reason before they evict someone, and that is huge,” said Judith Goldiner, an attorney at the Legal Aid Society in New York. “Length of tenure is what rent regulation really gives you. It allows you to really be in a neighborhood, to have connections there. It allows your kids to go to neighborhood schools, it allows you to go to local hospitals, and it allows you to have neighbors and friends to help you out. It provides a sense of security that those without rent regulations don’t have, and this is hugely important, not just for tenants but for the city as a whole.”

Yet New York’s rent-stabilization system is under siege, and it has been for decades. From the very beginning, New York City landlords were allowed to largely self-police compliance with the regulations and, according to McKee, worked constantly to undermine the system. In the 1990s, the real-estate industry mobilized to gut rent stabilization, scoring their first hit in 1993, when Senate Republicans engineered several amendments weakening the rent laws. In 1997, they successfully pushed for a loophole called the vacancy bonus, which lets landlords raise rents by 20 percent (sometimes even more) every time a tenant moves out of a rent-stabilized unit.

Such loopholes have been devastating to the state’s rent-stabilization system. Aaron Carr of the Housing Rights Initiative said the flaws in the system have led to widespread fraud and predatory speculation. “For landlords, the name of the game is to buy up a building and push out as many tenants as possible in the shortest time period possible and remove the apartments from rent stabilization,” he said. In recent years, Carr’s organization has filed dozens of class-action lawsuits against landlords in New York, arguing that they have fraudulently inflated construction costs or otherwise exploited loopholes to illegally raise prices on tenants. A recent state audit of 1,100 landlords found that in as many as 40 percent of cases, landlords could not legally justify past rent increases at their stabilized units.

As pocke d and challenging as the rental landscape has become in New York City, Maribeth Sheedy and her neighbors in western New York are contending with the largest loophole of all. The state’s rent regulations don’t apply to the vast majority of its counties. Scores of renters, in places like Rochester, Albany, Buffalo, and Kingston, are excluded from those protections.

The absence of renters’ rights in most of the state is part of what allows private real-estate investors to march into mobile-home parks and inflate rents as if they were party balloons, no matter who gets hurt in the process. The tenant-backed good-cause-eviction bill, as well as the expansion of rent stabilization to the entire state, would help ameliorate the plight of mobile-home residents and others.

Gail Travers is one of Sheedy’s neighbors and an early member of the Akron Mobile Home Park Tenants Association. Nine years ago, Travers’s daughter died in a car accident, orphaning her only son. Travers took him in. Then last year, in a desperate bid to start afresh and live closer to remaining family, she sold her longtime home, retired from nursing, and moved with her grandson to Akron. She figured the Akron Mobile Home Park, with its reputation as a stable and affordable community near a quality school, would be a good place to settle. For many years, rent increases at the park had been $10, $15, sometimes $20 annually.

Travers moved into the mobile-home park last September. In December, residents received letters from their new landlord informing them of rent hikes of as much as $95 a month, with more increases planned.

“That was, to me, catastrophic,” said the 66-year-old Travers, her voice trembling. “It made me doubt everything that I had done…. If it was just me, it would be one thing, but I have a 13-year-old to look after.” She said she fears the worst should her rent continue to rise and that she and her grandson “are going to be homeless.”

Sunrise Capital Investors, which bought the mobile-home park, said that “residents were notified of lot rent increases more than one full year before they went into effect” and that the company is “committed to providing affordable housing for residents in the village of Akron for years to come.”

Travers, Sheedy, and Martina Romero all said they want the same things. They want affordability. They want stability. They want to feel safe in their homes. And so, out of necessity, they and their neighbors are agitating in Albany.

The push to enact new rent regulations comes at a politically fortuitous time for the tenants’ movement. During the 2018 statewide elections, a slew of left-wing candidates, many of whom rejected real-estate-industry campaign contributions, swept into office and increased the influence of New York progressives just as
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Democrats regained control of the state Senate for the first time in a decade. They include people like Julia Salazar, a democratic-socialist senator from Brooklyn; Assemblyman Harvey Epstein, a longtime public-interest lawyer and housing advocate, from the East Side of Manhattan; and Zellnor Myrie, a senator from central Brooklyn who ran on a housing-justice agenda and is one of the movement’s chief allies in Albany.

Epstein said in an interview that this is “a really powerful moment for the tenants’-rights movement. We are at a place where tenants across the state are coming together. The Senate, Assembly, and governor have all expressed willingness to strengthen the rent laws. And it is just [a matter of] figuring out how far and strong we can make these protections for people.”

It’s true: The legislature is sending pro-tenant signals. In a statement to The Nation, the Senate Democrats, who now exert real influence over the fate of legislation, said that the “Senate understands that for too long the scales have been tilted against tenants” and affirmed that Democratic senators “intend to advance a comprehensive legislative agenda shortly that will provide the strongest rent laws in our state’s history.” In early April, meanwhile, the powerful Assembly speaker, Carl Heastie, went public with support for a package of bills that closely reflects the legislative agenda of the Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance. The only thing missing was his endorsement of good-cause-eviction legislation, though Heastie said in an interview that such legislation “is still on the table.”

And Cuomo? His press secretary, Caitlin Girouard, told The Nation that “the governor is fully committed to working with the legislature and tenant community to reform rent regulations, including ending vacancy decontrol and limiting capital-improvement charges, to protect affordable housing and respect tenants’ rights.”

Yet Cuomo continues to have deep ties to the real-estate industry. Since successfully running for governor in 2010, he has taken millions of dollars from individuals and organizations linked to it, including as much as $1 million from limited-liability companies tied to a single firm, Glenwood Management. And real-estate interests have not been pleased with the rent reforms under consideration in Albany.

“Responsible rent reforms protect tenants and owners,” said Frank Ricci, government-affairs director for the Rent Stabilization Association, the influential landlord lobby in New York. “Instead, these legislative proposals fail to create a single new affordable unit or improve vacancy rates where housing is most needed.”

