Biden’s First 100 Days

What can he do? What should he do?

ACCOUNTABILITY
JOHN NICHOLS

CONGRESS
PRAMILA JAYAPAL

FOREIGN POLICY
DAVID KLION

MONE-POLIES
ZEPHYR TEACHOUT

CLIMATE
VARSHINI PRAKASH

BLACK LIVES MATTER
BARBARA RANSBY

COVID-19
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MOVEMENTS
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Words Matter

Shortly after I came from Europe to the US, a close friend gifted me a subscription to The Nation. I’ve been a faithful reader and, when I was able to, supporter of the magazine. We need The Nation now more than ever; its voice needs to be heard. I like to think I’ll help keep it up for the future. It still reminds me of my old friend.

—Claudia Sole, Calif.

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Arms race: Health care workers get a Covid-19 vaccine at the Legacy Emanuel Medical Center in Portland, Ore., on December 16, 2020.

Even as we celebrate our tremendous victories, we must pay attention to why more than 74 million people voted to reelect Trump.

—Pramila Jayapal
J
oe biden will be inaugurated as america’s 46th president on january 20, after a year of turmoil. We are in the midst of the worst public health disaster in a century, with more than 300,000 dead from Covid-19 and tens of thousands more expected to succumb before mass vaccination can end the pandemic.

The turbulence has been political, too, with a presidential election in which the losing candidate refused to accept the results—and, even more ominously, his repeated attempts to overturn those results were backed by an overwhelming majority of the Republican Party’s elected officials and voters.

Clearly, Biden has his work cut out for him. He must take immediate action to get the pandemic under control and revive the economy, but unless both of the Democratic candidates in Georgia win their Senate runoff elections, that chamber will be controlled by obstructionist Republicans.

That’s why Biden’s first 100 days are critical. We asked 10 activists, analysts, and elected officials to examine what he can and should do to begin fixing the damage caused by the Trump/GOP wrecking crew. As John Nichols points out, though, we can’t effectively make repairs without accountability; a politics of “forgive and forget,” he writes, will only empower the Republican attack machine.

Tackling the pandemic, of course, will be a top priority. And while Trump has mishandled the crisis, epidemiologist Gregg Gonsalves notes that our public health infrastructure has been underfunded by both Democratic and Republican administrations. We need a New Deal for Public Health, he argues, with massive investments in communities and the social services that are the first line of defense against pandemics.

All of the contributors to this special issue have mapped out various strategies to push Biden in a more progressive direction. But none is better positioned to do so than Representative Pramila Jayapal, who leads a newly strengthened Congressional Progressive Caucus. Here she lays out an ambitious yet practical agenda that calls not just for a big Covid relief package but also for protecting voting rights, constraining corporate power, expanding Medicare coverage, and investing in robust clean energy infrastructure.

On that last point, no group has been more inspirational in the fight for climate justice than the Sunrise Movement. In her contribution, Sunrise cofounder Varshini Prakash invokes the example of Franklin D. Roosevelt in advocating for an Office of Climate Mobilization to address the global existential crisis of our era.

Biden has repeatedly vowed to fight for racial justice, but this fight cannot be won with “multiracial cronyism.” And while many of our contributors call for an end to student debt, Astra Taylor, cofounder of the Debt Collective, goes further, demanding much broader relief to address a structural, society-wide crisis.

Nothing has exacerbated our country’s obscene inequalities quite like the pandemic, during which some 40 million Americans filed for unemployment, even as billionaires saw their net worth increase by half a trillion dollars. Nation editorial board member Zephyr Teachout and our strikes correspondent, Jane McAlevey, recommend measures that Biden can adopt whether or not Democrats gain control of the Senate. Teachout suggests regulatory changes that would reverse four decades of monopoly abuse. McAlevey argues that, while Biden can reorient the National Labor Relations Board in a more worker-friendly direction, the labor movement must find ways to counter the right’s impressive mobilization efforts in the fall elections.

Biden will have more room to maneuver on foreign policy, but as David Klion notes, he’s already stacked his team with Obama-era advisers wedded to the corrupt arms industry and implicated in our post-9/11 forever wars. The public mood, however, has shifted dramatically against military adventurism, and progressive activism is far stronger these days.

And that’s where we, the public, come in. After four years of Trumpian criminality, Waleed Shahid says, we are now in a fight not just for the soul of the Biden presidency or the Democratic Party, but also for public sentiment. Shahid reminds us that the most transformative presidents never fully embraced the social movements of their time but were forced to act because of them. If Biden is not inclined to embrace our goals, well, then, let’s go out and make him do it.

