Too Big to Heal

Consolidation has left the US with a health care system built for profit over care

SUSIE CAGLE

A dose of remdesivir costs $3,120, even though it was partly developed by federal agencies.

Since 2005, more than 170 rural hospitals have closed nationwide.

Health care CEOs receive exceptional payouts.

Gilead Sciences

Daniel O’Day
$29.1 million

Some hospitals give nurses one N95 mask every three days.

There is no FTC oversight when monopolistic corporations buy out a community hospital.

As the health care industry consolidated, hospital capacity declined.

1975
1,465,828 Beds

2015
897,961 Beds
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Thai fighters: Pro-democracy protesters carry inflatable yellow rubber ducks at the Ratchaprasong intersection in Bangkok on November 18, 2020.

FEATURES

14 Privatizing Puerto Rico
ED MORALES
The rushed sell-off of the territory’s electrical utility is part of a move to gut public goods for private profit.

4 COMMENT
The Real Trump Surge
ELIE MYSTAL

5 COMMENT
Free the Plowshares!
They put faith into practice, putting Joe Biden on the spot.
MARRA MARGARONIS

20 Too Big to Heal
SUSIE CAGLE
The US health care system serves corporations, not patients.

24 Playing Games With Public Health Data
TIM SCHWAB
Thanks to $600 million from the Gates Foundation, the IHME can make its own rules.

6 DATELINE
Federal Death Row
In the administration’s rush to execute people, the writer may be next.
BILLY ALLEN

11 THE DEBATE
Should the Left Launch an American Labor Party?
PABLO BLEST
JONATHAN SMUCKER

13 DEADLINE POET
Republican Lawmakers
CALVIN TRILLIN

11 Rhyme (poem)
DANIEL IMMERWAHR

38 The Visible Hand
How monopolies define everyday life in the United States.
MARIO CHARD

41 Pronoun Study (poem)
ARI BANIAS

46 THE DEBATE
Fort Everywhere
How did the United States become entangled in a cycle of endless war?
DANIEL IMMERWAHR

43 The Sound of Care
Kelly Lee Owens’s healing electronic music.
JULYSSA LOPEZ

Each morning, I wake up with a growing fear in the pit of my stomach, wondering if today will be the day they call my name.”

Cover: SUSIE CAGLE
I

T didn’t have to be this way. As the United States gets slammed by yet another wave of Covid-19—the country now has more than 12 million cases, and over a quarter-million people have died—it is important to remember that what we are experiencing now is almost entirely by choice. We’ve known for months how to limit the spread of the disease, but a vocal minority of Americans have chosen not to do it. And they have chosen this path of most resistance thanks largely to one obnoxious person who has used his bully pulpit to frustrate public health: Donald Trump.

From the very first wave of the virus, Trump and his entourage of quacks and enablers have failed the most basic tests of governance and leadership. He acted too slowly to stop the spread of the virus or give hospitals the resources they needed. He didn’t come up with a plan for mass testing or contact tracing. Instead of using the powers of the federal government to coordinate a national response and save lives, he hid behind governors and left states to fend for themselves.

In the absence of anything approaching an actual plan, all he has given the country is performative messaging. And that messaging has been a disaster. Trump is the single largest driver of coronavirus misinformation worldwide. He called it a hoax (it wasn’t); he said it would magically go away (it didn’t); he told people to inject bleach (don’t); he mocked people for wearing masks (wear a mask); he said only older people die from the virus and children are immune (none of that is true). Even after he got Covid-19 and recovered—thanks to the socialized medicine taxpayers provided him—he refused to embrace basic science and reason; instead he ripped off his mask, parading about the White House balcony like some orange Übermensch. He ended his failed reelection campaign by barnstorming around the country holding superspreader events that are thought to have caused 30,000 infections and 700 deaths.

And now? Now he hides out in the White House, nursing his bruised ego with Big Macs and revenge fantasies. He stokes his clown coup—tweeting, filing lawsuits, refusing to allow a smooth transition to the Biden administration—all the while allowing the virus to run amok. This is the real Trump surge: a surge not of mythical lost ballots but of flagrant, fast-replicating disease. Trump is a walking biological weapon.

And yet, somehow, even all of this—the bleach, the rallies, the unconscionable disregard for life—fails to capture the full scope of the harm he’s done to this country. Trump’s anti-science sociopathy has been embraced by many other political actors. His messaging, his attitude, his culture-war-mongering have filtered down throughout our country, to our national shame.

We’re in a race to the bottom, and Republicans aren’t the only ones playing. Governors, including Democratic ones, reopened bars, restaurants, and gyms. That was unnecessary and dangerous, but it’s not surprising that without any support from the federal government in terms of messaging (or stimulus to keep local economies going), many states prioritized getting back to normal over keeping people safe. Meanwhile, it’s hard to persuade people to limit themselves to essential travel when everyone else seems to be going about their business as usual. When de
drange hordes go to death-cult rallies and football games, it’s hard to prevent regular folks from going to visit their grandmothers. And when Trump administration officials are out there drinking coronavirus Jell-O shots out of each other’s belly buttons—and only the Black guy Herman Cain dies—it’s no wonder some people think it’s OK to go inside a bar to grab a drink.

Unfortunately, Covid-19 doesn’t kill only those who taunted it.

A good leader would have tried to persuade people to protect themselves from the virus. A great leader would have inspired the nation to make sacrifices for others. Instead, we have Trump, and he has led us into this hell of sickness and death.

Even after he’s removed from the White House (and he will be removed on January 20), Trump will continue to use the media—Twitter, Fox News, Newsmax—to poison the well against public health. There will be a vaccine for the coronavirus eventually, but there is no cure for what Trump has done to our society. A leader would have inspired the nation to make sacrifices for others. Instead, we have Trump, and he has led us into this hell of sickness and death.

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The Real Trump Surge

There will be a vaccine for coronavirus eventually, but there is no cure for what Trump has done to our society.
Free the Plowshares 7!

They risked their freedom putting faith into practice—which puts Joe Biden on the spot.

I first met Martha Hennessy at a barbecue in Vermont, on one of those summer afternoons when the talk winds round the company as smoke from the grill floats lazily up to the heavens. With her gray ponytail and long, loose skirt, she fit right into our post-back-to-the-land community. Lifting her hem a little, she showed me the electronic tag on her left ankle. She was awaiting trial for her part in the Plowshares 7 symbolic disarmament action that took place on April 4, 2018, at the Kings Bay nuclear submarine base in Georgia on the 60th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination.

The Plowshares 7 are Catholic pacifists in the tradition begun by Daniel and Philip Berrigan. The group cut through the Kings Bay security fence, poured blood on the official seal, hammered on a metal display of a Tomahawk missile, and put up a banner reading “The ultimate logic of Trident is omnicide” (an adaptation of King’s “The ultimate logic of racism is genocide”). In October 2019 they were convicted of four federal crimes—conspiracy, destruction of government property, depredation of a naval installation, and trespass—for which the maximum sentence is 20 years and six months in prison.

Hennessy would not want to be singled out from her fellows in this way, but it’s through our conversations that I’ve begun to understand what enables her to keep confronting a threat so overwhelming that most of us ignore it and to risk her own body to challenge it.

For the Plowshares 7, nuclear weapons are not just a sword of Damocles hanging over humanity. They kill every day by stealing resources, reinforcing white supremacy, contaminating the land. Hennessy speaks about the connections King drew between racism, materialism, and militarism, pointing out that it was when he made the link between violence against Black people at home and the war in Vietnam that he became a real danger to the state.

Hennessy has struggled deeply with what she calls the US Catholic Church’s complicity with empire and its attitude toward women. Her faith grew out of her opposition to war and her experience of her grandmother Dorothy Day, a radical activist, mystic, and founder of the Catholic Worker movement. Hennessy remembers sitting on Day’s lap as a child, listening to her heartbeat and her voice, and sees that now as her first intimation of God. “It meant connectedness and love and warmth… knowing that I was part of this mystical body, where God is love and God is within each of us,” she said.

At 14 she watched her brother leave for Vietnam. In her 20s she was arrested protesting nuclear power in Vermont. Much later, she began to volunteer at Maryhouse, the Catholic Worker hospitality shelter in Manhattan, and eventually found her way to the Plowshares movement.

When Hennessy speaks of the mystical body or describes pouring blood on nuclear installations as a sacrament, something in me stalls. I can relate to those things only as metaphor. But listening to her—not just her words but also the fierce thoughtfulness of her voice—I’ve come to understand her courage and commitments as indivisible, the expression of a belief in love or, to put it differently, the possibility of goodness.

Something like that seems to have happened to Judge Lisa Wood at Hennessy’s sentencing, by video link, on November 13. Wood began with the necessary formalities, addressing the defense’s arguments for a reduction in the recommended sentence: 18 to 24 months in prison and a restitution payment of $33,503.51. The prosecutor brought in crime words like “conspiracy” and “under cover of darkness.” The judge rejected most of the arguments for a lighter sentence.

But the testimony of Hennessy’s witnesses changed the atmosphere, as if someone had opened a window and let the outdoors in. Her friend and Vermont neighbor Elizabeth Blum spoke of their shared interest in organic gardening, birding, and textile arts—and her own childhood in the 1950s, when she wasn’t allowed to drink milk contaminated with strontium-90. Et in Arcadia ego. George Horton, who has worked for Catholic Charities for 39 years, described meeting Hennessy at Maryhouse as she was assiduously scrubbing a huge pot; he said that her work there is about relationship and friendship, not social services, so she’s irreplaceable.

Retired attorney Mary Yelenick helped to draft the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which comes into force on January 22—two days after Joe Biden’s inauguration. She described the effects of nuclear weapons on children’s bodies and pointed out that many things we now consider abhorrent were once legal. Sister Marilyn Gramas, Hennessy’s spiritual director, spoke almost maternally about how hard it was for her to decide to take part in this action. Hennessy quietly explained that her faith, social responsibility, and love for humanity compelled her to act. She spoke of her remorse that we built the bombs and her regret at having embarrassed the personnel on the base. All respectfully asked for mercy.

When they had finished, the judge seemed almost reluctant to speak. She sentenced Hennessy to 10 months in federal prison, which, though dangerous in a pandemic for a woman of 65, is far less than was expected.

All six of the Plowshares 7 sentenced so far have received prison terms (in the case of Elizabeth McAlister now 81, for time served). Biden claims to share their faith. It would take but a pen stroke for him to pardon them and show that he, too, understands its moral implications.
A Plea for Life

As the Trump administration rushes to execute more and more people, my friends are dying—and I might be next.

One of us are promised another day—or even another minute. Here on federal death row, that reality bears down on us harshly. But Christopher Vialva’s execution on September 24 weighs especially heavily on me. Chris was the seventh prisoner executed by the Trump administration since July, after a 17-year lapse in executions. On November 19, Orlando Hall became the eighth.

There are vast differences between my situation and Chris’s: I am fighting to prove my innocence, whereas Chris, in the end, told people in a video recorded before his execution, “I’m not making this plea as an innocent man, but I am a changed and redeemed man.” Still, despite those differences, from the moment we met, I saw in Chris something I recognized in myself. Like Chris, I was arrested at age 19 and sentenced to death at 20. At the time of his conviction, Chris was still trying to figure out where he belonged and who he could be.

I had struggled similarly upon my arrival on death row. I had been taken from my family for something I didn’t do; I harbored a lot of anger and resentment. One of the older guys cautioned me not to allow myself to turn into “the worst of the worst”—the person society thought I was. He urged me to use every opportunity to do better. I taught myself law, worked on my writing skills, and with my family’s support, grew into a responsible man, all the while struggling to prove my innocence, battling depression and, later, cancer.

I saw the same determination in Chris. I saw someone who was looking for a better way.

A lot of guys in here see asking for help as a sign of weakness. That wasn’t Chris. He asked me to explain the law, asked to borrow my books. He seemed to soak up knowledge, eventually teaching himself Arabic and Hebrew and how to play the guitar. And as he began to grow, I saw the joy it gave him to help others grow as well. He helped anyone and everyone, and he made us want to be better. I was already pushing myself, but the example Chris set made me want to work even harder.

In the video before his execution, Chris said, “I committed a great wrong when I was a lost kid and took two precious lives from this world.... Every day I wish I could right this wrong.” Although we never spoke about the details of our cases, this desire he expressed to right his wrongs was clear in all his actions.

I saw Chris briefly the day before they took him. I was in the law library with Dustin Higgs, who is fighting to prove his innocence, as I am. Chris told us he loved us. We said we loved him, too. In a place like this, where trust and friendship are hard to find, we didn’t need a lot of words.

And now Chris is gone. So is Orlando, even though he was never indicted by a grand jury for a capital offense. And just a few weeks back, guards took Chris’s codefendant Brandon Bernard, as well as Lisa Montgomery, to the death-watch range. Despite DNA, other forensic evidence, and an alibi that support my innocence claims, I could be next.

Each morning, I wake up with a growing fear in the pit of my stomach, wondering if today will be the day they call my name. I think about Chris. Doesn’t the transformation he underwent count? Does the person we become matter in the eyes of the law? Does innocence?

I believe innocence does matter and that redemption is always possible, and I have to hope that others in our country believe this as well. It may be too late for Chris and Orlando, but it’s not yet too late for Lisa and Brandon, for the other guys on the row, for me.

We need your help, and we need it urgently. We need you to raise your voices against the death penalty before we lose another Chris. Before they come for me.
The Failed Coup

Trump’s cries of election fraud may be futile, but they’re not inconsequential.

Hopefully, by the time you read this, Donald Trump’s presidency will be in its end stage. But there will have been no graceful concession, no admission of defeat from a man so pathologically insecure that he would rather take down the country than be a loser. Instead, his failed coup d’état will have led, undoubtedly, to a scorched-earth lame-duck session.

Never much interested in governing anyway, Trump will run down the clock between golf games giving pardons to his allies, stoking red-meat conspiracy theories for his base, and issuing unconstitutional executive orders from the desk between golf games giving pardons to his allies, stoking red-meat conspiracy theories for his base, and issuing unconstitutional executive orders from the desk of Stephen Miller. Come Inauguration Day, it will finally all be over but the tweets—and the speeches, rallies, and deranged exhortations to his supporters. And that’s the problem.

Trumpism will survive and probably thrive long after this president leaves—or is dragged out of—the White House, because Trump will ensure it does. As of this writing, two weeks after losing to former vice president Joe Biden by more than 5 million votes, Trump is still tweeting that mail-in voting is “a sick joke” and falsely insisting, “I WON THE ELECTION!” From the sidelines, he is cheering on street violence by MAGA thugs and branding political opponents as un-American. Despite being dropped by two law firms, a mounting pile of lost lawsuits, and the inadvisable appointment of a head attorney recently duped by the fictional character Borat, Trump is pushing forward in his effort to weaponize the courts against democracy.