“Moreover,” he added, “the proposals actually decrease the likelihood that new affordable units will be created” by removing “all financial incentives owners have to upgrade or create new housing.”

Whether the housing-justice movement can persuade Cuomo to buck pressure from the real-estate industry and side with renters is the crux of its struggle. And with the June deadline to renew New York’s rent regulations approaching, tenant activists and their allies say they aren’t taking any chances.

“The real-estate industry is not going to take this lying down,” said state Senator Myrie. “We need to keep fighting extremely hard and in a very strategic way to get as many wins as possible.”
Whenever I need to drive somewhere, I use Waze. The app saves me a lot of trouble, because it aggregates information to which I have no access and even plans how to distribute the traffic rationally to avoid clogging the roads. It has a lot of pop-up ads, but I try to ignore them because they seem a minor annoyance.

Waze does, however, have some debatable features. First, it doesn’t tell me where to go, which is, supposedly, entirely up to me. If my desires are misbegotten, it facilitates their fulfillment as readily as if they weren’t. Waze is Jeremy Bentham for the digital-consumer age: The Potbelly Sandwich Shop is as good as the poetry bookstore. Second, Waze does not create infrastructure; by planning its users’ routes on roads that already exist, it thereby augments the illusion that what we have is satisfactory for our needs and that we require the state less than we might think we do. Most troubling, Waze entrenches our reliance on automobiles even further and postpones a collective reckoning with its consequences for the climate, including who ought to bear them in our unequal society.

But whatever its drawbacks, Waze marks a triumph for “navigability,” the ungainly term that Cass Sunstein uses in his new book, On Freedom, to describe how easy or difficult it is to get from here to there and, in the metaphorical sense, to achieve a goal once you’ve set one for yourself. For Sunstein, government ought to be more like Waze, helping people fulfill their desires and dreams, especially when they themselves are blocking that fulfillment. But any inquiry into navigability is inseparable
Born in 1954, Sunstein has been America’s foremost law professor for decades. On the strength of his achievements, he has stepped out as one of America’s leading public intellectuals, co-writing the 2008 wonk best seller Nudge. In it, he and University of Chicago economist Richard H. Thaler argued for a new and simpler form of government that seeks to influence choice through information, signaling to individuals rather than coercing them directly. A mentor and friend of Barack Obama, Sunstein served in his administration, working on regulatory policy from 2009 to 2012. In a bid for pop-culture relevance, he also wrote a book on the Star Wars films, although the less said about it, the better. Once the companion of philosopher Martha Nussbaum, Sunstein is now married to former US ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power, which means that he surfaces from time to time in the gossip columns (such as when Henry Kissinger attended an elegant party for one of his books).

Among the most prolific academics of our time, Sunstein, to his credit, has disproved Heraclitus’s dictum that you cannot step in the same river twice. He began his career as a liberal adept of administrative law, but ever since his early years at the University of Chicago, he has steeped himself in the libertarian economics made famous there and offered a more or less stable worldview. If you haul out one of his several dozen books at random—by my count, some eight books by Sunstein have been published in the last two years—you will usually find the same propositions.

First and foremost, Sunstein argues that the libertarian sage Friedrich Hayek was fundamentally correct: Government, aside from always courting tyranny, lacks the ability to centralize information so as to plan the best social outcomes (which raises the burning questions of how Waze works and how government could do anything competently). Correspondingly, Sunstein insists that the free market is king, though he does not entirely reject the state. In recent years, he has forcefully criticized the extremist skepticism of government that culminated in the Tea Party movement and its intellectual emanations. But his faith in the market has also made him skeptical of many forms of state intervention, and he tends to panic most of all at the frightful prospect of overregulation, insisting that the primary purpose of rules must be to maximize efficiency.

For Sunstein, the state exists to help citizens achieve their private ends; through its nudging, it can influence and shape, in a paternalistic manner, the attempts by citizens to fulfill these desires, but it should do so only if it respects their need to be “free to choose”—a phrase that Sunstein borrows from the economist Milton Friedman and uses repeatedly in his new book. For example, a law might require that you be shown the calorie counts for the different items listed on a fast-food menu, but this is justifiable, since you already care about your weight—and it is still up to you to order whatever you want on cheat day.

When it comes to government helping people achieve fulfillment, Sunstein insists that technocrats must rule. With a palpable sense of relief, he has confessed that he finds politics mostly a distraction and not so much about contending collective visions of the good life or about calling out the oppression that claims to expertise can mask. “Immersion in the facts made people’s political convictions look a little like background noise,” Sunstein explains, with more than a whiff of condescension, regarding what he learned during his years in the Obama White House.

Sunstein’s combination of pro-market enthusiasm and technocratic instincts comes linked to a patriotic endorsement of American civilization within its current institutional carapace. James Madison was right (or, in Sunstein’s adolescent description, he “rocked”): If unleashed, the people are fundamentally dangerous, and so democracy requires a big dose of oligarchy. Sunstein once penned a heated and still-relevant challenge to reactionary zealotry on the Supreme Court, Radicals in Robes (2005), but he later came to regret this excess, and while he has warned against overreach, he admires the high court’s power to keep democracy within the proper bounds.

This more conservative impulse can be seen in various other ways. During the Obama years, Sunstein served on a high-level commission that largely signed off on massive global surveillance in the name of national self-defense. His conservative streak has also led him to plead for tolerance on left-wing campuses allegedly hostile to ideological diversity. He has even gone so far as to praise the “intellectual dark web” site Quillette for countering progressive groupthink. Asked whether his approach inherently favors conservative conclusions, he answers, “I don’t think [my approach] has a conservative bias. If it ends up going in a conservative direction, that tells us something important. What it tells us is that the conservative view is correct.”