Biden has repeatedly vowed to fight for racial justice, but this fight cannot be won with “multiracial cronyism.”
Our Best Shot

The next phase of fighting the pandemic must be done with racial equity at the forefront.

With the national COVID death toll surpassing 300,000, the first doses of Pfizer's vaccine left a facility in Kalamazoo, Mich., on December 13, kicking off an extraordinary effort to inoculate nearly all Americans against the coronavirus. The vaccination campaign faces enormous challenges: the need to keep Pfizer's vaccine at -94 degrees Fahrenheit, for one. But the challenges are not only logistical. Serious ethical questions remain about who will be at the front of the line.

The pandemic has magnified long-standing health inequities in the United States. Black, Indigenous, and Latino Americans have died of Covid-19 at a rate more than 2.7 times that of white Americans. Given this disproportionate toll, which was exacerbated by political leaders' failure to ensure equitable access to testing and care, there’s an urgent need for public officials to prioritize racial and economic equity in allocating the vaccines. “Inequities in health have always existed, but at this moment there is an awakening to the power of racism, poverty, and bias in amplifying the health and economic pain and hardship imposed by this pandemic,” wrote a committee convened by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) to establish a framework for vaccine allocation.

The committee recommended that the first phase prioritize first responders, frontline health care workers, anyone with underlying health conditions that puts them at “significant” risk, and older adults living in group settings. A second round of vaccine recipients would include teachers and child care workers, essential workers whose jobs increase their exposure risk, and people living in institutional settings like prisons, group homes, and homeless shelters. NASEM also suggested using a metric for vulnerability to guide how the vaccine is distributed geographically, such as the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) Social Vulnerability Index (SVI), initially developed for natural-disaster relief, or a Covid-specific vulnerability index. “There really is a bit of a sea change in recognizing that it’s just not acceptable to do what we usually do [when distributing vaccines], which is to maximize benefits. Now we also have to ask, ‘Well, who do those benefits accrue to?’” said Harald Schmidt, an assistant professor in medical ethics and health policy at the University of Pennsylvania.

Initial doses of the vaccine are already being distributed to health care workers and older residents of long-term care facilities. Allocations from the federal supply will be made to states based on population size; while that may seem fair on its face, it doesn’t address the fact that certain states have a higher proportion of residents who are more at risk than others. Although a CDC committee sets recommendations for priority groups, states aren’t technically required to follow them, and the CDC has asked states to come up with their own detailed plans for distribution. That means there could be significant variation state by state.

Among the hard choices states face is whether to prioritize essential workers, who are disproportionately low-income people and people of color, or elderly adults, who face the most acute risks of death from the virus. And who counts as an essential worker? The CDC classifies nearly 70 percent of the US workforce as essential, but it’s clear that certain frontline workers, like bus drivers and grocery cashiers, face greater exposure risks than others. “Within each of these groups, there are better- and worse-off populations,” Schmidt said. “We want to recognize that there’s a spectrum of disadvantage and that some groups need vaccines more urgently than others.”

At least 18 states plan to use measures of disadvantage to prioritize vulnerable populations or, at least, to plan outreach to them, according to an analysis by Schmidt and other researchers. Tennessee, for instance, plans to reserve 10 percent of its vaccine supply specifically for areas that score high on the SVI, which factors in poverty and race as well as indicators like car ownership and crowded living situations. In California, which will use its own index, Governor Gavin Newsom said he’s committed to “making sure Black and brown communities disproportionately are benefited.” New Jersey’s plan notes that the SVI could be used to determine where to locate vaccination sites. But only half of the states’ initial plans had even a single mention of incorporating racial equity into their allocation decisions.

Furthermore, the national distribution plan created by the Trump administration relies on chain pharmacies and hospitals, which tend to be located in wealthier urban areas. “In its current form, the Trump Administration’s vaccine plan relies on private health facilities that have historically excluded Black and brown communities,” reads a letter from New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, the NAACP, and a number of other groups sent to Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar in December. “We need to enlist faith-based organizations, neighborhood groups and local non-profits with deep roots in Black, brown and poor communities to get this done. And we need the funding to do so.”
The media coverage of vaccine access in communities of color has so far been dominated by concerns about hesitancy—the idea that some people, particularly in Black communities, may refuse vaccination due to the health care system’s long legacy of racist discrimination, evident not only in historical scandals like the Tuskegee experiments but also in the ways politicians and institutions have failed communities of color during the current pandemic. “There have been many instances where Blacks and Latinos have been turned away from [Covid] care, turned away from testing, and died,” said Ruqaiijah Yearby, executive director of the Institute for Healing Justice and Equity at Saint Louis University. “I don’t want people to use hesitancy as a way to say, ‘Then we do not have to give them access to the vaccine.’”