He couldn’t pull off this con game without help from his Republican boosters. Bill Barr poked his partisan nose where no outgoing attorney general had during an election, with a memo urging federal lawyers to look into Trump’s groundless accusations of “vote tabulation irregularities.” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo smartly asserted that “there will be a smooth transition to a second Trump administration,” and Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell backed Trump’s bad-faith legal strategy by dismissing the idea that the “president should immediately, cheerfully accept preliminary election results.” Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican, publicly noted that Senator Lindsey Graham has pressured him to trash legal absentee ballots—a violation of both federal and state laws. As Senate Judiciary chairman, Graham announced just a week prior that he plans to investigate “all credible allegations of voting irregularities and misconduct.”

This is all insincere political theater to keep a cantankerous old man happy, an earnest antidemocratic heist to overturn the majority’s will against a Trump reelection, or a short-term effort to ensure Trump’s base turns out for Georgia runoffs that will decide control of the Senate, depending on which source you believe. In any case, the level of cynicism behind this ongoing performance art is off the charts. Trump aides have reportedly said the president knows it’s over, according to The New York Times, but is weighing “how far he can push his case against his defeat” in order to “keep his millions of supporters energized and engaged” for whatever vanity project he takes on next. “What is the downside for humoring him for this little bit of time? No one seriously thinks the results will change,” one Republican official told The Washington Post. Democratic Senator Chris Coons informed CNN that Trump-fearing Republicans, all of whom are well aware the president has no path to electoral victory, have asked that he “please convey my well wishes to the president-elect, but I can’t say that publicly yet.”

Even if, by the time you read this, Trump has been forced to abort his coup and redirect his nihilistic pettiness into other norm-destroying tactics—the best we can hope for from this president—his electoral stonewalling and the Republicans’ enabling will have already had a dangerous impact on democracy. His repeated insistence that the election was rigged, a claim he also made in 2016 but suddenly abandoned upon winning, is meant to convince his base their votes mean nothing, which must mean the system is rigged against them, too. And Trump’s campaign is working. After this year’s presidential contest, 70 percent of Republican voters surveyed said it was not free and fair, up from 35 percent before the election, and 82 percent said Biden did not legitimately win.

Democracy maintains domestic peace by “the mere fact that the political forces expect to take turns,” political scientist Adam Przeworski has noted. When people believe their votes literally don’t count, they become more likely to resort to violence. Trump’s supporters, already steeped in white grievance, are predictably receptive to the idea that “illegal voters” have even succeeded in stealing their democracy. Apparently not satisfied with all their ill-gotten political gains from real voter suppression—in the form of voter ID laws, gerrymandered districts, closures of polling sites, and purges of voter rolls—Republicans are now signaling that...
a Democratic win is itself evidence of fraud. Trump and the GOP used birtherism to delegitimize the first Black president in US history. Now Republicans are casting Black and brown citizens as illegitimate voters to invalidate the Biden presidency.

The potential for violence here isn’t just theoretical. As ballots were being tabulated in Arizona, Nevada, and Pennsylvania, armed Trump supporters swarmed vote-counting centers, and gun-toting election denialists have gathered at Georgia’s Capitol as the recount proceeds. After thousands of Trumpists, including plenty of white supremacists, marched in Washington, D.C., to protest nonexistent vote theft, members of the Proud Boys allegedly rioted against counterprotesters, and “other Trump supporters ripped multiple Black Lives Matters signs off a building before trampling on them,” according to the Times. An Alabama police captain announced via social media that Biden voters deserve “a bullet in their skull for treason,” and an Arkansas police chief urged his followers to “throw water on [Biden voters] at restaurants. Push them off sidewalks. Never let them forget they are traitors and have no right to live in this Republic after what they have done.” (Both officers resigned after outcries.) Claiming the election had been “fraudulently stolen from us,” a Trump supporter in the New York City borough of Staten Island advocated online for the “extermination of anyone that claims to be a democrat.”

This is the fire Republicans have fanned for years, and it will continue to ravage the political and cultural landscape as it burns. Once out of office, Trump will use every bullhorn at his disposal to spread misinformation and foment violence. His tweets will push debunked election fraud lies, and he’ll portray himself as a martyr slain by an Arkansas police chief urged his followers to “throw water on [Biden voters] at restaurants. Push them off sidewalks. Never let them forget they are traitors and have no right to live in this Republic after what they have done.” (Both officers resigned after outcries.) Claiming the election had been “fraudulently stolen from us,” a Trump supporter in the New York City borough of Staten Island advocated online for the “extermination of anyone that claims to be a democrat.”

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For American Jews, the 2020 presidential election marks the end of two pillars of their political identity. The first is the very idea of a Jewish community. There is not one; there are several, and they are growing ever more in conflict with one another. The second is the death of the two-state solution and, with it, the dream that one can marry one’s Zionism to one’s liberalism.

First things first: Jews largely remain very liberal. J Street, a nonprofit advocacy group that describes itself as “pro-Israel, pro-peace,” commissioned exit polling of Jewish voters and found a 77-21 percent preference for Joe Biden over Donald Trump. But Florida and the odd urban congressional district aside, Jewish votes rarely matter much. Jews constitute about 2 percent of the US population—not much more than Muslims. They vote the way most college- and graduate-school-educated urban-ish dwellers do: Democratic. Also, just 5 percent of Jews chose “Israel” as their first or second most important issue—and, being Jews, they disagree on that topic, too.

Given the role money plays in our politics, however, votes are not the real story. Jewish campaign cash carries far more weight. While conservatives never tire of blaming the liberal financier and philanthropist George Soros for the world’s ills, the right-wing Sheldon Adelson actually lives up to virtually every anti-Semitic stereotype ever invented. A gambling magnate with a Trump-like record for business shenanigans, this self-proclaimed “richest Jew in the world” devotes hundreds of millions of dollars to buying up politicians and the press and demanding that both adhere to his Likud party line.

It’s no wonder that Republican politicians travel to Las Vegas to kiss Adelson’s ring. According to preliminary Federal Election Commission data, compiled by OpenSecrets, he and his Israeli American wife, Miriam Adelson, ponied up over $183 million in the 2020 cycle. No other contributor comes close—and that includes the $100 million Michael Bloomberg committed to Biden’s failed campaigns in Florida, Ohio, and Texas. Moreover, the figure is just part of Sheldon Adelson’s political giving. These contributions should be viewed partly as a thank-you and partly as an investment in the politics that, under Trump, has delivered the move of the US Embassy to Jerusalem, the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, the unashamed encouragement of Israel’s massive settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, and a cutoff of US aid to the Palestinians. (Trump threw in a Presidential Medal of Freedom for Miriam Adelson as well.)
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WITH BILL MILLER

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Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues. He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept. Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madre y Maestra University in Santiago, the country’s second largest city.

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These policies no doubt appeal to many of the increasingly conservative 10 percent of American Jews who identify as Orthodox, but the real political payoff is with evangelical Christians. Saying the quiet part out loud once again, Trump complained at an August campaign rally, “You know, it’s amazing with that—the evangelicals are more excited by [moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem] than Jewish people.” This is consistent with Trump’s and his party’s embrace of anti-Semitism as an electoral and governing tactic. And Republican Jewish groups seem totally cool with this. As Rabbi Eric Yoffie, a former president of the Union for Reform Judaism, wrote, “Following President Trump’s now infamous ‘stand back and stand by’ comment, directed at the far right and anti-Semitic Proud Boys militia, even the Republican side of the aisle offered mild words of rebuke.” But the Republican Jewish Coalition, the rabbi pointed out, “had only words of praise for Trump.”

In 2016, Norm Coleman, now the national chair of the RJC, wrote in an op-ed for Minnesota’s Star-Tribune, “I won’t vote for Donald Trump…because of who he is. A bigot. A misogynist. A fraud. A bully.” Coleman then added, “Any man who declines to renounce the affections of the KKK and David Duke should not be trusted to lead America. Ever.” Today, however, it’s fine for Trump to embrace the Proud Boys, a group the Anti-Defamation League describes as “violent, nationalistic, Islamophobic, transphobic and misogynistic.” One of the group’s leaders, Kyle Chapman, recently said, “We will confront the Zionist criminals who wish to destroy our civilization” and announced his desire to change the group’s name to Proud Goys. Then there are the Trump advertisements that evoke age-old anti-Semitic tropes. How else to interpret the figure of the Jewish Bernie Sanders dangling a Biden puppet? Or the warm welcome the GOP has given the anti-Semitic QAnon conspiracist and soon-to-be Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, who tweeted, regarding that state’s upcoming runoff elections, “Our Senate seats are not up for sale to Soros, Bloomberg, Hollywood, and Stacey Abrams.”

Another group that appears OK with the anti-Semitism-for-pro-Israelism trade-off, alas, is Israeli Jews, among whom Trump’s 70-13 percent polling matches his support among evangelicals. One can confidently predict that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Republicans will resort to demagoguery every time the Biden administration does not defer to the Likud party’s racist and reactionary priorities. Theatrics aside, right-wing Israelis have nothing to worry about. The only weapon in the US arsenal that could conceivably persuade Israel to reconsider its democratic death march toward permanent apartheid would be the conditioning of US aid on a 180-degree reversal of its current political path. But Biden rejects this notion out of hand.

In addition, much of the Arab world is focused on the threat from Iran and is now willing to entertain peace with Israel. This has left the Palestinians with little leverage to achieve any independent political rights, whether via statehood or some other institutional arrangement. After longtime Palestinian peace negotiator Saeb Erekat died recently, his family received condolences from former diplomats and Jewish peace groups. They might as well have been mourning the prospect of peace itself.
Should the Left Launch an American Labor Party?

Yes!

P A U L  B L E S T

Joe Biden lost Florida by more than double the margin that Hillary Clinton did in 2016. Democrats lost at least five seats in the Florida House, and Republicans defeated two Democratic members of Congress in South Florida. An amendment to increase the minimum wage to $15 per hour, however, won by 22 points.

Florida isn’t alone. Arizona voters approved a tax increase on people making over $250,000 a year to fund public education in the wake of last year’s teachers’ strikes, and in Colorado paid family and medical leave passed with 58 percent of the vote. In both states, the measures passed with a larger share of the vote than Biden got.

There were disappointments, of course—the success of Prop 22 in California and the defeat of the fair tax plan in Illinois. But across the country, policies supported by the left and labor groups have proved more popular than the Democratic Party. Combine the dissatisfaction with Democrats with the dislike of the two-party system (57 percent of Americans believe the country needs a third major party, a September Gallup poll found), and you have the conditions for an actual labor party to emerge and compete against the two parties of capital.

Since American Federation of Labor founding president Samuel Gompers and his allies stifled the nascent movement for a labor party in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Democratic Party has ostensibly been the party for workers. And yet its alliance with labor has always been one of conflicts and contradictions—first with the anti-union, anti-civil-rights efforts of the Democrats in the Jim Crow South and more recently as the party embraced corporatism.

The arrangement isn’t working for unions. Nearly a third of US workers belonged to a union in the mid-1960s, but after 50 years of decline, union membership stood at just 10.3 percent in 2019. The pandemic’s devastation of the restaurant and hospitality industries is likely to do even more damage to workers.

Many Democrats are realizing that the gradual de-emphasis and weakening of labor has cost them electorally. After passing right-to-work laws, Wisconsin and Michigan, once strongholds of labor and the Democratic Party at the presidential level, have become swing states. Bear in mind all of the usual caveats about the unreliability of exit polls, but a New York Times exit poll in Ohio gave Donald Trump a double-digit vote. In both states, the measures passed with a larger share of the vote than Biden got.

With only 10.3 percent of US employees unionized last year, working people clearly need to build and wield greater political power. Toward that end, neither uncritical immersion in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party nor abstention from major-party politics is an effective strategy. Instead we need an inside-outside approach to electoral politics. We have to treat the Democratic Party not as an impenetrable monolith but as contestable terrain. We need an independent infrastructure, with its own staff, funding, base, and political capacity. But we also must reject the role of third-party spoiler and run candidates in primaries to unseat corporate Democrats.

The good news is that this plan is already underway, with a growing list of upset victories. It is not easy to beat the Democratic establishment, but Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Jamaal Bowman, Cori Bush, Rashida Tlaib, and many others have demonstrated that it can be done. Meanwhile, independent groups like Justice Democrats, the Sunrise Movement, Mijente, Dream Defenders, People’s Action, the Working Families Party, Democratic Socialists of America, and sections of the labor movement have revealed the critical role that independent movements and organizations can play in shifting the terms of debate, putting pressure on the power structure, and electing people’s champions. (The organiza-

The Debate

No!

J O N A T H A N  S M U C K E R

The electoral arena matters too much to abandon it to gutless liberals, the extreme right wing, and corporate interests. The problem facing progressive insurgents is how to engage with it. In 1864, abolitionists debated whether to endorse Abraham Lincoln for reelection. (William Lloyd Garrison did so enthusiastically; Wendell Phillips supported a third-party candidacy.) After the New Deal cemented white working-class and Black voters to the Democratic Party, many in the labor movement bemoaned the absence of a true workers’ party. Moderate socialists, like Michael Harrington of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, argued in the 1970s and ’80s that the Democratic Party constituted an American version of European social democratic parties, while a few leftists have experimented—with little success—with various third-party incarnations, from the Peace and Freedom Party in 1967 to the US Green Party, which still putter along today. Versions of these strategies compete for support in today’s reemerging political left.

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You have the conditions for an actual labor party to emerge and compete with the two parties of capital.

Critics within the party. The Green Party, with its overreliance on presidential elections and irrelevance at the local level, is instructive here: If a new party has any chance of succeeding, it needs to be built from the ground up, not the top down.

A labor party could mimic what the Democratic left is currently doing: challenge establishment Democrats in their dominance in the cities and lay the groundwork to organize rural areas and battle Republicans. Taking cues from the Working Families Party and the Vermont Progressive Party, such a party could form an occasional pact with labor-friendly Democrats to hold off a Republican and vice versa. (Another lesson from the WFP, at least in New York state: That alliance will be tenuous, and the Democrats will shiv you at the first opportunity.)

While the Democratic Party is the lesser of two evils, we need a new party concerned with the material well-being of the working class, not with balancing conflicting interests in search of a tent big enough to hold both the sheep and the wolves.

But we’ve seen Democrats betray labor before, most notably in 2009, when the conservative Democratic Blue Dog Coalition killed card check, which would have allowed workers to avoid NLRB-administered elections on union representation if a majority of people in a unit indicated support for forming a union. And despite the best efforts of high-profile leaders like Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to reorient the party toward the multiracial working class, it’s obvious where the party’s heart is. In September the US Chamber of Commerce—one of the most influential institutions of the conservative movement and capitalism—endorsed 23 freshman House Democrats for reelection along with 29 House Republicans. The message was clear: Business might be better under Republicans and their corporate tax breaks, but it wouldn’t exactly be bad with the other party of capital in power, either.