By dint of his central role in American intellectual life in recent years, Sunstein, who has taught at Harvard Law School for a decade, deserves respectful attention. Yet it is revealing that a man routinely celebrated by liberals (and sometimes denounced by Fox News) in the 1990s and early 2000s has come to look very different in a rapidly evolving debate. Like so many liberals in recent decades, Sunstein joins progressive stances on social issues with a libertarian economics. A longtime feminist, he edgily broached the possibility of giving animals legal rights, apparently disqualifying himself for a Supreme Court appointment as a result. But in thrall to his Cold War libertarianism, he has also advocated for an unquestioning devotion to free markets and has championed a national-security establishment committed to America’s role in protecting them around the world.

Unsurprisingly, the appearance and increasing popularity of Bernie Sanders, who calls both of these things into question, has ruffled Sunstein’s neoliberal equanimity. In a 2015 sally for Bloomberg, he equated Sanders to Donald Trump, alleging that their denunciations of the political establishment were compelling to many voters because of the human propensity to “think fast,” or hastily and impulsively. Conversely, more sober and cautious reflection, or “thinking slow,” would lead voters to resist their demagogic lure. In his more recent columns, Sunstein has suggested that Sanders plays on the irrationality of people (especially the young) to incline toward candidates who are not perceived as boring, and he has praised Trump for dismissing “socialism”—as if the great leader were worth endorsing, no matter the risks, when his impulses approached Hayekian principle. Sunstein does, however, appear to have a soft spot for Beto O’Rourke, whom he credits with the “grace” of Ronald Reagan in giving voters a rhetoric of national unity instead of stark division.
A
d now comes On Freedom, with its titular shout-out to John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty. “When life is hard to navigate,” Sunstein begins, “people are less free.” Social theory, meet Waze: Sunstein is interested neither in examining how humans routinely look for fulfillment in the wrong places nor in clearing obstacles beyond those that individuals put in their own way. As Sunstein’s book proceeds, it turns out that the point of thinking about navigability is to defend his old brief for government nudging from a variety of individualist and libertarian objections—even though his approach is already strongly individualist and libertarian. And while he answers these challenges plausibly, he does so only by ignoring the deeper objections to his account.

Is a state that nudges on a slippery slope to totalitarian rule? No, Sunstein counters: All human endeavors take place in settings that limit choice, and governments can therefore defensibly work to shape these landscapes. After all, absent government, nature itself imposes limits on liberty and encourages choice. (A hill on my hike in effect nudges me to navigate around it.) If so, policy-makers can also intervene when it comes to influencing the public’s decisions, especially if their aim as “choice architects” is to assist citizens in achieving their ends. Like Waze, the state can help everyone get where they want to go, as long as it does not substitute new goals chosen by the planners themselves. But even if all this makes sense as a response to libertarian critics of government, Sunstein neglects two bigger questions: Should liberals focus on restricting government to a Waze-like function of helping people successfully get where they want to go in life? And do individual foibles really constitute the main obstacles to that success?

“Oh, the places you’ll go,” once proclaimed that prophet of navigability, Dr. Seuss. But like others influenced by contemporary economics, Sunstein assumes that the formation of preferences is a black box that allows no examination into its workings, in spite of the many traditions in social theory that have concurred that what we say or think we want is potentially irrational.

For a long time, Western philosophy has rejected a blind trust in human desire. The Christian tradition asserts that sinful inclination lurks most where people claim to be making free choices, and many modern social theorists—notably, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud—have insisted that people’s conscious desires can be ascribed to ideology and rationalization. However, Sunstein simply ignores these traditions and assumes that people’s desires are credibly their own.

One of the most striking features of On Freedom is, therefore, that Sunstein has written a book about liberty that ignores how, even without government interference, the most insidious threats to it transpire when people believe they are in pursuit of their own preferences. The main problem in today’s society is not, as Sunstein maintains, that the state tends to transgress its bounds and overregulate; instead, it is that in the state’s absence, private coercion often holds sway, allowing powerful forces like the “free market” and structural injustice to reduce humankind to servitude, both in choosing its ends and in fulfilling them.

Blinded by fears of government overreach, Sunstein doesn’t recognize that the advertising business and the consumerist revolution already exercise this kind of extraordinary power. Long before Sunstein reconceived government activity around nudging, Madison Avenue and marketing companies had deployed very similar methods to sway consumers. Although he invokes Mill throughout his books, Sunstein seems to have missed the most momentous claim in On Liberty: that it is not government but one another whom we should most fear, precisely for usurping our power to determine the course of our lives. “The mind itself is bowed to the yoke,” Mill noted of social nudging:

> Even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done: peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally with crimes: until by dint of not following their own nature, they have no nature to follow: their human capacities are withered and starved: they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own. Now is this, or is it not, the desirable condition of human nature?

The state acting beyond its proper boundaries is not the only or even the main threat to human freedom; unchecked power outside of it is. At a critical point in On Freedom, Sunstein cites Aldous Huxley warning that the worst kind of totalitarian rule would be “a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude.” But Sunstein raises this possibility, which he associates with the state, merely to conclude that it is not an objection to the theory of freedom he wants to build in defense of state nudging. But of course it is. This is not because nudging creates a slippery slope to totalitarianism; it is because, if nudging merely helps people navigate to places in a world that social tyranny has made for them, the result is not freedom but its opposite.

Obstacles to navigability have been the great blind spot in the Western philosophical tradition,” Sunstein writes. It is disappointing that, despite this insight, he fills the gap mainly with a theory of how government can permissibly act to help people through self-imposed obstacles. The best use of government action, he insists, is when it helps me from becoming my own worst enemy—in cases in which I already know what I want but need help getting it in spite of myself, as in the assist that the state can provide in reminding me to lay off the Big Gulps and Big Macs in order to stay trim.