Using measures of vulnerability to guide vaccine allocation does carry political and legal risks. Prioritizing prison inmates over children is epidemiologically sound, but some state leaders may balk at the optics. The desire to dispense vaccines quickly may conflict with efforts to ensure equitable delivery: Getting vaccines to marginalized groups may take more time than getting them to people with better access to care. And explicitly factoring race into decisions could draw legal challenges.

While states have significant leeway in how they prioritize their residents, those choices will be open to public scrutiny. Many political leaders have expressed dismay about Covid-19’s disproportionate impact on communities of color; now they have an opportunity to address it, even if this will come too late for those already lost to the virus. And getting vaccine allocation right is just a “first step,” Yearby said. “It cannot be the last thing that we do. It cannot be, ‘Oh, we thought about equitably allocating vaccines, so now we don’t have to think about economic relief or protecting workers.’”

States will soon decide whether essential workers or elderly adults get priority in the next phase of the rollout.

F YOU BELIEVE THE RELENTLESS CHEERLEADING of the Murdoch press, Britain is in the final stages of a heroic drama that will finally see this island nation declare economic independence and stride boldly onto the global stage, its precious sovereignty regained. Freed from the fetters of the European Union, Britons will once again become shopkeepers to the world, negotiating on advantageous terms with trade partners from Tokyo to Toronto. Meanwhile, every day brings new developments in Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Brexit brinkmanship: a disastrous dinner with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, stern warnings from chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier, brave posturing from Johnson over an “Australian-style deal”—which means crashing out without a deal.

All very entertaining, but about as relevant as Trump’s musings on Covid-19 treatments. On December 31 (between when this issue goes to press and when it lands in your mailbox), Britain and the EU will either agree on terms for some kind of post-Brexit trade pact—or not. While reporters can hardly be blamed for ramping up the drama, the markets have long ago concluded—and priced in—the inevitability of a deal. The final hang-ups are fishing quotas in British waters (always a favorite for TV stand-ups) and the “level playing field” rules that bar EU countries from favoring or subsidizing domestic producers. For a government determined (as the Tories claimed to be in their last election manifesto) to resurrect domestic manufacturing and, with it, the country’s long-abandoned industrial north, “state aid” was the whole ballgame. But the only person in Johnson’s government really committed to that populist economic strategy was Dominic Cummings, the prime minister’s controversial adviser, whose flouting of lockdown rules in the spring rendered him politically toxic, and who was finally forced out in November.

Unlike his boss, Cummings was an unconvincing liar. As for Boris, he’s remained committed throughout to his core belief: that when it comes to cake, he’s pro–having it and pro–eating it. On Brexit, that probably means a last-minute bodge designed purely to save face (and to serve the interests of British bankers and German automakers). On Covid, it has meant yet another fatal failure to take the action needed to control the pandemic. With the UK’s R number (the rate of transmission) now above 1 and London already running out of ICU beds, and a new, more contagious strain spreading in the southeast, Johnson finally put the capital back into lockdown just in time for Christmas. Which sadly still makes a third national lockdown early in the new year—just as Brexit disrupts British ports and food supply chains—almost inevitable.
**Justice Long Due**

The MORE Act is necessary—but not enough.

**EARLY THIS DECEMBER, THE DEMOCRATIC-controlled House of Representatives passed a bill to decriminalize marijuana at the federal level. The Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act would expunge low-level cannabis convictions, remove pot from the Controlled Substances Act, and impose a 5 percent tax on legal marijuana sales, directing some of that revenue into grants that help those the bill identifies as “adversely impacted” by racist drug prohibition laws take advantage of the legal pot marketplace. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that from 2021 to 2030, the law “would reduce time served by 73,000 person-years, among existing and future” federal inmates. It’s one significant (though imperfect) step toward undoing the “legacy of racial and ethnic injustices...of 80 years of cannabis prohibition enforcement,” according to the bill’s sponsors.

And yet the legislation was met with mockery and derision by congressional Republicans, who registered their opposition through statements dripping with disingenuous concern-trolling, unscientific fearmongering, and sincere indignation. “The House of Representatives is spending this week on pressing issues like marijuana. You know, serious and important legislation befitting this national crisis,” snarked Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, who since April has obstructed every effort to produce a coronavirus relief package. Perhaps indifferent to the fact that some 40,000 people remain incarcerated in the United States on pot-related offenses, per the Last Prisoner Project, Representative Pete Stauber of Minnesota waved off the legislation as unimportant to those who really count. “Americans deserve better,” he tweeted.