There are significant obstacles to starting a third party, including restrictive ballot access laws, the perception that a labor party would hand elections to the GOP, and the intransigence of labor leadership. Any credible effort would need to begin with the most powerful unions in the labor movement as well as the defection of top Democratic critics within the party. The Green Party, with its overreliance on presidential elections and irrelevance at the local level, is instructive here: If a new party has any chance of succeeding, it needs to be built from the ground up, not the top down.

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We have a long way to go, but the insurgency has gained more traction than any other electoral attempt by the left in the past four decades. Our work now is to scale up. With each electoral cycle, we need to recruit more candidates, build stronger organizations, and develop more savvy campaigners and skilled organizers.

We are hitting our stride with a strategy that’s making measurable gains, and that should be argument enough. But let’s address the proposed alternative: exiting the Democratic Party to form our own labor party. The bottom line is that the United States’ winner-take-all voting system presents barriers to the emergence of a competitive third party that are insurmountable for the foreseeable future. A broad left political alignment can win in the US, but neither the Democrats nor a new leftist party can beat the GOP if they’re competing against each other. In US history, only the issue of slavery was sufficiently disruptive to give rise to a new party that could contend for majority support. And immediately afterward, the system contracted to two parties. Even the Great Depression—when a quarter of the nation was unemployed, millions of people were hungry and homeless, thousands of banks failed, and uprisings of the unemployed shook the political establishment—led to the transformation of the Democratic Party, not the emergence of another one.

A cursory look at the most recent consequential progressive third-party attempt, the US Green Party, shows why the path leads to a dead end. Ralph Nader had no strategy to win or to build power when he ran in 2000. Bernie Sanders, by running in Democratic presidential primaries, has done more to advance the left than the US Green Party has over its decades-long existence.

And the same thing would happen with any national-scale third party effort. Unless we can organize a successful constitutional convention, third parties are not going to be viable at the national level. And because they’re not viable, they will not attract serious leaders. (Consider Jill Stein and Howie Hawkins.) And without serious leaders, we will never build a mass party.

Fortunately, we don’t have to choose between a fantasy third party and the Democratic Party in its current state. We’re in the process of organizing a force to wrest the helm from the neoliberal old guard. We have a recent example that shows that a successful insurgency within a major party is possible: the Tea Party and Donald Trump. They took over the GOP and won the presidency with an unpopular agenda that excited their core base. Imagine what we can do running on a people’s agenda that enjoys widespread support.

Jonathan Smucker is a cofounder of Pennsylvania Stands Up and the author of Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals.
A Poisoned River

A layer of noxious foam floats on the Yamuna River in New Delhi on November 13. Manoj Mishra of Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan, an organization devoted to reviving the polluted waterway, told CBS News in 2019, “Yamuna is not a river anymore. It’s a collection of 18 drains flowing into it, carrying a toxic cocktail of sewage, chemicals, detergents, industrial waste, and excreta.”

By the Numbers

13 Named storms that developed into hurricanes, the latest of which is Hurricane Iota

12 Average number of named storms per year from 1981 to 2010

5 Named storms that were active at the same time in the Atlantic in September; three named storms formed on September 18 alone

Republican Lawmakers

Republican lawmakers privately say
That Trump is a dangerous galoot.
But asked their opinion in public, they’ll act
Like something has rendered them mute.

Republican lawmakers silent on Trump
On media such as TV
Will, sooner or later, stand to be judged
As almost as guilty as he.

—Meerabelle Jesuthasan
which many call simply “the Junta.” The FOMB is tasked with restructuring the territory’s $72 billion debt; its main tool, a brutal austerity regime. Hundreds of schools have closed, government workers’ pensions are threatened with cuts, municipalities are being defunded, and PREPA is slated to be fully privatized as part of the solution to its $9 billion debt. The fate of PREPA, then, is deeply bound up in the fate of Puerto Rico. The territory is in an exceedingly fragile state after a succession of political and natural disasters in recent years: devastating hurricanes in 2017; a political scandal that led to massive street protests and the resignation of the governor, Ricardo Rosselló, and several of his colleagues last year; and the massive earthquake and a series of aftershocks this January that knocked out the Costa Sur power plant and caused widespread damage.

Figueroa Jaramillo’s confrontational stance against the CEO of PREPA is therefore at the center of a conflict that reveals the ways multinational corporations, aided by the federal government, are using the precarious situation to extract profit through privatization. This privatization scheme, urged on by the unelected FOMB, is speeding up a dangerous deterioration of democracy on the island at a time when it can little stand yet another crisis.

“I see the Fiscal Oversight and Management Board as kind of like the epitome of the neoliberal dream.”

—Ingrid Vila, head of Cambio

Ed Morales teaches at Columbia University’s Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race and is the author of Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico.

The rushed sell-off of the territory’s electrical utility is part of a larger move to gut public goods for private profit. PRIVATIZING Puerto Rico

By Ed Morales

On July 26, Ángel Figueroa Jaramillo, the head of UTIER (Unión de Trabajadores de la Industria Eléctrica y Riego), Puerto Rico’s electrical and irrigation workers’ union, tweeted from one of the island’s power generation stations. From Costa Sur Unit 5, near the southern coast, he posted a video of an open porthole that allowed people to peer into a massive boiler made of decaying metal and see streaking blue and orange flames, the stuff of electric power generation.

“This is the plant that failed on January 7th, 2020,” he wrote—referring to the day a 6.4 earthquake hit southwestern Puerto Rico—“the one José Ortiz said would take a year to repair.” Ever since the quake, Ortiz, then the CEO of the government-owned Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), had been saying the agency did not have the capacity to get the damaged plant back up and running until then. (Ortiz stepped down from PREPA in August.) According to Ruth Santiago, a lawyer who works with renewable energy advocacy groups, Ortiz had been looking into leasing temporary electricity generation from a private company to the tune of $70 million per month. Along with UTIER, the groups that Santiago works with support Queremos Sol, a civil society proposal for a clean energy transition. By posting this video of the generator, back online less than seven months after the earthquake and at half the cost of the proposed private contract, Figueroa Jaramillo was sending a shot across the bow of privatizers like Ortiz, saying, Give us the time and the resources to repair and improve Puerto Rico’s failing infrastructure and stop with the unnecessary contracts that are draining the island of desperately needed resources.

Figueroa Jaramillo’s message—keep public goods public and give Puerto Rico a fair chance to right its economy without punishing austerity—is a popular one on the island, but it hasn’t received the same coverage as the endless parade of government scandals and this year’s fraught gubernatorial contest. Since 2016, when, in response to the island’s spiraling debt, the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) was signed into law, many of its major decisions have been in the hands of the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB), which many call simply “the Junta.” The FOMB is tasked with restructuring the territory’s $72 billion debt; its main tool, a brutal austerity regime. Hundreds of schools have closed, government workers’ pensions are threatened with cuts, municipalities are being defunded, and PREPA is slated to be fully privatized as part of the solution to its $9 billion debt.

The fate of PREPA, then, is deeply bound up in the fate of Puerto Rico. The territory is in an exceedingly fragile state after a succession of political and natural disasters in recent years: devastating hurricanes in 2017; a political scandal that led to massive street protests and the resignation of the governor, Ricardo Rosselló, and several of his colleagues last year; and the massive earthquake and a series of aftershocks this January that knocked out the Costa Sur power plant and caused widespread damage.

Figueroa Jaramillo’s confrontational stance against the CEO of PREPA is therefore at the center of a conflict that reveals the ways multinational corporations, aided by the federal government, are using the precarious situation to extract profit through privatization. This privatization scheme, urged on by the unelected FOMB, is speeding up a dangerous deterioration of democracy on the island at a time when it can little stand yet another crisis.

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ILLUSTRATION BY ADRIÁ FRUITÓS
In the dark: Hurricane Maria destroyed much of Puerto Rico’s electrical grid in 2017, leaving more than a million residents without power for months.

epitome of the neoliberal dream to have a nonelected government body with full authority to protect corporate interests and markets, unaffected by people’s preferences, opinions, and needs,” said Ingrid Vila, the head of Cambio, an organization that promotes sustainable energy in Puerto Rico, in an interview with The Nation.

Figueroa Jaramillo and UTIER, along with other supporters of Queremos Sol, want to bring Puerto Rico and its fossil-fuel-dependent energy infrastructure into the future, but they are up against powerful forces promoting the use of natural gas. The PREPA privatization is a case in point—a push to turn the public utility into a profit-making company for a few outside interests while providing no tangible benefit for the island’s inhabitants. Under the cover of the PROMESA debt restructuring, the government has welcomed an army of high-priced consultants, tax-evading billionaires, and real estate speculators, even as the austerity measures imposed by the oversight board are resulting in a drastic decline in the quality of life for most Puerto Ricans.

So who gains from PROMESA? The major beneficiaries of the FOMB’s debt restructuring, privatization, and austerity-imposing directives are investment companies like Golden Tree Asset Management, Taconic Capital Advisors, Monarch Alternative Capital, their arrays of lawyers and lobbyists (perhaps most notably Proskauer Rose, one of the board’s principal law firms), and the management consultancy McKinsey & Company.

Real estate firms that have been involved in speculation on the island for years, like Caribbean Property Group and Paulson & Co. (owned by 2008 housing crash profiteer John Paulson, with major holdings in hotel and luxury properties), also benefit from PROMESA’s push for outside investment. Local politicians and bureaucrats take advantage of the law’s mandate to shrink the government and defund municipalities. And the effort to privatize PREPA will put money in the pockets of liquefied natural gas (LNG) providers such as billionaire investor Wes Edens’s New Fortress Energy.

But in other ways, the austerity regime that PROMESA has ushered into being is new: The seven voting members of its oversight and management board, chosen by the US president and both houses of Congress, are largely unaccountable to the island’s residents. The board has leeway to make sweeping changes to major aspects of Puerto Rico’s economy, all with the goal of restructuring the island’s debt and ensuring that payments can be fulfilled—not with improving the lives of its inhabitants.

The privatization of PREPA is a major piece of settling that debt. It is one of many government entities that are in the red. Last summer then-Governor Rosselló and many in his administration became embroiled in the so-called Telegramgate scandal, which arose from leaked messages that he and key allies—including his representative on the PROMESA board, his chief of staff, and his secretaries of state and the treasury—exchanged on the chat app Telegram. The chat logs were rife with homophobic remarks and misogynistic slurs and revealed a flippant attitude about the deaths caused by Hurricane Maria, leading to mass protests that ultimately prompted Rosselló’s resignation. But his ouster didn’t come soon enough for PREPA. A year earlier, he signed a bill that would privatize the utility by creating public-private partnerships for power transmission, distribution, and services, including billing and meter reading.

On June 22 of this year, Puerto Rico’s Public-Private Partnerships Authority announced that LUMA, a consortium between Houston-based Quanta Services and Canadian-based ATCO, two firms previously involved in the Keystone XL pipeline, would operate PREPA’s distribution and transmission systems. The contract also includes the retention of North Carolina–based Innovative Emergency Management, a company involved in the responses to Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, apparently to manage the massive input of Federal Emergency Management Agency funds—as much as $18 billion—for repairing and renewing the authority’s systems.

The LUMA consortium was chosen over three other bidders (Duke Energy, Exelon, and PSEG Services) that were announced in January 2019 by the Puerto Rican government. After the cancellation of the disastrous Whitefish contract—the tiny Montana company was awarded $300 million to repair the island’s electrical infrastructure after Hurricane Maria, a task it was apparently unequipped to carry out—and a recent revelation that fossil fuel companies have for years been charging PREPA exorbitant
fees for low-quality oil, the opaque process by which LUMA won the contract has done little to improve public faith in the future of the utility.

The awarding of the LUMA contract has drawn a sustained outcry, not least because of the veil of secrecy that obscured the full scope of the arrangement from public view. “There has been no stakeholder engagement and no public participation, to the point that the documents related to this transaction have not been available until after the transaction was concluded,” said Cambio’s Vila. In an interview with The Nation, Figueroa Jaramillo said that he became aware of LUMA’s selection only on June 12, when a local reporter asked for his reaction, and that the Puerto Rico Energy Board, an independent regulatory body, had knowledge of the agreement as early as May 18 and “had not informed the public.”

The secrecy around the contract is perhaps understandable considering what UTIER lawyer Rolando Emmanuelli Jiménez characterized as its “extremely one-sided” nature, adding that its intent is to deconstruct PREPA and permanently eliminate the public-owned utility. Renewable energy advocates call it a sweetheart deal for ATCO and Quanta, because it requires no initial investment and requires PREPA to pay $125 million a year to the consortium—far more than a properly funded PREPA, utilizing a full complement of local workers, would cost to operate. Emmanuelli Jiménez sees the LUMA agreement as nothing more than a windfall for high-salaried executives. “Six of them will earn more than $400,000 per year, two more than $600,000, and in PREPA now, the biggest wage earner is José Ortiz at $250,000. So you can see the level of wealth they’re looking for in this transaction,” he noted.

“PREPA will be paying the $125 million [to LUMA], so if you have a bankrupt utility that now has a deficit, how do you cover that?” asked Santiago, the lawyer supporting Queremos Sol. “Either the Puerto Rico government has to pay for it, which will mean tax increases or taking away money from another public service, or you increase rates, which is the more likely thing.” Citing a report by London Economics International based on figures from the existing restructuring support agreement of the PREPA debt plan, Santiago estimated that rates for consumers would increase to as much as 27.8 or 30 cents per kilowatt hour, “even with the investment of federal funds”— which would give Puerto Rico some of the most expensive electricity in the country. (New York’s electricity cost consumers 17.9 cents per kilowatt hour in 2019, and most states’ rates are much lower.) A report last year by Baruch College sociologist Héctor Cordero-Guzmán stressed that rate increases affect “the poor and vulnerable more as a proportion of their incomes.” According to the study, which used rate increases in PREPA’s 2019 restructuring support agreement as a guideline for LUMA pricing, “the average household in the bottom 20% of the income distribution will pay, after the fourth increase, an average of $991.25 per year in electrical charges”—a hefty bill, given that the island’s median annual household income is only $20,166, much lower than that of any state.

ON TOP OF THE LOOMING rate increases, there’s the issue of what will happen to PREPA’s 8,000 workers, more than half of whom are members of UTIER. Despite LUMA’s stated intention to hire much of the existing PREPA workforce, there is no requirement that it do so, and those who are hired will lose their seniority as PREPA workers, their collective bargaining agreement, and medical insurance for preexisting illnesses. There’s also no guarantee that LUMA will assume their pension payments, a lifeline for many of these public sector workers. A sticking point for Emmanuelli Jiménez and Santiago is the pension payments, a lifeline for many of these public sector workers. A sticking point for Emmanuelli Jiménez and Santiago is the many provisions in the contract that LUMA can use to terminate the deal through its force majeure clause. To give just one likely example, if there is another major hurricane (a certainty for the region), LUMA could walk away, leaving Puerto Rico to pick up the pieces of whatever electrical provision remains.