It is not obvious, to begin with, how Sunstein can celebrate people’s personal goals without question but then fret so much that they will fall prey to self-imposed obstacles on their way to realizing them. If I am subject to irrationality and need help, it is hard to see why the trouble would set in only when it is time to satisfy my preferences. And if you grant that my desires are trustworthy, it is hard to see why my problems in satisfying them are most likely to be a problem with me rather than with the world. Sunstein’s obsession with self-control makes On Freedom often read like a book about piloting a boat through shark-infested waters that focuses mainly on the government’s role in encouraging the passengers not to drink so much that they fall overboard. Sunstein is not interested in the sharks.

Any serious account of threats to freedom would also have to address how civil society and those spheres outside the state stand in the way of fulfilling our individual desires. Neglected by Sunstein, these
obstacles were once considered the main target of social planners, since not only do people suffer from social domination without knowing it, but they also face bitter opposition when they struggle to free themselves from it.

In the midst of Sunstein’s narrow reflections on self-control, however, a number of valuable insights for thinking beyond that problem emerge, because it is here that he steps away from his libertarian defaults. He counterbalances government not merely for the sake of people’s “own” ends but also for the ones that might plausibly need to be imposed on people against their apparent will. Breaking from his usual fears of interference, Sunstein admits that, in those situations where people either dither about what they want or don’t care what they get, the state can justifiably impose its view of the good life. Far from blindly serving freedom as understood by those making the choices, policy-makers in these scenarios can nudge based on their “moral evaluations of options and outcomes.”

Sunstein’s argument on the role that government can play in shaping our preferences is all very enlightening. But in the end, his focus on self-control and its failures is more revealing, because it is so restricted to self-imposed obstacles to navigability. Perhaps the most telling example comes when he discusses how the poor suffer from “insufficient navigability.” In fact, poverty is almost never due to a lack of self-control; domination and exploitation are the culprits. It is therefore very strange for Sunstein to look past structural injustice to say that the poor need help when they want to “find the right track,” “identify the right doctor,” “find the right job,” and “get help in taking care of children.” He cites development economist Esther Duflo to the effect that, when people form their ends and when they try to live them out. He would also have to embrace Mill for real. This would mean dropping Hayek and extending his confidence in the government’s capacity to nudge to other forms of intervention. There is, in fact, no reason that centralized planning is inferior to decentralized activity, as Waze already shows in its way. Indeed, if society—including “the free market”—is the primary threat to liberty, then the state’s justifiable role is far greater than Hayek’s disciples have taught. From nudging, government would have to return to planning.

Sunstein would also have to confront the limits of technocratic nudges when they are allied to a system of oppression that they leave undisturbed. Expertise has a role; any governance depends on it. But as we know, technocrats can serve antidemocratic elites in a counter-majoritarian system as well, inviting an enormous right-wing backlash in the process. You are free to venerate Madison—but not if, like Mill, you repudiate oligarchy and dream of a knowledge class that will serve the people rather than reinforce hierarchy. As for navigability, it is a provocative notion, but emancipation is a better framework for reconceiving freedom.
The American publishing industry does not skimp when it comes to Israel. It has provided us with bookshelves groaning with hagiographies of generations of Israeli leaders, acres of glossy coffee-table books lauding the Israeli miracle in the desert, and a plethora of studies of Israel and its relations with the world.

In the last category, studies of Israel's relationship with the United States have a special place. Most are informed by a deep sympathy with Israel and staunchly defend the closest possible partnership between the two countries, even if they are occasionally critical of each other's excesses. Much of this writing is by political scientists or former diplomats, whether Israeli or American, and concentrates on diplomacy and strategy.

The better books in this extensive literature have a narrow temporal focus, like Michelle Mart's *Eye on Israel* and Peter Grose's *Israel in the Mind of America*, or take an international-relations approach, like Camille Mansour's *Beyond Alliance*, John Judis's *Genesis*, and Irene Gendzier's *Dying to Forget*. As a result, even the best of these studies often ignore the cultural, intellectual, religious, and emotional forces that have also played a role in shaping Israeli-US relations since the end of World War II.

Amy Kaplan's *Our American Israel: The Story of an Entangled Alliance* helps fill that void. A tour de force of both history and cultural studies, it is the first work to describe, fully and rigorously, America's relationship with Israel in terms of the profound cultural ties that bind the two countries so closely together and to examine their evolving relationship over several generations. The title of Kaplan's book is extremely telling: This is a story of how a national and colonial settler project in a distant and seemingly exotic part of the world was normalized and Americanized to the point that, in the American imagination, Israelis are seen as close kin. In a certain sense, for many Americans, Israel is a part of us.

Amy Kaplan is a historian of American culture and intellectual life at the University of Pennsylvania. Her work is widely respected among scholars in the field for its perceptive understanding of the crucial role of culture in history, and here she offers an exemplary examination of how American exceptionalism and the sense of Israel as a special place and people fostered by Zionism have mirrored each other. For Kaplan, this explains a crucial aspect of the extraordinary affinity between the two peoples: They share a belief that their nation's existence was divinely ordained and that it is therefore exempt from the rules that apply to other nations.

In explaining this affinity, Kaplan draws on the two peoples' parallel pioneering mythologies and their similarly disdainful views of the indigenous populations in the lands they rule over. She shows that American and Israeli forms of exceptionalism intersect in many ways—not just in the manner in which both countries understand their respective manifest destinies but also in the material means by which they have realized them through systematic colonization and the suppression of indigenous populations. Kaplan stresses the crucial importance of this process of suppression in the paradoxical victim-and-victor image that Israel has long enjoyed in the United States. Emphasizing the consequences of this long-standing sympathetic view of Israel for the usually invisible third party to this triangle—the Palestinian people—she also notes how the negative image of Palestinians in the American mind was largely shaped by hostile Israeli views of them, as well as by American Islamophobia and Arabophobia.