“The arguments we heard throughout the floor debate on the MORE Act, to me, were just really out of touch and offensive,” said Maritza Perez, director of the Office of National Affairs at the Drug Policy Alliance. “We know that half a million people are arrested every year for simple marijuana possession. Black and brown Americans have long deserved an end to the War on Drugs, and the MORE Act is one small step toward undoing the incalculable damage that war has wrought. A criminal conviction can disallow someone from getting housing, from earning a higher education, from getting a job. These are all things that are especially important during a pandemic, when people are feeling the economic crunch.”

From their inception, drug prohibition laws have targeted Black and brown folks with laser precision. Harry Anslinger, appointed as the first director of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in 1930, publicly declared that “reefer makes darkies think they’re as good as white men.” Instead of using the standard term “cannabis,” Anslinger leaned into the Mexican word “marihuana,” exploiting the xenophobia that followed immigrant flows from the southern border after the Mexican Civil War.

“There are 100,000 total marijuana smokers in the US, and most are Negros, Hispanics, Filipinos, and entertainers,” Anslinger warned the white citizens of America. “Their Satanic music, jazz and swing, results from marijuana use. This marijuana causes white women to seek sexual relations with Negroes, entertainers, and others.”

In 1937, Anslinger took his case before Congress, where he testified about the need for a law that would criminalize the use, possession, and sale of cannabis. Included in his evidence was an article reporting that Mexican immigrants in Colorado were producing weed “cigarettes which they sell at two for 25 cents, mostly to white school students.” Anslinger succeeded in convincing Congress to pass the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937, which effectively made pot illegal at the federal level. The Boggs Act and the Narcotic Control Act followed in the 1950s, setting mandatory minimums for sentencing and establishing increasingly greater penalties for weed crimes.

“The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people,” President Richard Nixon’s domestic affairs adviser, John Ehrlichman, admitted to reporter Dan Baum in 1994, nearly 25 years after the administration launched the War on Drugs. “We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities.... Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.” In the following decades, Presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton further criminalized cannabis use.

Finally, though, the tide is turning. As of the November elections, 36 states and the District of Columbia have made medical marijuana legal, while 15 states have signed off on recreational pot use. But Black folks continue to be disproportionately affected by the racially
unequal application of marijuana laws. An ACLU study found that, despite the fact that Black and white people use pot at the same rate, Black folks are nearly four times as likely to be arrested. And people with felony convictions are disqualified from owning a marijuana dispensary in many states. That means Black folks—who as of 2017 represented only 4.3 percent of top-level stakeholders in the legal marijuana industry—are locked out of the gold rush. “Historically, with alcohol during Prohibition and marijuana now, everything that Black people have gone to prison for, white people seem to be able to get rich from,” DeAnna Hoskins, president of JustLeadership-USA, told me.

The MORE Act doesn’t adequately address this issue, Hoskins added. The bill would prohibit those with marijuana felonies from working in the legal pot marketplace. It also restricts expungement and resentencing relief to “nonviolent” marijuana offenders, even though many “violent” crimes don’t actually involve the use of violence, and Black offenders are far more likely to have been charged with them than white ones.

Yet even this modest bill has a snowball’s chance in hell of clearing the Senate. “Part of the political process is moving the needle,” Perez said. “We were under no illusion that Mitch McConnell would bring this to the floor. But once you go forward, it’s really hard to go back. We got the bill through a chamber of Congress. We made history.”

“The federal government, law enforcement, the criminal justice system—it’s the only business I know that continues to dig a ditch into what’s not working, because it’s a tool to keep Black and brown people marginalized and oppressed,” Hoskins told me. “Is this a system of accountability or a system of punishment—but only for a certain segment of the population? Because for some reason, there’s a refusal to put political capital on the table and to undo this harm, not piecemeal but boldly.”

“Everything that Black people have gone to prison for, white people seem to be able to get rich from.”

—DeAnna Hoskins, JustLeadership-USA

I’ve been writing a version of this column in just about every other issue of The Nation for nearly 25 years. This will be my last. Obviously, much has changed since I began. There was no Fox News or MSNBC, and the “news” on the Internet barely justified the trouble it took to dial it up. But a few things have remained relatively constant, and so, too, have my attempts to explain them. The one thought I’d like to leave readers with is this: Remember the fundamentals—the things that inevitably get lost in the never-ending frenzy that defines our current media ecosystem.