At a hearing in late July of the House Committee on Natural Resources, Puerto Rico Public-Private Partnerships Authority executive director Fermín Fontanés, one of Rosselló’s last appointments before he was forced from office, claimed that the clause was standard and that “this [hurricanes] is what the LUMA team excels at. These are the companies that are called in to work in disasters not only in the United States but all over the globe.” Santiago was more skeptical. “Under no stretch of the imagination is it a standard clause. It’s the broadest I’ve seen,” she told The Nation. “A change of law can serve as the basis not to provide service. They have experience responding to hurricanes, and that’s why they’ll find a way out.”

Emmanuelli Jiménez and other advocates don’t see how the contract and PREPA policy conform to the law—passed with much fanfare under the Rosselló administration—that aims to convert Puerto Rico’s energy production to 100 percent renewable power by 2050. Queremos Sol, the civil society proposal that includes signatories like Vila, Santiago, Figueroa, and Arturo Massol, director of the legendary alternative energy and cultural center Casa Pueblo, has long called for solar rooftop structures and battery packs to decentralize the energy system and provide renewable, clean electricity. “I don’t see anything in the contract that gives LUMA incentive to implement that,” Emmanuelli Jiménez said. “Right now we have 2.3 percent renewable. It will be impossible to meet the benchmark of 40 percent by 2025 because the contract for Eco-Electrica [an LNG provider] is supposed to generate 20 percent of energy until 2032.”

The Federal Emergency Management Agency recently awarded $9.6 billion toward LUMA’s grid modernization plan for PREPA, which calls for an increase in fossil fuel infrastructure for liquefied natural gas. Since mainland US fracking now pro-
“PROMESA, the law, talks about preserving essential services, but they’re not defined.”

—Nicole Díaz González, Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico

The privatization of Puerto Rico’s electrical utility has been at the heart of the FOMB’s agenda since the board’s inception, but if it succeeds, it will be traveling down well-trodden but perilous roads. In the past few decades, Puerto Rico has attempted several times to privatize its Aqueduct and Sewer Authority, creating opportunities for higher-priced private water distribution systems. It has privatized San Juan’s Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport, handing it over to the Mexican company Aerostar. The privatization of its health care system in the 1990s caused the eventual deterioration of an innovative decentralized system of local health care clinics. It has privatized the tolling system on its highways; the authority that operates the ferries between the main island and two small islands, Vieques and Culebra, which serves mostly lower-income Puerto Ricans; and even the beaches, which have long been open to all Puerto Ricans. In April, the FOMB ordered the privatization of the government-owned public television station. With schools shuttered due to Covid-19, the effort to close public schools and allow for more charter schools has stalled, and the education secretary who oversaw that effort, Julia Keleher, will face trial next year on several counts of fraud.

PROMESA has only increased the push to privatization. Many of the sources I spoke with felt that the FOMB has created a kind of dark parody of what democracy is supposed to be. “PROMESA, the law, talks about preserving essential services, but they’re not defined,” said Nicole Díaz González, who works with Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico, which assists people in danger of losing their homes in the island’s accelerating mortgage crisis. In May, Representative Raúl Grijalva of Arizona put together legislation that, among other reforms, would force the FOMB to define essential services. Days later, FOMB executive director Natalie Jaresko refused to do so, saying it would give the impression that the board should “only limit themselves to subsidize the minimum required government services.”

Vila said the LUMA contract was even worse because of PROMESA: Previous privatization deals, like the one for the San Juan airport, at least required a sizable upfront investment. LUMA’s does not. “The deals made before PROMESA, like the one for the Aqueduct and Sewer Authority, failed. They actually left us with two EPA consent decrees,” she said. “But in that case, when there was a change in administration, the government was able to cancel that contract. Since the LUMA contract is incorporated into the FOMB fiscal plan, I don’t know if a new government has the authority to cancel it unilaterally.”

Díaz and others said that in the PROMESA era, even normal legislative proposals lack a rigorous debate process, and what reaches the floor has already been affected by what legislators believe will fly in the current atmosphere. “At the beginning with the FOMB, there was an attitude of ‘Let’s see what you’re going to do, and I’ll tell you if that complies,’” said Emmanuelli Jiménez. “Now the attitude is ‘No, you have to do this, and [the FOMB is] not going to give you the budget if you don’t.’ From the onset of the pandemic until now, [the FOMB has] written more than 200 letters saying, ‘This yes, this no, this you can do, this I prohibit, I will revoke this.’”

The distortion of the democratic process is also playing out in the strange theater between the government and the board. At times the government resists it for political purposes, while the FOMB wants to shift the onus of imposing austerity onto the government so that it can act as the impartial arbiter as the government endures scandal after scandal. “I think that the Junta has served as an experiment with another form of governing, a mode of governing that is more comfortable for the local government,” said Adriana Godreau-Aubert, the head of Ayuda Legal. “For the local government, it’s more convenient not to have to define essential services and push austerity. They hang back and say, ‘Someone else can do that.’”

But as the PREPA privatization moves forward, the FOMB is faltering. In July, FOMB chair José Carrión and member Carlos García—both suspected of conflicts of interest because of their previous involvement with, respectively, the Government Development Bank and the Puerto Rican bank Santander, which was instrumental in accumulating the $72 billion debt in the first place—announced their resignations from the board. In August a third member, José Ramón González, also previously involved with Santander, stepped down. In fact, all of the board members’ terms were up over a year ago; they have remained in place only because Trump did nothing to start the process to replace them.

In Congress, Grijalva has proposed amendments to PROMESA that would prohibit conflicts of interest among FOMB members; allow federal funding for the board, which is currently paid for by the Puerto Rican people; promote economic growth; improve access to information; provide relief from some of the unsecured public debt; and restart a comprehensive public audit of the debt. A Democratic-controlled Senate—still possible given Georgia’s two runoff elections in January—could make some of these reforms a reality.

Still, they are reforms and would not change the antidemocratic nature of the FOMB and its control of government expenditures. Economist Stephanie Kelton, the author of the best-selling book The Deficit Myth, said she is convinced that under modern monetary theory, the Federal Reserve could easily issue $100 billion to Puerto Rico and wipe out its debt—which would be much more efficient in
helping to create real internal economic development. It would make sense for US voters to push their representatives to investigate this, not only for the relief it would provide to Puerto Ricans but also for the precedent it would set for the rest of the country. This spring, as state economies shuddered to a halt during the coronavirus lockdowns, Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell began muttering that states should “declare bankruptcy.” As the pandemic continues to ravage the country and many states’ debt burdens are skyrocketing, it’s not impossible to imagine Republicans trying to impose fiscal control boards on underwater states.

Fiscal oversight boards have a long history in the United States, going back to the ones imposed on local jurisdictions in Missouri in the wake of the fiscal crises of the 1870s. They were used during the Great Depression in states like Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Oregon, and the oversight board imposed on New York City in the 1970s was key to cementing the idea that government borrowing to stabilize social programs is irresponsible and detrimental to economic development. Detroit filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy in the early 2010s (something Puerto Rico, as a territory, doesn’t have access to), putting the city at the mercy of a draconian debt restructuring regime. More recently, several states—including Connecticut, Illinois, and New Jersey—have been teetering toward fiscal collapse, while California, which closed a $54 billion deficit in June, faces a renewed threat of a $600 million deficit.

The coronavirus-induced economic crisis and the hard line the Trump administration has taken toward supplying desperately needed relief funds to localities is placing a huge swath of Americans at risk of the imposition of fiscal supervision and its attendant austerity policies.

The warm glow of Puerto Rico’s 2019 summer rebellion has dimmed a bit, and Governor Wanda Vázquez’s strict curfew to control the spread of Covid-19—the strictest in all the states and territories—has had a chilling effect on street protest, outside of some interventions by Figueroa Jaramillo’s UTIER and a Socialist Workers Movement—led attempt to shut the San Juan airport to visitors, many of whom are mainlanders who refuse to wear masks. After losing the New Progressive Party (PNP) primary to Pedro Pierluisi this year, Vázquez’s term is nearing its end, but Puerto Rico’s long-term problems remain.

Meanwhile, the Puerto Rican government is again up to its ears in scandal, with an independent investigation of Vázquez under way over her handling of supplies sent there for earthquake relief. The island had to have a second primary voting day in August because many ballots were not delivered on time, causing great embarrassment and calls for the resignation of the election commission’s president. During the summer the PNP’s María Milagros Charbonier, a member of Puerto Rico’s House of Representatives and a onetime Ethics Committee head, was arrested by the FBI for a bribe-and-kickback scheme, and in November another PNP representative, Néstor Alonso, was arrested on similar charges.

As for the governor’s office, Pierluisi—who tried to claim it after Rossello’s departure in what amounted to an attempted coup—won the November 3 gubernatorial election by a percentage point. Pierluisi has been criticized for having been a lawyer for the FOMB as far back as 2017 while working for the firm O’Neill & Borges, which is receiving the second-largest monthly fee for legal services from the FOMB, after Proskauer Rose.

November’s elections in Puerto Rico showed a continuing erosion of the dominance of its traditionally powerful parties, even as voter participation keeps declining. The pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party and the pro-statehood PNP are being increasingly challenged by the Independence Party and the fledgling Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (Citizens’ Victory Movement), which received a combined 28 percent of the vote. (A week after the election, nearly 200 boxes of uncounted votes were found, making the winners of some races still unclear.) A PNP-warped referendum on statehood, which framed the question as merely yes or no, leaving out other possible options, received 52 percent yes votes, but as long as McConnell retains control of the Senate, congressional action on the issue remains highly unlikely. Representatives Nydia Velázquez and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York have proposed a status convention to allow Puerto Ricans to debate their future, which greatly resembles the one proposed by Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana.

With Trump’s departure from the White House imminent, Puerto Rico’s fate remains unclear. On September 18, in what was interpreted as a gambit to gain Puerto Rican votes in Florida, Trump announced the approval of $12.8 billion in aid to rebuild the electrical power system and the education system. But this “aid,” unlikely to be reassessed by Democrats in what will be an extremely difficult transition of power, is merely a fast-tracking of funds for LUMA’s takeover of PREPA, a spur to the privatization of one of Puerto Rico’s most important public services. “This commitment,” LUMA said in a statement, “is a crucial step in carrying out the transformation of the electric grid on the island.”

The coronavirus-induced economic crisis is placing a huge swath of Americans at risk of austerity policies.

Sleeping giant: 2019’s massive protests in response to the Telegramgate scandal showed the power and potential of civil society to demand change.
Consolidation has left the US with a health care system built for profit over care.

Since 2005, more than 170 rural hospitals have closed nationwide.

Health care companies claim austerity is the only way forward, as the cancellation of elective procedures and appointments eat into their profits.

The numbers tell a different story.

Our view is it’s been a long-held goal of theirs to restructure the health care industry in order to produce more profits.

There once was a time when hospitals were community-controlled enterprises, with locally elected community boards. And their mission was to really protect the health of the community they served.

Now with so many mergers and acquisitions, fewer and fewer people control the decisions about public health.

Libby Devlin, National Nurses United
The economic pressures and opportunities of the pandemic appear likely to consolidate the industry further, creating less access to care and higher prices for what is available.

Letting pharmaceutical companies test vaccines separately, as opposed to against one another in a master protocol, allows each company to keep tighter control on its patented drug—at the expense of expediency, efficacy, and safety.

In the absence of a vaccine, much hope has been pinned on the Covid-19 treatment remdesivir. The drug giant Gilead is exclusively producing it in the US, though remdesivir was developed in part by federal agencies. That monopoly has limited supply and raised prices.

The monoclonal antibodies President Donald Trump credited for his Covid-19 “cure” are set to be similarly hampered by production monopoly—though the federal government can work around patent monopolies by licensing drugs to boost production.

These companies are inherently incentivized to maintain a monopoly on these drugs so that they can price gouge. The federal government, though, is consenting to this.

We need to mobilize for this emergency. The basic failure to think outside this monopolist mindset is a public health threat.

James Krellenstein, cofounder, Prep4All and member, Covid-19 Working Group New York
When the pandemic first hit, the concern was less with insurers or pharmaceuticals, and more with the country’s limited hospital capacity.

Meanwhile, private equity investments in health care have exploded.

This consolidation is in the regulatory purview of the Federal Trade Commission, with one big caveat:

If either hospital group involved in a deal has fewer than 100 beds, the agency won’t challenge a merger.

That means no oversight of small community hospital takeovers.

Solving the hospital monopoly problem would really go a long way to making our health care system more affordable and more equitable.

Even after the pandemic is behind us, these rural communities will not have easy-to-access and affordable health care.

One out of every five rural hospitals was already at risk of closing because of the existing financial pressures.

The fear is that the pandemic would put them more at risk of either closing or putting themselves on the market to be acquired by a larger and more profitable health care system.
All the while, health care executives are receiving exceptional payouts: Of the top 100 highest paid US CEOs in 2019, 19 head health care companies.

1. Gilead Sciences
   Daniel O'Day
   $29.1 million

10. HCA Healthcare
   Samuel Hazen
   $17.2 million

12. Eli Lilly
   David Ricks
   $16.6 million

But since the pandemic struck, many hospitals and staffing firms have saved money and driven profits in part by cutting pay, benefits, workers and safety equipment.

At the hospital where Marissa Lee has worked for 17 years, some nurses are given one N95 mask every three days.

I have seen it go from patient-centered care to paper-centered care. It’s all about the money. How many people can we get in, and how fast can we move them out?

There’s an expectation to take a bigger load of patients. With these staffing shortages, we are functioning with the bare minimum.

This pandemic has given everybody working in a hospital a total reality check.

MARISSA LEE, LABOR AND DELIVERY NURSE, OSCEOLA REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER, KISSIMMEE, FLA.

As the country faces surging rates of infection and hospitalization, the health care systems in some areas are already overtaxed.

Even Wisconsin, which hasn’t had a rural hospital closure since 2011, had to gird its safety net with a 530-bed field hospital.

The past two decades of health care consolidation have left the US especially vulnerable to the effects of this pandemic.

What was efficient for profits has proved fragile for patients.

This was made possible by a grant from the Economic Security Project.
Playing Games With Public Health Data

BY TIM SCHWAB
Perennial feature of the COVID–19 pandemic has been the guessing game of whether things are getting better or worse—and how policy approaches (masks, shutdowns) and changes in the weather will affect the coronavirus. Dozens of research institutes have published educated guesses about what’s coming next, but none have had the impact or reach of the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.

In the early days of the pandemic, the IHME projected a far less severe outbreak than other models, which drew the attention of Donald Trump, who was eager to downplay the danger. At a March 31 press briefing, the White House’s coronavirus response coordinator, Debbie Birx, with the president at her side, used IHME charts to show that the pandemic was rapidly winding down.

“Throughout April, millions of Americans were falsely led to believe that the epidemic would be over by June because of IHME’s projections,” the data scientist Youyang Gu noted in his review of the institute’s work. “I think that a lot of states reopened based on their modeling.”