Many aspects of *Our American Israel* are

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**MANIFEST DESTINIES**

The tangled history of American and Israeli exceptionalism

by RASHID KHALIDI

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Many aspects of *Our American Israel* are
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revealing, even for those who have long been immersed in this topic. Kaplan’s discussion of Leon Uris’s novel *Exodus*, as well as its film adaptation, places both hugely influential works precisely where they belong: firmly at the center of an entire generation’s understanding not just of Israel but of the entire Middle East. As Kaplan points out, a lyric from the theme song for the film—“This land is mine, / God gave this land to me”—is perhaps one of the most concise and gripping pieces of political persuasion about colonization, grounding territorial conquest in a divine injunction. Similarly brilliant is Kaplan’s analysis of the striking success of Joan Peters’s 1984 book *From Time Immemorial*, which had a powerful impact in persuading all those eager to believe that the Palestinians never existed as a distinct people, although reputable scholars universally debunked the book’s argument.

Among the other notable aspects of *Our American Israel* is Kaplan’s perceptive reading of how the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the subsequent massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, and the outbreak, five years later, of the first Palestinian intifada reshaped American views of Israel and the Middle East. While the Palestinians—erased from public consciousness after the 1948 Nakba (Catastrophe), the brutal forced exodus of hundreds of thousands from their homes during the war that led to Israel’s creation—were able to draw international attention to their cause in the 1960s and ’70s, they did not achieve a similar new salience in the United States. If they existed at all in the public consciousness, they were often seen as terrorists. The 1982 war and then the first intifada started to change this equation. Israel’s invasion of Lebanon and its two-month siege of West Beirut, in which more than 17,000 people—mostly civilians—died, had a strong impact on American public opinion. The televised images of this hail of fire raining down on a defenseless city could not be squared with the carefully cultivated image of plucky little Israel holding off hordes of murderous Arabs. This was “not the Israel we have seen in the past,” said John Chancellor of NBC News, speaking from a rooftop in West Beirut as buildings burned in the background. The news reports on the first intifada had a similar effect: Month after month of nightly images showing the shootings and savage beatings of young Palestinian demonstrators by Israeli soldiers further altered the way that many Americans viewed the conflict.

Even as Kaplan underlines the importance of these events in helping transpose from the lemming-like consensus that supports Israel’s every action. A new cohort of young, progressive women of color elected to Congress, including Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, have spoken out against Israeli policies and in favor of the pro-Palestinian boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement. In spite of the ferocious, often racist pushback against them, they have demonstrated that things can be said today about Israel and Palestine in Congress, on college campuses, and even, feebly, in the media that were simply unsayable in American public discourse only a few years ago.

This is therefore the right time for the appearance of Kaplan’s compelling book on the extraordinary nature of the American relationship with Israel over the last three-quarters of a century. Her deep historical grounding and highly sophisticated treatment of culture, the arts, and the media help explain the crucial—indeed, she would probably argue (and I would agree), the preeminent—role of novels, film, journalism, and other forms of cultural and artistic production in shaping the American view of Israel. Such an understanding is especially useful at a moment when large numbers of younger Americans are increasingly scornful of their elders’ often uncritical and misty-eyed views of Israel. Palestine today has a place in the American public debate that it never previously enjoyed, and with this increased attention has come greater critical scrutiny of the US-Israeli alliance and the myths we have been told.

In this environment, *Our American Israel* could not be timelier, and it will likely find a broad audience not only in a number of academic fields but also among activists and nonspecialist readers. For this is a book that anyone can read with enormous benefit: It is beautifully written, carefully crafted, and entirely free of jargon.

The book will also likely provoke intense controversy, as it gently but deeply goes many sacred cows. But it will be welcomed by anyone seeking to understand and to depart from the myths that have been central to producing the American/Israeli/Palestinian conundrum we face today. *Our American Israel*’s clear-eyed analysis helps show us how we ended up in this conundrum, and by doing so it also helps us map out a realistic path through which justice and equality for both peoples can replace the discrimination and oppression that are the status quo.

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**Our American Israel**

*The Story of an Entangled Alliance*

By Amy Kaplan

Harvard University Press. 368 pp. $29.95

While the Trump administration’s effusive support for Israel may make it seem nothing has changed between the two countries, in fact much has been going on beneath the surface over the past half-decade. Public opinion on the left, particularly among the young and people of color, has shifted significantly where Palestine and Israel are concerned in recent years. Correspondingly, politicians appear to be willing to break...
The Association of American University Presses (AAUP) is now the Association of University Presses (AUPresses). The visual identity you see here is a vibrant expression of the Association’s purpose and vision: open and engaging, representing a forward-thinking and mission-driven publishing community that holds to—and stands for—high standards of scholarship and professionalism.

Sand and Steel
The D-Day Invasions and the Liberation of France
BY PETER CADDICK-ADAMS

In addition to covering the buildup to the invasion, Caddick-Adams gives a full and detailed account of the German preparations. Sand and Steel reveals precisely what lay in wait for the Allies. But the heart of the book is Caddick-Adams’ narratives of the five beaches where the terrible drama of D-Day played out—Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, and Sword.

Well
What We Need to Talk About When We Talk About Health
BY SANDRO GALEA

Americans spend more money on health than people anywhere else in the world. And what do they get for it? Statistically, not much. Well is a radical examination of the subtle and not-so-subtle factors that determine who gets to be healthy in America. The country’s failing health is a product of American history and character. Refocusing on our national health can usher enlightenment across American life and politics.

Blackhood Against the Police Power
Punishment and Disavowal in the “Post-Racial” Era
BY TRYON P. WOODS

Both significant and timely, Blackhood Against the Police Power addresses the punishment of “race” and the disavowal of sexual violence central to the contemporary “post-racial” culture of politics. The book redefines policing as a sociohistorical process of implementing antiblackness and, in so doing, redefines racism as an act of sexual violence that produces the punishment of race.

Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World
BY D. STEPHEN LONG

“With erudition and passion, Long demonstrates how lies make the achievement of justice impossible. Drawing on examples from history and the present, he shows how the refusal to tell the truth about wrongs makes impossible political alternatives to the lie. This book can be read at many levels and hopefully will find its way to many readers.” —Stanley Hauerwas

The Eagle Has Eyes
The FBI Surveillance of César Estrada Chávez of the United Farm Workers Union of America, 1965–1975
BY JOSÉ ANGEL GUTIÉRREZ

This book is the first of its kind to bring transparency to the FBI’s attempts to destroy the incipient Chicano Movement of the 1960s. Utilizing declassified files from the FBI, the author investigates the agency’s role in thwarting César E. Chávez’s efforts to build a labor union for farm workers.

Learn more at www.aupresses.org, and take a design retrospective through the history of AUPresses’ look.
Spend enough time in the workforce and you’re bound to have a job in which the bulk of daily activities—though they may be taxing, exhausting, harrowing—have nothing to do with getting work done.

Such is the case for Millie, the narrator of Halle Butler’s second novel, *The New Me*. Millie—30 years old, rudderless, and disgruntled to her core—is a long-term short-term employee: a seasoned temp. It’s familiar territory for Butler; she temped throughout her 20s to fund creative work, and her first novel, *Jillian*, follows the life of an embittered young medical secretary.

At the start of *The New Me*, Millie is 10 days into a receptionist gig at a boutique Chicago furniture showroom, where she is paid $12 an hour to stare at an unringing phone. Her manager and primary antagonist is Karen, the senior receptionist, a small-fry Machiavelli who instantly dislikes Millie—not for her performance, which is adequate, but for her awkward manner and shabby clothes.

Millie has what anthropologist David Graeber would call a bullshit job; it’s meaningless, and she knows it. There’s close to nothing for her to do, less than an hour of actual work per day, and it’s not for lack of initiative. When Millie asks Karen for additional tasks in an attempt to prove her value, she is met at first with irritation and later with a cruel act of sabotage. Karen is a perfect villain for the LinkedIn age: Her warped sense of professionalism has usurped all other values.

For Millie, every day of work is “another fucking waking nightmare.” She detests Karen, her other coworkers, and the few clients she speaks with over the phone. Millie’s schedule is blank, but beyond the occasional fruitless Google search (“foods that reduce stress”), she’s too anxious for the customary desk-job practice of mindlessly consuming the Internet. Even a break-room sugar fix can’t dull her torment. A bite of a doughnut becomes a “disgusting bolus” as soon as she swallows.

Despite the unmitigated badness of the job, she longs to go from temp to perm. The stability and pay bump, she thinks, might allow her to become “calm, cool, self-assured, self-reliant,” a better friend and daughter, the titular “new me.” Most of these daydreams hinge on consumption—ordering deliveries from Whole Foods, buying gifts for her mother, paying for yoga classes. But Millie can only halfway fool herself. When it seems she might get a permanent offer, she’s overcome with hope and dread. It feels, she thinks, “like someone I love has just been admitted to the hospital.” Things, of course, go awry.

Interspersed with Millie’s narrations are short third-person sections that depict the interior lives of several youngish women in Millie’s peer group, including a few co-workers and a downstairs neighbor. These characters are not transparently miserable like Millie, but they’re certainly not flourishing. One woman deals with a stressful workweek by ditching her friends to get high and binge on a pile of snacks. Another prepares anecdotes and jokes to share with her group of friends and has a “conniption” when their reactions don’t match her expectations. These sections seem to serve as additional counterpoints to Millie’s fantasies of a promotion-based end to her suffering. Even the normatively successful can feel alienated and dissatisfied; they just have a little more energy left for self-deception. Or, as Millie muses early in the novel about those around her, they’re simply “too dumb to know they’re not happy inside.”

Butler captures the way a person can feel grateful for—and terrified to lose—a poorly compensated job that is an obvious, miserable, nerve-fraying waste of life. The novel’s loose plot is constructed around this feeling, which makes it tempting to read *The New Me* as an explicitly political story: The archetypal millennial gets screwed by the system.

This would be a mistake. Millie’s money woes are so abstract, they may as well not exist. She never pauses to make a furious calculation before buying another round of drinks, never wonders if she’ll make her rent. She has a college degree, and she’s without debt. Her parents, educated upper-

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**EVERYDAY ZOMBIES**

Halle Butler’s novel about the millennial workplace

by KATIE BLOOM

Katie Bloom’s work has appeared in *The Outline* and *The Seattle Times*.

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Illustration by Ben Dunmore
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Learn more at www.aupresses.org, and take a design retrospective through the history of AUPresses’ look.
middle-class retirees, chip in for rent and groceries with gentle encouragement and nary a passive-aggressive remark. Temping is a choice, not a last resort; Millie says she’s drawn to the “slight atmospheric changes” of different workplaces. This particular job is indeed precarious, as temping is by nature, but crucially, her life is not.

This is not to deny Millie’s anguish, which seems to be her salient experience of being alive. But unlike many millennials, she can afford to step away from the treadmill desk and reassess her path. Thanks to classes paid for by her parents, she has amassed a battery of skills: “Illustrator, bartending, grant-writing, ceramics.” And while no job is perfect, some are pleasantly challenging or boring in a soothing way or at least have a reason to exist. The reader wonders, “Why is Millie, a woman with options, so attached to this particular cage?”

But seeking pleasure isn’t Millie’s forte. She spends her free time binge-watching a true-crime show and making sporadic half-hearted stabs at self-improvement. There’s no evidence that she likes or admires anyone; the two women she calls friends are the self-absorbed Sarah (“talks too much, almost constantly”) and dull Beth (“always bored the shit out of me”). Calling her sup-

The New Me
By Halle Butler
Penguin Books. 208 pp. $16

portive mother makes Millie “bored and irritated.” She doesn’t eat for pleasure or health; her diet is all “sour” coffee, “old cheese,” the “stale butt of a baguette.” She seems disgusted by her body and uncommitted to hygiene; her “pits are slick,” and she smells “like an onion pizza.” In her myopia, Chicago exists primarily as an annoying commute.