Many in the media have recently awoken to the myriad ways in which the Trump presidency has sought to murder our democracy. In truth, it was barely breathing when the orange monster stepped into the Oval Office. Here again, thanks to the obedience of so many Republicans to Donald Trump’s nonsensical whims, journalists have also discovered the desiccated state of the GOP’s commitment to the traditional norms of democratic politics, to say nothing of common sense. Even so, this welcome new focus fails to capture the structural failings that underlie our politics and therefore continue to escape the attention of even the most attentive citizens. Here are a few of my concerns:

§ Voters rarely matter much. In a study back in 2014, political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page demonstrated that “economic elites and organized interest groups (including corporations, largely owned and controlled by wealthy elites) play a substantial part in affecting public policy, but the general public has little or no independent influence.”

§ Voters rarely matter much (II). In their 2018 study, political scientists Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Matto Mildenberger, and Leah C. Stokes found that congressional staffers—and by extension, the people who cover them in the media—believe that their constituents are far more conservative than they really are and act accordingly. That’s because the people they hear from, and respond to, are the people identified in the Gilens-Page report mentioned above.

§ Voters rarely matter much (III). Thanks largely to Citizens United, according to the research conducted by political scientist Stan Oklobdzija, dark money groups have grown far more influential in shaping the ideological agenda of the political parties. Given the fact that the vast majority of this funding is directed by extremely conservative sources—
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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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most famously, but hardly exclusively, the Koch network—this phenomenon, rather than the preferences of GOP members, is responsible for the takeover of the Republican Party by the lunatic fringe.

§ When voters do matter, they are often motivated by media misinformation. I’ve written two books about presidential lies. (The most recent one, Lying In State: Why Presidents Lie and Why Trump Is Worse, was published this past August.) What has always been hard to measure, however, is the degree to which any given politician’s lies are acted upon by voters. I still can’t fully answer that question, but thanks to a 2018 examination of the political “knowledge” of more than 3,000 Fox News viewers by political scientists Sanford Schram and Richard Fording, we know that “relying on Fox News as a major news source significantly decreased a person’s score more than relying on any other news source.” Not surprisingly, people also vote on the basis of these lies. A 2017 study by political scientist Gregory Martin and economist Ali Yurukoglu found that the effect of watching Fox News was powerful enough to change the results of almost any close election and even some that would never have been close without it.

As Fox News became a veritable moneyprinting machine for the Murdoch family, it effected a gravitational pull on the other news networks, which sought to attract viewers with similar bullshit. Fox News also spawned an army of imitators peddling even more outlandish lies and conspiracy theories, multiplied by the millions thanks to the conscienceless algorithms that power Facebook, YouTube, and the like. These forces continue to exploit marketplaces in which truth has no particular instrumental value. What the columnist and political philosopher Walter Lippmann defined in 1922 as the conflict between “the world outside” and “the pictures in our heads” has now grown so vast as to overwhelm what remains of the journalistic commitment to logic, fairness, and the hope that so many once held of “speaking truth to power.”

It is often said that liberals tend to come to a gunfight with butter knives. But what I have been attempting to show in this media column is that if we look beneath the surface of our elections, we see a culture of plutocracy that has enabled the creation of an autocracy based on a foundation of purposeful dishonesty. Rupert Murdoch’s minions aside, most of our mainstream institutions have implicated themselves in this transformation thanks to a collective commitment to treating political conflict as mere theater—a “he said/she said” battle in which “both sides do it.” Truth in these reports is an afterthought, if it is thought of at all. The quote I have found most apt for the Trump era comes from an interview the German-born philosopher Hannah Arendt gave during what, in retrospect, now appears as the relatively halcyon days of Watergate. She noted back in 1974 that “if everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer…. And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge.”

This is exactly the point to which the conservative conquest of our media culture has brought us. While we were watching them work the refs, they were actually purchasing the entire playing field. Before we liberals can fairly contest in politics, we must first reclaim our culture.

Thanks for reading.
How might we explain to young people, who have witnessed the rise of strongmen and a world turned upside down by Covid-19, the liberal triumphalism of the 1990s and 2000s? Pankaj Mishra’s new collection of essays provides one provocative answer: Such triumphalism is akin to a religious creed, one that presumes that Western-style liberal democracy will be absorbed by the rest of the world, which will evolve toward it just as the Anglo-American sphere did. Mishra describes such liberals, borrowing from the Cold War realist thinker Reinhold Niebuhr, as “the bland fanatics of western civilization who regard the highly contingent achievements of our culture as the final form and norm of human existence.” Mishra’s new book, Bland Fanatics: Liberals, Race, and Empire, grapples with the history and legacy of this brand of liberalism.

—Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins

**DSJ:** There is a passage in Bland Fanatics in which you state, “The global history of the post-1945 ideologies of liberalism and democracy, or a comprehensive sociology of Anglo-America and Anglo- and America-philic intellectuals, is yet to be written, though the world they made and unmade is entering its most treacherous phase yet.” Why is this the case?

**PM:** One immediate difficulty of this task—and I mean to be matter-of-fact rather than sarcastic here—would be that the reckless minds in question are little more than cymbalists accompanying the Pentagon’s war marches. When I speak of a possible sociology of an intelligentsia, I am more interested in how intellectuals in less triumphalist societies and cultures—in India, China, Indonesia, Brazil, Peru, and Chile—came to be infatuated by Anglo-American ideologies. How did they make that turn from postcolonial modes of resistance to the imperial modes of political economy, from Bandung to the Washington Consensus? A whole class of comprador intellectuals emerged in countries across the globe to assist the Americanizers. We need to understand the facilitating networks of Ivy League universities, think tanks and foundations, wonkfests, and the Anglosphere’s publications.

**DSJ:** Why do centrist liberals seem so preoccupied with the left?

**PM:** We are looking not so much at independent thinkers as an intellectual service class—Tony Judt’s phrase in his late antiestablishment phase. And if you look at the trajectory of someone like [Yascha] Mounk, who was employed by Tony Blair in an outfit partly funded by Saudi Arabia, or the constellation of the Enlightenment-monger Steven Pinker, in which Bill Gates and Jeffrey Epstein both revolved, the money trail and ideological commitments linking various ruling classes will come into view.

**DSJ:** What seems clear in postmortems of the election is that liberals have a strong sense of normalcy. What is your thinking about this and about US elections in general?

**PM:** I think it is safe to say that many of those who voted for [Donald] Trump in 2016 and 2020 voted for [Barack] Obama in 2008 and 2012. The outsider-y candidate who offers to terminate business as usual—after such calamities as the War on Terror, Hurricane Katrina, and the financial crisis—was obviously attractive. Obama came to power on the back of a deep and widespread yearning for change but then chose to cement his membership in the ruling class while talking a lot of emollient nonsense about bipartisan-ship. Is it so surprising that Trump then emerged to channel those frustrated and increasingly bitter desires for change?

Do you remember how, back in 2016, [French President Emmanuel] Macron was hailed as the great hope of the liberal order, a French Blair, more intellectual and literary than Obama? Look at Macron now, despised by almost every constituency and trying to salvage his chances in the next election by approximating [National Rally leader] Marine Le Pen’s position on Islam. [Joe] Biden is much more closely associated with the discredited old order than Macron and much less suited to be its savior. The desire for normalcy, essentially a state of affairs in which gross inequities reign behind a veil of sophistication and civility, is what brought us Trump in the first place. The pursuit of nor- malcy now might bring us Trump 2.0 or a clone more competent and toxic than the original.

“We are looking not so much at independent thinkers as an intellectual service class.”
OSHA didn’t issue a single violation, despite hundreds of worker deaths. It has since issued citations to 62 businesses, including two in early September to meatpacking giants Smithfield Packaged Meats Corporation and JBS Foods, Inc. When the citations were issued, a total of 1,584 workers at the two plants had tested positive, and 10 had died. OSHA proposed fining Smithfield $13,494 and JBS $15,615—a pittance for companies with millions in profits.

As OSHA twiddled its thumbs, workers paid the price. As of mid-December, at least 262 meatpacking employees had died from Covid-19, according to tracking by the Food & Environment Reporting Network, while nearly 50,000 had tested positive. There have been at least 1,445 deaths among health care workers, according to The Guardian and Kaiser Health News. Among grocery store workers represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers union, 109 had died by late November, and 17,400 had been infected or exposed. At least eight Amazon warehouse employees have died, and the company has reported that 19,816 of its workers, including at Whole Foods, had been infected as of October.

Another avenue of redress for people who contracted Covid-19 at work could be the workers’ compensation system. But lawmakers have gutted it. Insurance companies, arguing that workers can’t prove they contracted Covid-19 on the job, have rejected thousands of claims, even from health care workers and prison guards.