The IHME brushed aside the widespread criticism that emerged—“Many people do not understand how modeling works,” its director, Chris Murray, explained in a Los Angeles Times op-ed—and continued to push headline-grabbing projections that drew alarm from its peers. For example, while many researchers limit their projections to a few weeks into the future, Murray used his regular appearances on CNN to chart the course of the pandemic many months in advance, putting the IHME’s highly contested estimates in a position to guide policymaking ahead of other models.

“It seems to be a version of the playbook Trump follows,” says Sam Clark, a demographer at Ohio State University. “Absolutely nothing negative sticks, and the more exposure you get, the better, no matter what. It’s really stunning, and I don’t know any other scientific personality or organization that is able to pull it off quite like IHME.”

The institute’s uncanny resilience, unconventional methods, and media savvy have long made it controversial in the global health community, where scholars have watched its meteoric rise over the past decade with a mix of awe and concern. Years before Covid, the IHME gained outsized influence by tracking hundreds of diseases across the planet and producing some of the most cited studies in all of science.

But it has also spawned a legion of detractors who call the IHME a monopoly and a juggernaut and charge the group has surrounded itself with a constellation of high-profile allies that have made it too big to peer review, the traditional method of self-regulation in science. Fueled by more than $600 million in funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—a virtually unheard-of sum for an academic research institute—the IHME has outgrown and overwhelmed its peers, most notably the World Health Organization (WHO), which previously acted as the global authority for health estimates.

Thanks to $600 million from the Gates Foundation, the IHME can make its own rules.

“It’s quite impossible to criticize or indeed comment on [the IHME’s] methods, since they are completely opaque.”

—Max Parkin, former WHO cancer epidemiologist

Today the IHME’s sprawling estimates have become the gold standard for understanding an increasingly broad array of topics related to health and development—particularly in the data-poor developing world, where record keeping is sparse. Its website offers interactive maps that allow users to drill down to virtually any village in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, to find out how many years of education people have; how malaria, HIV, and lower respiratory infections are changing over time; who has access to piped water; or how many men are circumcised. These estimates—educated guesses, really—help guide billions of dollars in aid spending and tell health ministers, charities, researchers, and journalists where things are getting better or worse.

“In a relatively short period of time, the IHME has exerted a certain kind of hegemony or dominance on global health metrics production,” says Manjari Mahajan, a professor of international studies at the New School. “It’s a kind of monopoly of knowledge production, of how to know global health trends in the world. And that produces a concentration of...power that should make anybody uncomfortable.”

Critics say this monopoly power can be seen in the ways the IHME appears to play by a different set of rules from the rest of the scientific community. Many describe its estimates as a black box.

“It’s quite impossible to criticize or indeed comment on their methods, since they are completely opaque,” says Max Parkin, from the International Network for Cancer Treatment and Research.

In 2019, Peter Byass, then a professor of global health at Sweden’s Umeå University, told The Nation, “From a scientific point of view, that makes it impossible for anyone to replicate or verify the estimates.”

Despite such criticisms, the IHME’s dominion keeps expanding—thanks in large part to Richard Horton, the ed-
The Bill chill: Some experts are reluctant to criticize the IHME for fear of upsetting Bill Gates, whose foundation is one of the most important funders in global health.

“Chris issupergood, but he likes controversy—and he doesn’t back down.”

—Bill Gates

Murray is the IHME’s driving force and a towering figure in the world of global health—one of the rare scientists about whom biographies are written while they are still alive.

The 2015 book Epic Measures: One Doctor. Seven Billion Patients, by Jeremy M. Smith, describes Murray’s approach to health estimates as an extension of his medical training. Instead of treating individual patients, he’s diagnosing the globe, using Big Data to show governments and aid groups which diseases need the most attention and money.

Gates has long been a fan of Murray’s work, including a 1993 World Bank study he co-authored on the global burden of disease. “I saw…that 12 million children are dying every year,” Gates told Scientific American in 2014. “Wow! It was mind-blowing to me that these preventable diseases—pneumonia, diarrhea, malaria and some other infections that infants get—had such a huge impact. That was the first time it dawned on me that it’s not hundreds of different diseases causing most of the problem—it’s a pretty finite number.”

Based on Murray’s estimates, Gates saw an opportunity to make a big impact, and his foundation went on to donate almost $40 billion to global health and development, becoming one of the most powerful political actors in the field.

Though the WHO already had a robust health metrics program in place, Gates decided to create a competing group in 2007, luring Murray from Harvard to the University of Washington in Seattle, where the Gates Foundation is headquartered. Gates described his support of the IHME as designed “to make sure that everybody views this as the definitive source of information.” (The Gates Foundation and the IHME refused multiple interview requests and did not respond to most questions sent by e-mail.)

A renowned technocrat, Gates undoubtedly liked Murray’s Big Data approach, but may also have seen him as someone cut from the same cloth: entrepreneurial, combative, and hard-driving, someone with the rare combination of technical know-how and business acumen—and a desire to dominate.

“Chris is supergood, but he likes controversy—and he doesn’t back down,” Gates acknowledged in 2014. “For the job of administering the normative database, he’s not absolutely the perfect person.”

To be sure, the field of global health is littered with war stories of researchers who have had run-ins and blowups with Murray, many of them beginning the same way: with a request to Murray to show his work. Colin Mathers is one of them. These days a private consultant, he says that in his previous position managing health statistics at the WHO, he worked as a scientific adviser to the IHME but left because Murray would not share basic information about how he formulated the estimates. “We felt that without access to the data, we couldn’t put our names to the results,” Mathers explains.

Sam Clark of Ohio State University says
that when he asked the institute to provide the source code for a tool it used in its estimates, it engaged in years of “obfuscation and blatant noncooperation” and later published a scientific paper attacking his work.

Another academic researcher asked to speak anonymously, saying he wanted to avoid provoking Murray, who turns “professional disagreements into personal accusations.”

Even the hagiographic Epic Measures describes Murray as believing that “scientific progress relies on picking fights.” The book recounts an incident in which he accused an academic researcher of inflating child mortality estimates 10 percent higher than his own. “He knows that deaths translate into money for child health programs. Deaths are money,” Murray is quoted saying. “Who’s right? That’s the only question. All that matters is being right.”

Yet during the pandemic, the IHME’s early projections proved dramatically wrong—and damaging to public health, some say. But this reckoning has come only because the high stakes of Covid have brought a new level of scrutiny and competition from other researchers and because the institute has had to contend with the emergence of actual data on infections and deaths.

In much of the IHME’s other work in health metrics, these feedback mechanisms do not come to bear in the same way, even though its estimates may be just as influential and, in some cases, just as wrong. This includes its efforts to track hundreds of diseases in the most remote corners of the planet.

“It’s impossible to do what they’re trying to do rigorously… The data is just not there to really quantify the impact of some of these diseases,” notes Ruth Etzioni, a professor of public health sciences at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. “Instead of saying, ‘You know what? That’s not possible,’ [the IHME says,] ‘Here are some numbers.’ You’ve naturally got yourself in an overpromising situation.”

The IHME counters that “no estimate of a problem is interpreted as an estimate of no problem.” And in an e-mail, it defended its estimates as transparent and published with statistical confidence intervals that inform users about the limitations of its work.

But Etzioni sees a pattern in the IHME’s pushing its findings into the limelight while relegating “key caveats and uncertainties” to the fine print. She points out that even when the institute made a major mistake in its early Covid projections—it had been using a bad model—it never issued a clear mea culpa.

“Instead of being straightforward and telling the public that they had a new model, Chris Murray told everyone that the numbers had gone up because we were reopening [from lockdowns] and not socially distancing anymore,” Etzioni says via e-mail. “What happened early in the summer when the IHME revised its estimate downward dramatically (which served the White House and consequently gave the IHME huge press) and…then turned out to be utterly wrong was nothing short of a debacle.”

In a normal year on the planet, approximately 60 million people die. Fewer than half of these deaths, including many in the developing world, will have medical records citing a cause. Knowing why and where people are dying is crucial to improving global health, which is what makes the IHME’s estimates so important and influential.

Gates extols the way the IHME’s work on global health “democratizes information,” bringing together 281,586 global data sources from national health ministries, private insurers, and the scientific literature at a public-facing academic institute.

The problem, according to global health scholars, is that even if all of the IHME’s data were publicly available (it’s not), they would not have the capacity—or the endless philanthropic patronage—to trace the institute’s steps as it turns this mess of numbers into meaning.

“It is a great thing that [Murray] has done this, but there has to be some way of being more democratic,” says Dinesh Mohan of the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi, who adds that the IHME can’t be held accountable in the absence of competitors and peers. “I would love to see more such initiatives and more openness and discussion without being called spoilsports.”

Some critics go further, describing the IHME as data imperialism—a Seattle-based organization, funded by a multi-billionaire, that has too much control over the numbers that guide health planning for poor people of color in the Global South.

Parkin, who formerly worked on cancer estimates for the WHO, says the IHME’s granular mapping of global health gives “the impression that everything is known,” which is “progressively disempowering countries” from improving their own data collection infrastructure—and from building toward a global health landscape driven by actual data instead of estimates.

The IHME pushes back on allegations that it has too much power, insisting that “for nearly all outcomes that we publish, there are alternative sources of estimates.” (Elsewhere, it

“What happened early in the summer when the IHME revised its estimate downward dramatically (which served the White House and consequently gave the IHME huge press) and…then turned out to be utterly wrong was nothing short of a debacle.”

—Ruth Etzioni, professor of public health sciences, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center
has called itself “arguably the de facto source for global health accounting.”

While there are other groups working in health metrics, the IHME’s reputation as a monopoly stems from its ability and willingness to put a number on anything and everything, which has made it a go-to source for researchers, journalists, and governments. Stéphane Helleringer, a demographer at New York University, says the overreliance on the IHME’s numbers may be inadvertently distorting global health through what he calls “circular research.”

Because the IHME often doesn’t have clear data—for example, comprehensive records about malaria deaths in a given region—it makes estimates from other data points, such as the distribution of bed nets that protect people from malaria-carrying mosquitoes. (The more bed nets in a given region, the less malaria there should be.) Helleringer points to a 2015 study that refers to the IHME’s malaria mortality estimates—based in part on bed net distribution—to show that lives are being saved through an aid program that distributes bed nets.

One of the study’s authors, Eran Bendavid from Stanford University’s School of Medicine, doesn’t disagree with the criticism of his research as circular. “This is a real issue for my paper and increasingly for the global health research agenda,” he says via e-mail. “Because data is often scarce, and because IHME produces reams of it for the parts of the world where it is the scarcest, there is an enormous temptation to use their estimates as the gold standard. This is increasingly so as they have gained in prominence and visibility, with (often) multiple Lancet (+ sub-journals) publications weekly. IHME has a lot of talented people, and Bill Gates’ support has enabled them to attract even more top talent, but users of that data should be very cautious in deciding what that data can and cannot be used to infer…. And everyone could do better, including IHME and Lancet, with the recognition that highlighting the limits of their data has a cost to them, so they may be reluctant to accept it.”

For its part, the IHME wouldn’t comment on the study, saying it doesn’t police how its estimates are used.

Bendavid’s study could also be seen as circular in its close orbit around the Gates Foundation, which funds the IHME estimates he used and the aid effort he evaluated, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, to which Gates has given more than $2 billion.

As a leading medical journal, the Lancet is one of the most important venues for researchers to discuss, debate, and debunk developments in health and medicine. And in his time as its editor, Horton has positioned himself as a public intellectual who isn’t afraid to speak truth to power—or to follow the money when it reveals conflicts of interest.

In a 2003 editorial, The Lancet questioned whether Gates was a “philanthropist or commercial opportunist,” observing that his foundation had announced a $100 million charitable donation to fight HIV in India the day before Microsoft unveiled a $400 million investment expanding its market presence in that country.

Six years later, Horton admonished the Gates Foundation for its growing power in global health, writing, “Sometimes [it] doesn’t value…every voice that wants to contribute to the debate about public health.”

Over the past decade, however, mentions of the Gates Foundation have appeared less frequently in The Lancet’s critical commentaries than in its funding disclosures. In 2010 the foundation gave more than $700,000 to the University of North Carolina and the Mater Medical Research Institute to create content for The Lancet, beginning a trend of funding—$13.5 million to Harvard, Johns Hopkins, the WHO, and others—that has reached dozens of publications.

The Lancet has a particularly close relationship with the IHME, Gates’s signature project in science, and some see perverse incentives driving this relationship. Publishing the institute’s influential estimates has brought attention and esteem to The Lancet, whose “impact factor”—a measure of its relative importance in the scientific literature—doubled over the past decade. The IHME boasts that more than 16,000 scientific studies have cited its work. These citations boost The Lancet’s growing impact factor and have also likely increased subscriptions and advertising revenue for its for-profit publisher, Elsevier.

Horton acknowledges the “very special relationship” The Lancet has with the IHME but defends it as good science. “The reason why it’s very important to publish these papers in our journal is because it holds IHME accountable,” he says in an interview. “If you publish a paper in The Lancet…scientists can look at that paper and say, ‘OK, do I think this is high-quality science? Do I agree with what they said? And do I agree with their interpretation?’ And they can write letters to us, and they can say, ‘Actually we strongly disagree with X, Y, and Z,’ and we will publish those letters, and that holds Chris Murray and IHME accountable for their work,” Horton said. “This is the way the science is done. It’s self-corrective…. You publish the best work you can, then you see who over time falls out of view.”

The Lancet also publishes estimates from other research institutes, Horton notes, creating a robust debate that has historically been missing in global health, including during the WHO’s reign as the leading purveyor of estimates. (The WHO and the IHME produced competing estimates for years but recently agreed to work together.)

Yet scholars cite a number of irregularities in The Lancet’s oversight of the IHME, including its peer review process—in which scientists scrutinize another’s work before publication.

“You can’t go through the 5,000 pages of tables and figures for The Lancet and say, ‘I’ve
noticed a mistake on page 3,556, line 25,” said Peter Byass, referring to the IHME’s very long and complex papers. “That’s just not going to happen.” Nevertheless, The Lancet publishes 5,000-page appendices that are labeled as having been peer reviewed.

Patrick Gerland, a demographer in the United Nations’ population division, says The Lancet compounds the problem by sometimes publishing IHME studies on a fast track. “At the end of the day, [the peer-review process] pretends to be a validation of something it is not,” he adds.

Horton says he believes reviewers have “ample time” and notes that the IHME’s studies go through extensive revisions. He also points to another robust accountability measure: the vast network of scientific collaborators who check the institute’s work. “This is not a little cabal of American academics at one university funded by the Gates Foundation,” he said.

Indeed, the IHME boasted in an e-mail of having “more than 4,300 collaborators from 147 countries and territories,” although it refused to disclose their names.