Does Millie like anything? By her own account, “I try to assess the things that bring me pleasure…and the answer sits in my empty skull: nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing.”

Millie is surprisingly apolitical for a woman with a spiritually vacant low-wage job, a penchant for rage, hours to burn, and an Internet connection. There’s evidence to suggest some vaguely progressive leanings: She “knows” that it’s wrong to buy bottled water and that “Forensic Files is propaganda for the Justice Department.” But she cannot contextualize her suffering, nor can she conceive of solidarity with other workers. She believes her life should be better, but it’s not a political yearning. Instead, she seems to think her pedigree entitles her to a cushier life. By the second chapter, Millie specifies that her parents have graduate degrees and that she was “raised correctly and in a good home.” Later, she recalls mocking an acquaintance to her ex-boyfriend “it’s not a political yearning. Instead, she seems to think her pedigree entitles her to a cushier life. By the second chapter, Millie specifies that her parents have graduate degrees and that she was “raised correctly and in a good home.” Later, she recalls mocking an acquaintance to her ex-boyfriend for using elitist intellectual language, even though ‘utilize’ is basically just ‘use’ for no fucking reason other than to try to make people feel like you’re the one with the big mental dick, even though ‘utilize’ is basically just administrative jargon and completely déclassé to them that knows.

[It’s] a real first-gen-college-grad kind of word, like your parents are small-town conservative Christians who didn’t have any books in the house, and you’re self-conscious about your upbringing so you want to stand out by using elitist intellectual language, but you don’t actually know any long words, so you just truss up the word ‘use’ for no fucking reason other than to try to make people feel like you’re the one with the big mental dick, even though ‘utilize’ is basically just administrative jargon and completely déclassé to them that knows.

Where!
Barbs like this thread the book. Millie is as cynical as an Elena Ferrante narrator without the superhuman perception, as vicious as a Thomas Bernhard character without the rigorous self-awareness. These lines are occasionally funny (“It’s like sucking on a rock and pretending it’s candy, talking to this guy”), but the cumulative effect is tedious.

Without the pathos of real precariousness—she has plenty of escape routes—Millie sometimes reads like the sort of millennial caricature trotted out by Fox News anchors and boomer opinion writers: self-absorbed and entitled, lazy and undirected. There are moments when The New Me almost passes for satire, but the book confirms her point of view a little too often for this to be the case. Her coworkers really are vacuous; her job really is pointless; Karen really is judging her hygiene.

Millie is at home with the protagonists of several recent novels about millennial women—including Made for Love by Alissa Nutting, Severance by Ling Ma, The Answers by Catherine Lacey, and My Year of Rest and Relaxation by Ottessa Moshfegh (which is technically about a Gen Xer but has significant spiritual overlap). All depict young women struggling to find connection and purpose in a society that buries meaning under distraction, consumption, and superficial self-help. And all tell the stories of women who, to varying degrees, can’t set their own course: They take the strange, grim jobs offered to them, accept curdled imitations of love, and possess few dreams of their own. The narrator of My Year of Rest and Relaxation is possibly the most consistently successful of the pack at setting and achieving a goal—but this goal is to drug herself into a yearlong snooze, which isn’t exactly proactive.

Reading these novels in succession, you’d get the sense that millennials are defined not by the downward mobility of their generation but by something internal: a mysterious dearth of will. It’s a curious archetype for so many ambitious young writers to gravitate toward; successful novelists are hardly a listless crowd. Perhaps the appeal lies in the ready-made, almost meme-like relatability of these characters. Who hasn’t wanted to leave work and nap for a few months? Who doesn’t feel like a zombie on Monday mornings?

It feels, in a way, like a shortcut, a way to evoke a sense of generational fatigue without getting into the details and to suggest political heft without mentioning politics. These characters—broke but not poor, emotionally unwell but physically safe—allow middle-class readers to feel like the real victims of capitalism instead of like participants and beneficiaries. Millie isn’t alone in her shrunken field of vision. If you gaze long enough into a Whole Foods bag, the Whole Foods bag will gaze back into you.
COMMUNING WITH SPIRITS

Big Thief’s U.F.O.F.

by OLIVIA HORN

Mary, Haley, Matthew, Andrew, Evelyn, Jacob. These are among the personalities Adrienne Lenker, the singer-guitarist and primary creative force behind Big Thief, names on her group’s sophomore album, Capacity. On its third record, U.F.O.F. (short for “Unidentified Flying Object Friend”), she expands the roll call: Jodi, Caroline, Violet, Betsy, Jenni. Some of these characters are her family: Andrew, from Capacity’s “Mythological Beauty,” is the older brother she never knew; Violet, from the new song “Cattails,” is her great-grandmother. Some are friends, some are lovers, and some are fragments of herself. In her porous alto, Lenker summons them like spirits. Their lingering presence gives Big Thief’s music a sense of community—a warm, lived-in quality quite unlike anything else that exists in the realm of indie rock.

For Big Thief, ancestry has long been a core concern. On one highlight from its first album, Masterpiece, Lenker sings about the fucked-up conceptions of love that are Injectable flying objectFriend), she relays ordeals from her childhood in achingly specific detail. The fascination with inheritance persists on U.F.O.F. “From,” which originally appeared on a solo record that Lenker put out last fall, fixates on an expectant mother, wondering what her baby will discover of the circumstances that made her, but it feels less about bloodline and more about collective unconscious. Tapping into this idea of a common resource—a universal shared psyche, shaped by the knowledge of our ancestors—renders strangers less strange. Lenker has said that all her songs are about “making friends with the unknown”—hence the addition of “Friend” to the titular abbreviation. Throughout the album, perspectives mingle as she weaves together accounts of women and creatures, greeting them with warm familiarity but capturing them from a poetic distance. She communes with Jenni, rides alongside Betsy, and sees “through the fruit bat’s eyes” on “Strange.”