So one of the few avenues for justice left is suing the most negligent employers. Some lawsuits are already pending. The family of a Publix grocery store employee who died has sued the company, alleging the store barred workers from wearing face masks. A lawsuit against Tyson Foods over the death of a man who contracted the virus while employed at its Waterloo, Iowa, facility alleges that managers took bets on how many workers would catch Covid. A suit against Walmart alleges that one of its many workers would catch Covid. A suit against Walmart alleging that managers took bets on how many workers would catch Covid. A suit against Walmart alleging that managers took bets on how many workers would catch Covid. A suit against Walmart alleging that managers took bets on how many workers would catch Covid. A suit against Walmart alleging that managers took bets on how many workers would catch Covid. A suit against Walmart alleging that managers took bets on how many workers would catch Covid. A suit against Walmart alleging that managers took bets on how many workers would catch Covid. A suit against Walmart alleging that managers took bets on how many workers would catch Covid.
Almost Christmas

Santa Claus entertains a child from behind a protective shield on December 15 at a shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The World Health Organization announced that Santa is immune from Covid-19 but still recommends taking precautions around him. The WHO’s Maria Van Kerkhove told reporters that “physical distancing by Santa Claus and also of the children themselves must be strictly enforced.”

### By the Numbers

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**2020**

We’ve had a year, you must admit,
Whose misery would just not quit.
At last, we offer this obit:
We’re glad to see the back of it.

—Rima Parikh
Biden’s First 100 Days

What can he do? What should he do?

ACCOUNTABILITY
JOHN NICHOLS

CONGRESS
PRAMILA JAYAPAL

FOREIGN POLICY
DAVID KLION

MONOPOLIES
ZEPHYR TEACHOUT

BLACK LIVES MATTER
BARBARA RANSBY

CLIMATE
VARSHINI PRAKASH

COVID-19
GREGG GONSALVES

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COVID-19
GREGG GONSALVES
A New Deal for Public Health

BY GREGG GONZALVES

A year ago, few could have predicted that the richest nation on earth would soon be in the midst of the greatest public health crisis in its history, with hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of people having been infected in a matter of months by a new virus that emerged from a faraway place. But we were warned. As far back as 1992, the US Institute of Medicine issued a report called “Emerging Infections: Microbial Threats to Health in the United States.” Just two years later, Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Laurie Garrett wrote her best seller The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance. Democratic and Republican administrations since then have pursued pandemic preparedness plans in revolving cycles of enthusiasm and ennui, with SARS, avian flu, H1N1, and Ebola lighting periodic fires under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama in the 2000s.

It’s all well and good to have high-level plans and resources, like the Strategic National Stockpile of protective equipment, vaccines, and drugs that President Bill Clinton set up in 1999. But public health crises play out at the state and local level; it’s not the feds who are on the front lines. And here again we were warned. In 2018, the Trust for America’s Health’s annual report stated that “Budget cuts have occurred at all levels of the public health system from the smallest town to the most populous city as well as at the federal level. The country needs a long-term commitment to rebuild the nation’s public health capabilities—not just to plug some of the more dangerous gaps but to make sure each community will be prepared, responsive and resilient when the unexpected occurs.” Last winter, the unexpected hit—and we were not prepared, responsive, or resilient.

While the failures of the Trump administration on Covid-19 are deservedly well known, Trump alone did not set us up for this catastrophe. Since 2002, during the Bush and Obama presidencies, key funding for state and local health departments dropped by a third, from $940 million in fiscal year 2002 to $667 million in fiscal year 2017. And as the Trust for America’s Health documented in 2018, of the $3.36 trillion we spend on health care annually, only 3 percent goes to public health.

However, public health is not just about preparedness. We went into this pandemic sicker than our peers among the industrialized nations, burdened by, as another Institute of Medicine report summarized in its title, “Shorter Lives, Poorer Health.” The reason for the sorry state of Americans’ health, as Elizabeth H. Bradley and Lauren A. Taylor explained in their 2013 book, The American Health Care Paradox: Why Spend-

We need to make the collective realization that the pandemic is a symptom of what has ailed us as a nation.

Gregg Gonzalves is the codirector of the Global Health Justice Partnership and an assistant professor of epidemiology at the Yale School of Public Health.
Pollack in the *JAMA Health Forum*, are serving communities “as a gateway to meet their basic needs.”

Such efforts could be the start of something remarkable: a real focus on this country’s community health, a collective realization that the pandemic is a symptom of what has ailed us as a nation. For too long, we have thought our health begins and ends with the sophisticated procedures on offer at our nation’s teaching hospitals and other major medical centers. We marvel that those who can afford it come to the United States from all around the world to get the best care they can—except those who can expect to live longer by staying in their own countries. In life expectancy, according to the latest United Nations report, Americans rank 37th.