Colin Mathers, echoing many other scholars, calls the network “window dressing,” saying that many scientists join simply because doing so allows them to become coauthors on the IHME’s Lancet studies—a feather in any scholar’s cap. “You could sign on as a collaborator to IHME, and they’ll send out draft papers to you,” he explains. “You may or may not read them, you may or may not comment on them, but your name gets to be [included as] an author in the end, and IHME can then claim there are 1,200 people from [various] countries who have reviewed all the results. I don’t know how The Lancet squares that…with the standard scientific authorship requirements.”

Standard ethical guidelines in science limit authorship to those researchers who make specific, meaningful contributions. Listing hundreds of authors, as the IHME does in The Lancet and sometimes in other journals, is extremely uncommon. (The Lancet did not respond to questions about authorship.)

“When you have this many people and their roles are ill-defined, you’re losing the accountability and responsibility for it,” says David Resnik, a bioethicist at the National Institutes of Health. “It’s not really telling [you] who did what or who did more.”

The IHME insists that it complies with proper authorship guidelines, but days before offering this defense—and shortly after The Nation raised questions—it issued an internal memo announcing new guidelines and a strict new auditing process.

Perhaps the most striking irregularity in The Lancet’s relationship with the IHME concerns the $100,000 Roux Prize, which Horton accepted in 2019—and which prompted alarm even within the institute.

“I would like to understand what the long term thought process was in awarding Horton the prize,” one IHME employee said in an internal e-mail, “and how we are expected to defend that decision as staff when criticized for buying our way into the Lancet rather than being published based on the merit of our work.”

Horton argues that the award came from the IHME’s board of directors, which he views as independent of the institute. He notes that IHME board member Dave Roux, a cofounder of the private equity firm SilverLake, funds the award.

“I see it as completely separate, personally,” Horton says.

So does the IHME, which offered its own parsing: “IHME does not award the Roux Prize; it is the custodian of the prize.”

Before becoming the IHME’s director in 2007, Murray worked at the WHO from 1998 to 2003. But he subsequently became one of its fiercest critics, arguing that its work is compromised by political influence from member states, which sometimes have an interest in presenting their countries’ health as better than it really is.

“For health evidence to be useful, it also must be credible, generated by a scientific process unimpeded by political, financial, or other types of interference,” states the IHME’s website, which cites impartiality as one of the institute’s five guiding principles.

It’s a bold proclamation, given the political and financial interests surrounding the IHME’s work—from the Gates Foundation, one of the most powerful actors in global health, to Big Pharma and Big Oil, which have been quietly pouring millions of dollars into the institute for years.

An internal memo that Murray sent in early 2018 announced the creation of the IHME’s “client services unit” and added, “This development has the strong support of IHME’s Board, of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and of the University, all of which believe that engagement with the private sector will increase the global impact and reach of our work, as this sector has great influence over health.”

Murray went on to sign a three-year, $1.5 million deal between the IHME and Chevron, one of the world’s largest fossil fuel companies, “to establish the Health Measurements Strategy for Global Corporations Program.” The same month, he published a paper in The Lancet Planetary Health announcing a new initiative looking at the effects of pollution and climate change—two areas where Chevron has had huge and negative effects on human health. Murray made no disclosures about his ties to Chevron in this or subsequent papers, though most academic journals have transparency requirements regarding financial conflicts of interest.  

Peer review?

In 2019, Lancet editor Richard Horton (below) was nominated for the $100,000 Roux Prize.

Horton acknowledges the “very special relationship” that his journal has with the IHME but defends it as good science.
Since 2014, the IHME has contracted extensively with pharmaceutical companies—Merck, Pfizer, Novo Nordisk, Gilead, GlaxoSmithKline, Novartis, and others—that research and develop treatments for the diseases the IHME tracks around the globe, including Covid-19. It does not appear to have ever disclosed these ties in scholarly work or in the many media appearances that Murray has made during the pandemic.

Yet by far the largest influence over the IHME’s work comes from the Gates Foundation. A spokesperson there told The Nation that the foundation has given $613 million to support the IHME through late 2019 and an additional $210 million to construct a building to house the institute and other global health researchers. These donations account for the large majority of the IHME’s funding, even though it stresses its diverse roster of sponsors, including the National Institutes of Health, which public records suggest has given it around $10 million in grants.

A public records request revealed one funding agreement in which the Gates Foundation was given approval over new hires for the IHME’s executive leadership team as well as oversight of press releases related to the work it funds (which is to say, most of the institute’s research).

Gates’s influence over the IHME can also be seen in a map of Seattle. Though the institute is part of the University of Washington, it is was until very recently far off campus, a few blocks from the Gates Foundation’s headquarters. (According to Epic Measures, the IHME’s first temporary offices were in the foundation’s former headquarters.) One former IHME employee, asking to speak anonymously, says the foundation regularly requests bespoke charts and graphs for Gates’s presentations and conferences, prompting entire teams of IHME researchers to drop everything else.

“It really did feel like we were consultants for the Gates Foundation, and the scientific methods we used were often in service of getting the results we wanted...or the story he [Murray] thought the Gates Foundation wanted,” the source continues. “There are thousands of hours cumulatively spent each year just on one-off requests from Bill Gates that trickle through from the Gates Foundation.”

The IHME also publishes favorable research about its sponsor, estimating that the Gates Foundation has saved 1.5 million children through its vaccination efforts and helped prevent more than 100,178 HIV infections in India through another charitable program.

The foundation, in turn, uses its bully pulpit to elevate the IHME’s work. Gates’s annual splashy Goalkeepers event, for example, features keynote speakers like Barack Obama and lauds on IHME estimates to chart progress in global health and to lobby for the next places where aid groups and governments should spend their money.

Marlee Tichenor of the University of Edinburgh sees a fundamental conflict of interest in the Gates Foundation’s role as a leading “financier of global health initiatives” while controlling the “means by which we judge whether they succeed or not.” It’s a criticism that applies more broadly to all of the foundation’s work in global health, given that it funds many of the researchers, academic journals, and think tanks best positioned to evaluate its work—or to criticize its influence.

“There is not a single organization working in global health that is not somehow related—most likely financially related—to the Gates Foundation,” says Adam Moe Fejerskov of the Danish Institute for International Studies. “And, of course, that is a huge problem, because it makes us ask who is setting the agenda in terms of what is being researched and what is not being researched.”

This summer, The Lancet published an IHME study projecting that the human population would peak far earlier (2064) and at a lower level (9.73 billion) than the prevailing estimates from the United Nations had indicated. Released with an elaborate press package—including a video endorsement from Horton—the study enjoyed widespread news coverage highlighting some of its more sensational findings, such as Horton’s remark that Nigeria will become a geopolitical rival of the United States over the next century.

More than 170 scholars and advocates signed a letter of complaint to The Lancet (thus far unpublished) citing contradictions and questionable assumptions in the paper, which the signatories say reduced complex demographic issues to simplistic terms. Stuart Gietel-Basten, a demographer at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, observes that even if the letter eventually appears in print—months after the initial Lancet publication—it’s unlikely to have much of an impact. He offers this prediction with the world-weary fatalism not uncommon among scholars who have faced off with the IHME.

“There is this issue of it being almost too big to fail. You’ve got this big journal, lots of people involved,” Gietel-Basten says. “I don’t want to say it’s a gravy train, but it’s a...
big thing. It’s got so many people involved in it. But you think about it as, ‘How would we express our concerns? What are the mechanisms by which we can express our concerns?’”

Jeremy Shiffman, a political scientist at Johns Hopkins University, coauthored a commentary in The Lancet this spring that examined the “uneven playing field” surrounding the IHME and found that “many valid concerns of critics are being overlooked because metrics proponents—including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the IHME, and The Lancet—wield far more power than critics.”

Even so, criticism of the institute is long-standing and well understood by its supporters, including the University of Washington and the Gates Foundation. In 2012 the two commissioned an external IHME evaluation, which found that the institute is “not consistent in when and to whom it shares methods, data sources, authorship and this is perceived as not being transparent” and that “the extensive resources of IHME relative to other institutions have created an unhealthy imbalance in the field.” The evaluators called on the Gates Foundation, as the IHME’s primary funder, to improve its accountability and transparency. The foundation would not comment on if or how it had done so.

Peter Byass of Umeå University told The Nation that if the IHME were publicly funded, it would have to operate in a far more open and accountable manner. “If you’ve got enough billions, you can set up a foundation, and you can make the rules entirely as you wish,” he said. The Gates Foundation “is both the rule maker and the rule keeper, in terms of how they choose to scrutinize grant holders. That’s their privilege, because that’s where they are in the marketplace.”
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Fort Everywhere

How did the United States become entangled in a cycle of endless war?

BY DANIEL IMMERWAHR

Shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States, a reporter asked Donald Trump if he now considered himself a wartime president. “I do. I actually do,” he replied. Swelling with purpose, he opened a press briefing by talking about it. “In a true sense, we’re at war,” he said. Yet the press and pundits rolled their eyes. “Wartime president?” scoffed The New York Times. “It’s far from clear if many voters will accept the idea of him as a wartime leader.” His “attempt to adopt the military mien raised more than a few eyebrows,” NPR reported.

What few noted at the time is that Trump, of course, was a wartime president, and not in a metaphorical sense.
He presided—and still does—over two ongoing military missions, Operation Freedom’s Sentinel in Afghanistan and Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq and Syria. More quietly, thousands of US troops patrol Africa and in recent years have endured casualties in Chad, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan. US planes and drones, meanwhile, fill the skies and since 2015 have killed more than 5,000 people (and possibly as many as 12,000) in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen.

Why is it so easy to screen these facts out? The relatively low number of US casualties plays an obvious role. Yet surely what matters more is how relentless the slow drip of news reporting is. The United States has been fighting in so many places, for so many vaguely defined reasons, that it’s easier for some to forget the combat altogether and ask instead whether a virus made Trump a wartime leader. In two presidential debates, neither candidate even mentioned the fact that the United States is at war.

But it is, and it’s unsettling to reflect on just how long the country has been. Students who entered college this fall have lived their entire lives during the Global War on Terrorism and its successor campaigns. The decade before that saw American deployments in the Gulf War, the Balkan conflicts, Haiti, Macedonia, and Somalia. In fact, since 1945, when Washington cast itself as the global peacekeeper, war has been a way of life. Classifying military engagements can be tricky, but arguably there have been only two years in the past seven and a half decades—1977 and 1979—when the United States was not invading or fighting in some foreign country.

The question is why. Is it something deep-seated in the culture? Legislators in the pocket of the military-industrial complex? An out-of-control imperial presidency? Surely all have played a part. A revelatory new book by David Vine, The United States of War, names another crucial factor, one that is too often overlooked: military bases. Since its earliest years, the United States has operated bases in foreign lands. These have a way of inviting war, both by stoking resentment toward the United States and by encouraging US leaders to respond with force. As conflicts mount, the military builds more, leading to a vicious circle. Bases make wars, which make bases, and so on. Today, Washington controls some 750 bases in foreign countries and overseas territories.

China, in a telling contrast, has just one foreign base, in Djibouti. And its military confrontations since the 1970s have been almost entirely limited to border clashes and skirmishes over small islands. Though a rising power with a huge military, few qualms about violence, and no shortage of possible enemies, China only recently broke its decades-long streak of not losing any combat troops in action.

Daniel Immerwahr is a professor of history at Northwestern University and the author of How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States.

For the United States, which was fighting in every year of that period, such peace is inconceivable. The question is whether, by retracting its bases, it could cure itself of the scourge of constant war.

It’s easy not to think about the bases. Look at a map of the United States, and you’ll see only the 50 states; you won’t see the hundreds of other sites over which the US flag flies. For those who haven’t served in the military, those tiny dots are barely noticeable. And they are truly tiny: Mash together all of the overseas bases that the US government admits to controlling, and you’d have an area not much larger than Houston.

Yet even a single speck of land controlled by a foreign military can, like a grit of sand in an oyster, be an immense irritant. In 2007, Rafael Correa made this clear when, as president of Ecuador, he faced pressure to renew the lease on a US base in his country. He told reporters that he’d agree on one condition: that he be allowed to put a base in Miami. “If there’s no problem having foreign soldiers on a country’s soil,” he said, “surely they’ll let us have an Ecuadorian base in the United States.” Of course, no US president would agree to such a thing. A foreign military operating a base in Florida or anywhere else in the United States would be an outrage.

As Vine points out, it was precisely this sort of outrage that fueled the creation of the United States in the first place. The British crown did not just burden its colonists with taxes; it viscerally angered them by stationing redcoats in the colonies for a war with France. In the 1760s and ‘70s, alarming reports of assaults, harassment, theft, and rape by the soldiers were common. The authors of the Declaration of Independence denounced the king for “quartering large bodies of armed troops among us” and exempting them from local laws. It is not an accident that the Third Amendment to the Constitution—coming before rights concerning fair trials and freedom from unreasonable searches—is the right not to have soldiers quartered on one’s property in a time of peace.

A country born of hostility to military bases nevertheless quickly began building its own. Vine’s book shows just how central they have been to US history. The national anthem, he notes, recounts the story of an Army base, Fort McHenry outside Baltimore, under siege by British ships in the War of 1812. US coastal defenses kept the British incendiary rockets largely out of range, so that despite a barrage of hundreds of “bombs bursting in air,” at the end of the combat, “our flag was still there.”

The British never took Fort McHenry, but US troops during that war seized bases in Canada and Florida. Andrew Jackson, whose troops won the war’s final battle (fought, awkwardly, two weeks after the peace treaty was signed), followed the peace by building yet more outposts in the South, from which he waged destructive campaigns against Native nations.

You can tell a similar story about the Civil War. It began with a Confederate assault on Fort Sumter, an Army post outside Charleston, S.C. And that wasn’t the only Fort Sumter of the war, as it happens. Just as it did in the War of 1812, the Army used the Civil War as an occasion to push farther into Indian lands. Its volunteer units and other militias fought not only in Georgia and Virginia but also in Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. In March 1864 the Army forced some 8,000 Navajos to march 300 miles to Fort Sumter in New Mexico, where they were incarcerated for four years; at least a quarter died.
Forts, Vine asks.

The answer is obvious yet unnerving: They were military installations. Some, like Fort Sumter in South Carolina, were built on the coast and designed for defense. Yet far more, like Fort Sumter in New Mexico, were placed inland, near Native lands. They were intended not for defense but offense—for fighting, trading with, and policing Indian polities. Today there are more than 400 populated places in the United States whose name contains the word “fort.”

The presence of forts was not limited to North America. As the United States took territories overseas, it built still more bases, such as Fort Shafter in Hawaii, Fort McKinley in the Philippines, and a naval base at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba.

Yet again, the vicious circle held. All over the Philippines archipelago, the Army built forts and camps to extend its reach, and those bases then became tempting targets, such as when a group of 500 irate townspeople in Balangiga stormed an Army encampment in 1899 and killed 45 soldiers there. That attack provoked a bloody campaign of slaughter, with US soldiers under orders to kill any Filipino male over the age of 10 who didn’t turn himself over to the government.