Lenker’s arms are spread wide to the world, and she and her bandmates conjure an unmistakable sense of wonderment with their arrangements. It’s felt in the whale-call-like drone that appears on “Cattails,” the ethereal choir that chimes in on “Strange,” the outro of “Magic Dealer” suggesting summer twilights scored by fluttering insect wings. Yet for everything that it contains, Big Thief’s music is both immediate and elusive. Wrapped into U.F.O.F.’s delicate folds are fragility and resilience, love and trauma, nature and ether, enclosure and space, light and dark. Big Thief inhabits these crossroads with all their might and mystery. “Fragile is that I mourn her death / As our limbs are twisting in her bedroom,” Lenker sings on “Orange,” her words clouding intimacy with anxieties about mortality. Elsewhere, her imagining of a spooky, sci-fi alien encounter (“U.F.O.F.”) rubs up against the warm, earthy swells of “Cattails”; birth and death coexist on “Terminal Paradise.” Such internal tensions make for songs charged like the space between two magnets’ poles.

At times, the tension mounts to the point of rupture. One of the record’s best songs, the thrashing tribute “Jenni,” feels almost apocalyptic, encased in a torrent of distortion that evokes collapsing buildings. The song is an index of literal violence—to make it, guitarist Buck Meek suspended his open-tuned instrument from the ceiling, surrounded by amplifiers to create feedback, and bashed it with his body. The equally jarring opener, “Contact,” intimates both personal crisis (“I wanna see / To feel my body sinking”) and a promise of resolution in the arms of another (“She gives me gills / Helps me forgive the pills”). But Lenker’s musing and the delicate guitar tendrils surrounding her are cut off by a violent caterwaul that rips across the track, upending the illusion of serenity. It is a literal realization of a lyric that surfaces a few tracks later, on “From”: “Couldn’t tell for sure where the screaming sound was coming from,” Lenker murmurs, as if in a daze. The disturbance sets an unnerving tone for everything that follows, lacing the record’s most tender moments with seeds of doubt; everywhere there is beauty, the band seems to be saying, terror lurks around a blind corner.

There is precedent for this idea within Big Thief’s catalog. One track on Capacity, “Watering,” depicts in harrowing, bloody detail an encounter between a woman and her stalker. Asked about the song in a recent conversation with Pitchfork, Lenker suggested that she identified more with the man in the song than with his victim. “We all have these demons,” she offered. Few artists would put a sentiment like this on the record; then again, few artists can look into the record’s most tender moments with seeds of doubt; everywhere there is beauty, the band seems to be saying, terror lurks around a blind corner.

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**Puzzle No. 3501**  
**Joshua Kosman and Henri Picciotto**

**ACROSS**

1. At first, acute pressure to back up claims (7)
2. Like one receiving a pension or new wheels? (7)
9. En route, I smuggled in bell (5)
10. Enterprising stratagem after disposing of initial debts (9)
11. Like a bit of sapphire amid mere counterfeit jewelry (10)
12. Computer person losing head with love, love, love... (4)
14. Commercial break without purpose (6)
16. Nerd goes around globe with no better than average means of access (8)
18. Perfume dispenser talking at a cheapskate (8)
19. Flat stone housing Kentucky research facility (6)
21. What you need to think without limits: money (4)
22. Written right to left in Avignon, the calfskin describes that object with many stories (10)
25. Sound arrangement of skeleton is outstanding (9)
26. Man takes in Eastern playwright (5)

**DOWN**

1. Keep reusing garment materials as a way to stay cool (5,10)
2. Legal actions of executives (5)
3. Urchin runs over to conceal error (10)
4. Second piece of furniture is not likely to fall (6)
5. Brooks and birds, running (8)
6. Bishop’s skirt (4)
7. Applaud Panama, say, for invasive operation (4,5)
8. Confused, having expanded outside small band at second-rate university (13)
13. Garden tool interfering with plant disease is a safety feature (5,5)
15. Hopper looks for oil and gas—they’re on top of the car (4,5)
17. Blue law inscribed in broken cane (8)
20. Feverish, except for the face (it is an ailment) (15)
23. Old-fashioned recording, like “Jungle Love” at the beginning (5)
24. Beat of young reporter including legislature’s opening (4)

**SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3500**

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**ACROSS**

1. NOTIFICATION + HELP IT
2. BEDFELLOW
3. EULER (anag.)
4. BED + HELP IT (anag.)
5. E + ULER (anag.)
6. L + O + N + A + Y + I + O
7. E + P + W + I + C + A + E
8. LOOP + SPINDOCTOR
9. I + L + M + H + N + E + O
10. SCENE + ACID TEST
11. T + T + N + A + S
12. CHEAPEST + CADET
13. PU + T + E + A + T + A
14. RESTAURANT PRIM
15. E + G + R + A + S + I + L
16. P + L + O + A + D + S + B + L + I + N + D + I
17. M + A + D + E + L + I + E + N + G + L + E

**DOWN**

1. NO + BE + LIST
2. BEDFELLOW
3. EULER (anag.)
4. BULT + LIST (2 anag.)
5. TIDE + Anag. 3
6. TIDE + Anag. 4
7. TIDE + Anag. 5
8. BRO + RO (rev.)
9. M + E + T + E + A + R + S + M + A + L
10. ME + T + A + R + S + M + A + L
11. E + G + R + A + S + I + L
12. P + L + O + A + D + S + B + L + I + N + D + I
13. M + A + D + E + L + I + E + N + G + L + E

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