Four decades later, the pattern continued. Japan launched an all-out attack on a series of US bases in the Pacific, most famously Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The United States responded by entering World War II, napalming dozens of Japanese cities, and dropping two atomic bombs.

The war, by its end, had positioned the United States as “the most powerful nation, perhaps, in all history,” as President Harry Truman put it in a radio address in 1945. Measured in bases, this was certainly true. The number of outposts the United States built during World War II “defies the imagination,” one international relations scholar wrote at the time. An oft-cited count puts the US overseas base inventory at 30,000 installations on 2,000 sites by the end of the war. The troops posted to them were so entranced by their sudden access to all corners of the earth that they came up with a graffiti tag, “Kilroy was here,” to proudly mark the many improbable places they’d been. Inhabitants of the base-strewn countries had a different slogan: “Yankee, go home!”

Peace did not come, however, and the reason it didn’t is that the two superpowers learned to interpret each other as existential threats. Histories often emphasize the role of the diplomat George Kennan in firming up US fears. In early 1946 he sent a highly influential cable arguing at length that the “traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity” could never allow for peace. Moscow was a menace, he argued, and its actions must be systematically opposed.

Less is usually heard about the Soviet side. After Kennan’s long telegram was intercepted, Stalin ordered his ambassador in Washington, Nikolai Novikov, to prepare a parallel assessment, which was ghostwritten by Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet minister of foreign affairs. Molotov believed the United States was bent on “world domination” and preparing for a “future war” with the Soviet Union. The evidence? He pointed to the hundreds of overseas bases Washington held and the hundreds more it sought to build.

That’s the thing about bases, Vine argues. In the eyes of US leaders, they seem innocuous. But for those living in their shadow, they are often terrifying. Khruščev would make that point, when vacationing on the Black Sea, by handing his guests binoculars and asking them what they saw. When they replied that they saw nothing, Khruščev grabbed the binoculars back,

**Rhyme**

Body, teach my mind to age.
Rage has taught me nothing.
Pain has taught me only to rage at pain. Blame has taught me nothing. But I still blame.

Here lies one taken in their prime.

Body, teach my mind to bury prime where I have buried rage:
above blame and pain, above age and mind and my, body—
time, before that word their one
repeated ending makes, remains.

MARIO CHARD
the country become an American colony

resentment. “It is unconscionable to let
but as usual, the presence of US troops
in other nations. Kuwait in 1990, the United States moved
of military bases in other nations.

Khrushchev offered to deploy missiles to Soviet bases in Cuba. Beyond protecting an ally, Khrushchev saw
this as a way to give his adversaries “a little
taste of their own medicine.” As he later
explained, “the Americans had surrounded
our country with military bases and threaten-
ed us with nuclear weapons, and now
they would learn just what it feels like to
have enemy missiles pointed at you.”

They did learn, and they were horr-
fied. John F. Kennedy moaned that it
was “just as if we suddenly began to put a
major number of MRBMs [medium-range ballistic missiles] in Turkey.” “Well, we
did, Mr. President,” his national security
adviser reminded him. In fact, Kennedy
was the one who had sent Jupiter missiles
to America’s Turkish bases. After a 13-day
standoff—“the closest the world has come
to nuclear Armageddon,” Vine writes—
Kennedy and Khrushchev agreed to disarm
their bases.

Historians call this harrowing event the
Cuban Missile Crisis, but should they? The
name puts the focus on Cuba, implicitly
blaming the near cataclysm on Castro and
Khrushchev. Kennedy’s earlier stationing
of missiles in Turkey slips quietly into the
background of the story, as part of the nat-
ural order of things. After all, the United
States controlled so many armed bases that
Kennedy could forget he had even put mis-
siles in Turkey. Calling the event the Turk-
ish Missile Crisis might better drive home
Vine’s point: There is nothing natural about
a country maintaining an enormous system
of military bases in other nations.

Even after the US bases in
Turkey almost triggered a
nuclear war, military lead-
ers struggled to grasp how
politically volatile bases
could be. When Saddam Hussein invaded
Kuwait in 1990, the United States moved
thousands of troops into Saudi Arabia, in-
cluding to the large Dhabran base on the
country’s east coast. The idea was to use
Saudi bases to push back Hussein’s forces,
but as usual, the presence of US troops
on foreign soil kicked up considerable
resentment. “It is unconscionable to let
the country become an American colony
with American soldiers—their filthy feet
roaming everywhere,” fumed one Saudi,
Osama bin Laden.

“Af ter the danger is over, our forces
will go home,” then—Defense Secretary
Dick Cheney promised the Saudi gov-
ernment. But the troops stayed on after
Hussein’s defeat, and resentment flared. In
1996 a bomb near Dhabran killed 19 US
Air Force personnel. It’s not entirely clear
who was responsible, although bin Laden
claimed responsibility.

Two years later, on the eighth anniver-
sary of the arrival of US troops at Dhabran, bin
Laden’s Al Qaeda set off bombs at the US
Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing
more than 200 people. On September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda hijackers flew planes into the Pentagon (“a
military base,” as bin Laden described it)
and the World Trade Center.

“Why do they hate us?” terrorism ex-
pert Richard Clarke asked after the at-
tacks. Bin Laden’s reasons were multiple,
but bases loomed large in his thought.
“Your forces occupy our countries; you
spread your military bases throughout them; you corrupt our lands, and you
besiege our sanctuaries,” he wrote in his
“Letter to America.”

Can the United States
free itself from
its state of endlessly
recurring war?

Reducing the US military footprint
would help in other ways, too. In his pre-
vious book Base Nation, Vine calculated that
overseas bases cost taxpayers more than
$70 billion annually. In United States of War,
he argues that this figure underestimates
their toll. Because of their propensity to
encourage war, cutting back on the num-
ber of overseas bases would likely reduce
other military costs, putting a further dent
in US taxpayers’ enormous $1.25 trillion
annual military bill. The amount the Unit-
ed States has spent on its post-9/11 wars, Vine
writes, could have funded health care to adult-
hood plus two years of Head Start for every
one of the 13 million children living in pov-
erty in the United States, as well as public
college scholarships for 28 million students,
two decades of health care for 1 million vet-
erans, and 10 years of salaries for 4 million
people working in clean energy jobs.

Was that trade-off even remotely worth
it? By now, a majority of US adults think
the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were not
worth fighting. A majority of veterans feel
that way, too. And what of such countries
as Niger, where Vine counts eight US
bases and where four US soldiers died
in an ambush in 2017? Given that key
senators reported not even knowing there
were troops in Niger, it’s hard to imagine
a groundswell of popular support for the
nebulous mission there.

The public is weary of war and seems
to have little fondness for—or even aware-
ness of—the overseas bases that keep the
fighting going. Trump repeatedly threat-
ened to close some of them to fund his
wall. Vine has little sympathy for the
president but regards Trump’s airing of
“once-heretical views” as symptomatic of
a growing dissatisfaction with the status
quo. The question is whether Joe Biden,
a three-time chair of the Senate Foreign
Relations Committee, will recognize and
respond to that dissatisfaction.

Biden should. We’re long overdue for
a new US foreign policy, one that regards
war as a terrible exception requiring justi-
fication rather than as a taken-for-granted
background condition. Trump was, like
all of his predecessors for decades, a war-
time president. Let’s hope the
coming years bring us something
far rarer: a peacetime one.
The Visible Hand
How monopolies define everyday life in the United States
BY BRYCE COVERT

In the morning, I shower right after I wake up. I choose from a number of products to clean myself, yet they are made by just two companies: Unilever and Johnson & Johnson. I brush my teeth with a toothbrush and toothpaste made by Procter & Gamble but sold under the separate brands Oral-B and Crest. Before I eat breakfast, because I have Type 1 diabetes, I take insulin, a drug that, because of pharmaceutical consolidation and anticompetitive patent hoarding allowed to run amok, cost about $20 for a vial in 1996 but now costs $275. Lunch isn’t any better. The peanut butter for my sandwich almost certainly comes from one of three companies; same with the jelly. We all have “choices,” but do we really get to choose?

Once you put on your “monopoly decoder ring,” David Dayen writes in his new book Monopolized: Life in the Age of Corporate Power, you start to see how this power influences every part of our lives. There’s a baby formula monopoly: Three companies—Abbott Laboratories (which makes Similac), Reckitt Benckiser (which makes Enfamil), and Nestlé—control about 95 percent of the US market. It even follows us after our deaths: Service Corporation International keeps buying up funeral homes and now earns more than $1 out of every $5 in profit from funeral services, and two companies, Hillenbrand and Matthews, make 82 percent of the country’s coffins and caskets.

Some monopolies have become so obvious that everyone can spot them. If you want to fly anywhere in the United States, you basically have four choices, all of which offer increasingly bad service. If you want cable and Internet, you usually have only one or two high-cost options and no power to fight back when the company tells you a technician will be coming anywhere between 8 am and 8 pm to set it up. If you want to search for information or buy something on the
From the Movement for Black Lives to the fight for climate justice, from the unjust immigration regime to the unfinished voting rights struggle, Harris-Perry and Warren talk with leaders and thinkers to find out how to change these systems.

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• System Check is available free in all major podcast apps, including Stitcher, Spotify, RadioPublic, and iHeartRadio. You can also listen from your desktop or laptop: Visit TheNation.com/systemcheck and click the Play button on the audio player to begin.
But monopolies crop up in all sorts of unexpected places. Match Group, the parent company that owns Match.com, also owns OkCupid, Tinder, and Hinge. Berkshire Hathaway, the holding company empire of billionaire Warren Buffett, owns brands as diverse as Duracell, Dairy Queen, Benjamin Moore, and Fruit of the Loom. The coffee brands Caribou, Peet’s, Intelligentsia, and Stumptown are all owned or partly controlled by the European firm JAB.

Our country is saturated with monopolies, but some might ask, does it matter? As Dayen shows, monopolies make it harder for workers to wield power when there are fewer and fewer employers to choose from. They make the economy less dynamic and innovative. They make society less equal, and by amassing so many resources, they are able to amass power to protect those resources. Monopolies are even a threat to our very democracy, drowning out the voices of the people.

Dayen mentions much of this history, but his aim is not simply to recount it or engage in the contemporary debates over the ways monopolies warp our economy and our society; instead, he wants to spark a modern movement through real, human stories. Corporate concentration and antitrust regulation can sound like dry issues. Dayen seeks to remind us of the very real consequences they have in our everyday lives.

The stories he tells can often be heartbreaking. There’s Travis Borkstein, whose son, Tyler Borkstein, died of a heroin overdose at 23 after getting hooked on opioids that were prescribed for his elbow surgery when he was 18. Rather than call an ambulance or take him to a hospital, his mother, who grew up aspiring to join the family business, had to find work at a rental management company that owned his home. “You can’t prepare to lose a child,” Travis Borkstein tells Dayen. “I felt like I failed as a father.”

But the Borksteins were failed by the rampant cartelization and concentration in the pharmaceutical industry: Tyler Borkstein’s death is one of over 200,000 related to opioids since OxyContin, manufactured by one of the Big Pharma companies, was introduced in 1996. OxyContin, Dayen insists, is just one stark example of the dangers in an industry in which, as he puts it, “monopolies at every stage of the supply chain placed their bottom lines ahead of the health of the recipients of those drugs.” For example, “If you have glaucoma, the reason liquid from your eye drops constantly rolls down your cheek is that companies deliberately make the drop larger than the human eye can hold. Every milliliter that falls out of your eye represents a tiny profit, and it adds up.”

Dayen also introduces us to Chris Petersen, a third-generation hog farmer in Iowa whose farm has been so battered by agricultural monopolies that his daughter, who grew up aspiring to join the family business, had to find work at a hotel instead. After several generations of farmers, “I’m it,” he tells Dayen. “This is the dead end. You know, it’s sad.” It’s hard for Petersen to compete with concentrated animal feeding operations, which squash thousands of hogs into giant feedlots without sunlight and with scant room to move, whose cost cutting has sent hog prices plummeting. As Dayen notes, four hog firms control two-thirds of today’s market.

We also meet Kate Hanni, who, with her husband and two children, was stuck in a grounded American Airlines flight in 2006 for nine hours without food or water, watching mothers use barf bags for diapers and others puke into them as the smell of overflowing bathrooms wafted through the cabin. The airline refused to let passengers off because doing so would have cost it money through mandated refunds. One distressed traveler even tried to flash SOS signs through the window with his cell phone.

One might wonder if this is an isolated incident. But the entire industry is dominated by just four major airlines, and as Dayen writes, “as long as passengers have nowhere else to go, there’s no incentive to fix a perpetually broken system,” one in which long flight delays are frequent and the service gets worse and worse.

In Dana Chisholm’s quest for an affordable rental house in Southern California, Dayen gives us a story of how monopolization in real estate is running rampant: Chisholm eventually rented from the private-equity-backed landlord Starwood Waypoint, one of several Wall Street real estate companies that have become huge players in the rental market. In 2017, Starwood Waypoint merged with Invitation Homes and is now the nation’s largest rental landlord. More than 240,000 US homes are now in the hands of investors, mostly private equity firms. Because they own so many properties, these companies can jack up rents and fees while slow-walking upkeep and repairs. For Chisholm, that meant appliances that didn’t work, no running water in the sink, and a building infested with rats and roaches. When she contacted the management company, she had to wait months for repairs before getting a Zillow alert for her own house: The management company had listed it for rent even though she had just paid up.

While the stories Dayen offers take place all across the country, from rural areas to Los Angeles’s urban sprawl, and involve people in very different communities and careers, they have the same nugget of truth at their heart: When companies are allowed to keep consolidating, people lose. Without robust regulation that keeps consolidation in check, corporations will keep laying waste to our economy and our lives.

Dayen wrote his book before the current health crisis but in many ways anticipates it.
ipated it. Concentrated supply chains are brittle and unable to cope with major disruptions, such as a pandemic that spikes demand for toilet paper and nose swabs alike. Meat-processing giants that squeeze out smaller players through aggressive line speeds and cost cutting are now major Covid-19 hot spots, thanks to a focus on the bottom line instead of higher safety standards and humane worker treatment. “Amazingly,” Dayen writes, “news deserts correlate with the spread of infectious diseases, as epidemiologists rely on local articles to track outbreaks.”

As Dayen convincingly shows, monopolies are so interwoven in our economy and our lives that there is no escape from them. But his book also highlights some of the challenges faced by a politics that is primarily focused on monopoly. If you see it everywhere without pausing to clarify what is anticompetitive behavior and what is just plain old greed, you risk having the concept lose its specific meaning.

Dayen points a finger at the tech monopolies Google and Facebook, for example, for ravaging the media industry by bleeding advertising dollars dry through their dominance of the market. But there are also other forces pummeling the industry: Wall Street ownership, fickle billionaire backers, and smaller publications’ struggle to find new sources of revenue. Meanwhile, the media industry itself is dotted with monopolies, such as News Corp, which owns The Wall Street Journal and the New York Post and dozens of other properties; TV conglomerates that control local news; and dominant talk radio brands. Later, in a chapter on private equity, we begin to see how the problem with its quest for acquisitions is not only that it shrinks competition but also that it shifts companies’ focus from the production and distribution of goods to the maximization of money for investors. Private equity has, for example, fed upon the retail sector and spit out discarded brands like Sears and Toys “R” Us. This parasitic relationship seems to be less about monopoly power than avarice and a lack of regulation. Certainly, private equity funds have bought up companies in a number of sectors, leading to consolidation. But that’s not what happened to these retailers: The hedge funds came in, loaded the companies with

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Pronoun Study

They paid them to cut their olive trees down.

You paid them to cut their olive trees down.

We paid them to cut their olive trees down.

They paid you to cut your olive trees down.

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ARI BANIAS
debt, got fat off the fees, and then let the companies fail.

Dayen says that his book’s ambition is not to rehash economic arguments made elsewhere but to turn those arguments into a movement. But a call to action has to be clearly defined. Likewise, as liberal and left politics in the past demonstrated, alongside anti-monopolist politics must be a program of strong social policies. Breaking up health insurance cartels, for example, will help lower costs, but it won’t ensure health care for all. Anti-monopolism must define its potential and its limits and be married to other policy interventions.

There is a compelling reason to focus on anti-monopolist politics, which has garnered bipartisan support over the years. In Tennessee, Republican and Democratic lawmakers alike have tried to get rid of state limitations on municipal broadband service that were imposed at the behest of telecom giants. “We’re aligned on this issue, because it’s not theoretical, it’s practical,” says Chattanooga Mayor Andy Berke, a Democrat. “I’m a small-c conservative,” Christopher Mitchell, a researcher at the Institute for Local Self Reliance, tells Dayen. “The idea of a family moving because they lack broadband is devastating.” Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib stood with Freedom Caucus leaders Jim Jordan and Mark Meadows in demanding that a military contract monopolist return over $16 million in excess funds that it was able to squeeze out of the government. But it is where bipartisan support ends—on matters of redistribution and universal programs—that the lines are drawn between those seeking economic justice for all and those seeking merely a less tilted field.

One reason anti-monopolism is so popular among a certain set is that the solutions to monopoly power are easy to find. In fact, we often don’t need anything new. “We know how to handle monopolies,” Dayen points out, citing existing laws that can protect us against antitrust abuses but that have been misinterpreted or watered down. To him, this should be at the center of any anti-monopolist movement: restoring these laws with their original power and using them to break up monopolies, block mergers that create future ones, and regulate any that remain as public utilities. That’s all “entirely possible under existing law,” he adds.

The institutions are also in place, and not just in the Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission (which are supposed to police monopolies and bust trusts). The Federal Communications Commission is supposed to ensure universal, high-speed Internet access under the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The Civil Aeronautics Board, created in 1938, used to keep airlines from getting concentrated while ensuring widespread access to travel. But if this is all a matter of laws and regulatory bodies doing the jobs they were given, then why aren’t they? Here Dayen looks to the underlying politics of monopolization. “The mechanisms are clear,” he writes, but “getting the political class to enforce them is the stumbling block.”

Some have tried to take on this fight. Over 750 cities and towns now have some form of community broadband, and advocates are trying to undo state restrictions on expanding it. Some cities, such as Tulsa, Okla., and Mesquite, Texas, have placed limits on the growth of monopoly dollar store chains. Other communities have fought back against prison monopolists that have pushed for the elimination of in-person visitation, forcing family members to pony up for video and phone calls. But as Dayen notes, without national organization, no national anti-monopoly program stands a chance. So far, the so-called New Brandeisians and other anti-monopolist legal scholars have mostly remained cloistered in academia and think tanks; only occasionally do they find themselves speaking at congressional hearings or informing presidential candidates’ platforms. Revitalizing America’s anti-monopoly tradition requires sparking a broader mobilization. “We are living in an antimonopoly moment,” Dayen writes hopefully. Now it must “become an antimonopoly movement.”
The Sound of Care
Kelly Lee Owens’s healing electronic music
BY JULYSSA LOPEZ

When she talks about her music, the Welsh artist Kelly Lee Owens often invokes her experience training as an auxiliary nurse at a lung cancer ward in Manchester, England, as a teenager. Her patients were the ones who encouraged her to pursue the creative path she’s on now. “They were kind of like my career advisers,” she told *The Guardian*. “They had this unique perspective, of having their lives threatened by something out of their control, so I respected all of their words of advice.”

After leaving nursing in 2009, Owens worked in record stores, played bass in the band the History of Apple Pie, and got a few tips from the London electronic artists Daniel Avery and Ghost Culture. Her debut album, *Kelly Lee Owens*, felt like a final curtain reveal after all that preparation, unveiling a dreamy, parsimonious approach that trickled out like ASMR. The songs incorporated a range of electronic styles, but they were tied together by a soothing, palliative quality.

Owens also funnels her personal experiences into her sophomore album, *Inner Song*. However, her sonic calculus has changed this time as she opts for brooding tones and ominous textures. The opener, “Arpeggi,” is a cover of a Radiohead song—one that’s been in the ether a lot these days, with a gorgeous version by Li-ane La Havas released recently. Owens’s take is made up of restless synth arpeggios beating down like raindrops. Its sparseness and fastidiousness still sound like her, but the mood is angstier and more layered than before, allowing her technical skill to spill into new territory.

Right now, it’s easy to discern in any piece of art the gravity of the current moment. Things seem to mirror the dysphoria of quarantine, even though it might just be our brains applying meaning to ambiguous works as if they were Rorschach tests. Still, there is an arc that Owens captures on *Inner Song*. The individual tracks cover what she called “the hardest three years of my life,” relevant to any transition out of a dark place.

Owens is a singer and a songwriter, and she has always avoided heavy-handedness by keeping her lyrics allusive, delivering quick
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STACEY ABRAMS MARGARET ATWOOD CHARLES M. BLOW SHERROD BROWN NOAM CHOMSKY GAIL COLLINS MIKE DAVIS ELIZABETH DREW BARBARA EHRENREICH DANIEL ELLSBERG FRANCES FITZGERALD ERIC FONER THOMAS FRANK HENRY LOUIS GATES JR. MICHELLE GOLDBERG AMY GOODMAN CHRIS HAYES MARGO JEFFERSON DAVID CAY JOHNSTON NAOMI KLEIN RACHEL KUSHNER VIET THANH NGUYEN NORMAN LEAR GREIL MARCUS JANE MAYER BILL MCKIBBEN WALTER MOSLEY JOHN NICHOLS LAWRENCE O’DONNELL LAURA POITRAS KATHA POLLITT ROBERT REICH JOY REID FRANK RICH ARUNDHATI ROY BERNIE SANDERS ANNA DEAVERE SMITH EDWARD SNOWDEN REBECCA SOLNIT MARGARET TALBOT CALVIN TRILLIN KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL YANIS VAROUFAKIS JOAN WALSH AMY WILENTZ GARY YOUNGE —Hosted by Jon Wiener

observations through light, wispy vocals. She takes her cues from ambient artists, focusing on space and atmosphere rather than direct message or meaning. Because of its personal undertones and its abstractions, Inner Song carries more intimacy and emotional weight than her debut, landing in a place that feels connected to a universal need to rise from bleakness. Even as it touches on ecological devastation and political uncertainty, the album is understated and beautifully self-possessed, allowing her to extend her sounds and technique as a producer while achieving a quiet complexity that adds undeniable depth to her body of work.

When Owens brushes on ever-present anxieties, the approach is subtle. “Melt!” is one of the album’s most upbeat entries, even though she said it’s meant to evoke the dread of climate change. The song is built around a sample of what she called “melting glacial ice,” swatches of techno, and the sound of ice-skating. These elements aren’t exactly easy to pick up. They’re blended in the mix, and what stands out instead are the scant lyrics. “Ice, while you sleep, while you breathe,” Owens whispers over and over again. Although the pace is brisk, there’s something meditative in the repetition, which unspools like a mantra that can either quell the fear that comes with thinking about climate change or remind us of our apathy as the ice caps continue to wither. She recreates that ruminative quality through instrumental songs like the steely “Flow” and “Jeanette,” bright with choirs of synths. Even when she isn’t working with lyrics, her approach to production is to build slowly but meticulously, driven by Owens’s dream-pop tendencies. However, it misses the brute force of “Melt!” and “Corner of My Sky” and comes across as almost too innocuous; its message of release and restoration gets lost in the shuffle. “Wake-Up” goes further, thanks to tiny glitches and beeping synth lines, but it’s one of the few times her lyrics get in the way. She offers a breathy warning of too many hours spent on apps, seemingly urging the extremely online among us to be more present: “Swipe to the next frame / Swipe to the next face, among us to be more present: “Swipe to the next frame / Swipe to the next face, another new face / Never pausing to take it in / Always avoiding your sense of dread.” As gentle as her delivery is here, it’s the clunkiest message on the record.

Still, Owens’s careful hand works more often than not, and the album’s appeal lies in how understated it is. She doesn’t make a spectacle out of her apocalyptic musings or warp her observations into preachy declarations, and her music never feels didactic or overly prescriptive. Instead, Inner Song’s subjectivity becomes a strength, allowing listeners to walk away with what they wish from it. The music feels inextricably bound to Owens’s years of caring for others; only here she’s found a way to let people process their pain and create a space to regenerate.

On her new album, Owens transforms personal experience into brooding sound.

n “Corner of My Sky,” Owens fashions an enigmatic sonic backdrop fit for the low bellows of her fellow Welsh artist John Cale. He slides neatly onto the album, in terms of his sound as well as for the figure he cuts as a pioneer of the avant-garde. Owens said when the song was released that she had asked him to “delve into his Welsh heritage and tell the story of the land via spoken-word, poetry, and song.” and he obliged, offering naturalistic imagery that’s a little hallucinatory. In an interview with The Guardian this year, Owens joked, “Let’s just say with the track, ‘Corner of My Sky,’ that might be what microdosing mushrooms sounds like.”

At its core, the song is interested in roots, origins, and histories, almost as if Owens and Cale wanted to imagine what the beginning of time might have sounded like and, in the process, untangle the cataclysmic disasters of today. That circuitousness reflects her progression toward a clearer state of self-understanding on the album, and it highlights the music’s individual passages from dark, sulking moodiness to sudden luminosity. After the intensity of “Corner of My Sky,” she moves on to “Night,” one of Inner Song’s standouts, made blissful through her beatific vocalizations.

Some of the album’s least interesting moments seem like repetitions of past formulas. “Re-Wild” is undeniably pretty, driven by Owens’s dream-pop tendencies. However, it misses the brute force of “Melt!” and “Corner of My Sky” and comes across as almost too innocuous; its message of release and restoration gets lost in the shuffle. “Wake-Up” goes further, thanks to tiny glitches and beeping synth lines, but it’s one of the few times her lyrics get in the way. She offers a breathy warning of too many hours spent on apps, seemingly urging the extremely online among us to be more present: “Swipe to the next frame / Swipe to the next face, another new face / Never pausing to take it in / Always avoiding your sense of dread.” As gentle as her delivery is here, it’s the clunkiest message on the record.

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Letters

Moneyball

One reason for the steady decline of African Americans in Major League Baseball that Gene Seymour neglected to mention [“Fade to White,” November 2/9] is the overwhelming number of football and basketball scholarships offered by colleges and universities, compared with the paucity of those for baseball. The football and basketball scholarships offer a huge incentive for Black athletes (and their parents) to steer toward those sports. It’s hardly the only reason, but given the number of players who are drafted by MLB teams out of college, it’s definitely not a minor factor.

When baseball was reaching its peak of African American participation in the 1970s and early ’80s, college football and basketball, especially in the South and Southwest, were still overwhelmingly white. It wasn’t until the mid-’70s that this began to change in large numbers, and since the early ’80s, there has been an almost perfect inverse correlation between the percentages of Black players in college football and basketball and their percentage in Major League Baseball. I can’t see this as nothing but a coincidence.

Andy Moursund

Roe Reversal

I was honored to be noticed in these pages by someone whose work I have long admired, Katha Pollitt, who in “Settling Out of Court” [November 2/9] responded to my thoughts on the future of abortion rights, given that Amy Coney Barrett would soon join the Supreme Court. If I ruled the world, Roe v. Wade would be nonnegotiable. But I do not. As a longtime abortion rights supporter, I stated clearly in my New York Times op-ed that I regret the passing of Roe. I also consider it a done deal, either through the Supreme Court’s current death-by-a-thousand-cuts gutting of Roe or by an outright overruling.

Pollitt asks what the 850,000 people per year who now get abortions will do after Roe. They will do what far too many women do now: travel. We need to mobilize to help them and follow the example of Women on Waves, a group of Dutch activists and doctors who loaded a drone with abortion pills and flew it to Poland, where abortion is illegal and an estimated 50,000 underground abortions occur each year. I explored potential silver linings of an overruling of Roe not because I want it—I said clearly I did not—but because I consider it inevitable. Yes, as Pollitt says, every state legislative session will become a battleground over women’s rights (as they already are over racism and workers’ rights). Let’s get on with it.

Joan Williams
San Francisco

Remembering Steve

Re “Stephen F. Cohen” by Katrina vanden Heuvel [October 19/26]: I always knew my radio interviews with Steve would be filled with wisdom, because he had a sense of history and was never afraid to challenge any shibboleth. Friend, scholar-activist, deep thinker, and wonderful orator—Steve Cohen, rest with the giants.

Suzy Weissman

Letters to the Editor

E-mail to letters@thenation.com (300-word limit). Please do not send attachments. Letters are subject to editing for reasons of space and clarity.

SUBMISSIONS: Go to TheNation.com/submission-guidelines for the query form. Each issue is also made available at TheNation.com.
here is a name in the Haitian Creole language for women like my mother: *gwo fanm*. Literally “big woman,” a *gwo fanm* is a woman who stands out in life and stands up for the ones she loves. As a Haitian immigrant to the United States, my mother fought for her family, fronted the cost for countless relatives to come here and go through the immigration process, and worked hard to raise her children. But a *gwo fanm* is also a woman who takes more than her fair share of the slings and arrows this world throws at her, who absorbs hurt and pain that could crush less resilient or determined people. After my mother passed away when I was 10, I realized that a lot of the women in my family are *gwo fanm*: women who have shouldered burdens beyond most people’s imaginings. These experiences left scars both physical and emotional that haven’t faded with the passing of time.

—Naomieh Jovin

Marking time:
Above, a portrait of my godmother in her younger days. (That’s her off to the side, posing in her Sunday best.)

Resilience:
A found image of my mother when she was young, left, and a photo of my aunt after church, above.

This work was produced in partnership with Magnum Foundation, with support from the Economic Hardship Reporting Project.
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