A genuine New Deal for Public Health—one that lifts up social welfare as key to our nation’s post-pandemic future—will be a struggle to achieve. Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell and the GOP will summarily dismiss it as socialism, because doing anything that helps the incoming administration is not in their political interest, even if it’s a matter of life and death for their constituents. The temptation in Congress, too, will be to settle for less by compromising from the start. But if the Democrats embrace an austerity politics now—by claiming, as Ted Kaufman, one of Biden’s chief advisers, did in August, that “when we get in, the pantry is going to be bare”—we will limp out of this pandemic far worse off than when we began. When the prescription is for a full dose of medicine to cure a disease, getting a few pills isn’t a victory; it’s a recipe for the next disaster.

We can deny the importance of bringing America’s public health and social welfare up to code, and we can declare it un-American, unaffordable, unrealistic, and unachievable. However, the next virus won’t care about our excuses. In the words of James Baldwin (quoting an old hymn): “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more water, the fire next time!”

***The Past Cannot Be Forgotten***

Joe Biden wants to heal America after four years of viciously divisive and deadly governance by Donald Trump. But he will fail at that task, risking both his presidency and his party’s fortunes, if he refuses to hold Trump and his enablers to account. A politics of “forgive and forget” will not unify the nation—it will simply ensure that Democrats lose control of Congress in 2022 and the presidency in 2024.

It’s no secret that Biden is most comfortable in the role of conciliator. But in order to govern and frame the future, he cannot afford to ask Americans to imagine that Trump simply violated norms when the facts tell us that he and his associates broke the law, repeatedly, wantonly, and destructively.

The new president should never hesitate to support the work of federal, state, or local prosecutors pursuing necessary cases against Trump and others who engaged in an orgy of self-dealing, attacked the rule of law and democracy, and presided over a deliberately negligent response to a pandemic that has left over 300,000 Americans (and counting) dead. As Philip Allen Lacovara, a former counsel to the Watergate special prosecutor, reminds us, “If a person who succeeds in acquiring the presidency can flout the criminal law with impunity, then we will have rendered our republic unrecognizable to the Founders and dangerous for our descendants.”

The point is not to be vindictive but to be effective. Bold policy proposals are much harder to dismiss when they are framed in the language of necessity and accountability. When he uses executive orders, legislation, and legal strategies to reassert ethical standards, protect voting rights, secure American elections, and constrain the influence of corporate interests by increasing transparency and accountability in pandemic spending, Biden can say, “These are the things we must do in order to repair the damage done by four years of maliciously destructive actions by Donald Trump and a wrecking crew that cared more about its own enrichment than the health, safety, and prosperity of the American people.”

But this is about more than just reforming a broken process. A steady focus on accountability isolates and diminishes the critics who will challenge vital initiatives to renew the economy, save the planet, and address structural racism, as it identifies Trump and his congressional enablers with the crises that metastasized on their watch.

Establishing this standard of necessity and accountability will not be easy. There will be an outcry from the Sunday morning commentariat, which desperately wants Biden to surrender the mantle of commander in chief for that of healer in chief. Nothing excites political and media elites more than the prospect of a kumbaya moment when “the mystic chords of memory will yet swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.” The poetic appeal of those words from Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address is undeniable. But so, too, is their context. Lincoln spoke on the eve of a civil war that exposed divisions so deep, and so enduring, that the United States is still arguing about whether to take down the flags and statues of traitors who tore apart the country.

A far better touchstone for a new president who hopes to unite the majority of Americans behind a bold policy agenda is the president who did just that: Franklin D. Roosevelt. FDR knew that to accumulate the political power required to achieve transformational change, he needed to point the finger of blame, rouse righteous indignation, and prosecute wrongdoers. He cheered on investigations that targeted the bankers and speculators who exploited the misery of a nation mired in the Great Depression. He called out war profiteers and linked his Republican rivals to the dreaded economic royalists who thwarted not just progress but democracy. And when the merchants of greed objected, FDR cried, “I welcome their hatred.”

The American people have handed Biden a mandate to address the political and economic corruption of our time: a margin of over 7 million votes and a higher level of support than for any challenger to a sitting president since Roosevelt upended Herbert Hoover in 1932. Hoover was never as morally loathsome and lawless as
This is about more than just reforming a broken process. A steady focus on accountability isolates and diminishes the critics.

Destroyer in chief: President Trump at the White House.

Trump, but FDR’s approach is instructive. Like his Democratic predecessor, Biden needs not merely to claim his mandate but to defend it, and the way to do that is with a steely determination to assign blame and exact accountability.

That may sound petty, and Biden will surely be attacked as such. But he will be attacked no matter what he does by Republicans who have developed a boilerplate strategy for undermining and ultimately disempowering newly elected Democratic presidents. Playing nice and peddling the false hope of unity in a divided nation may win plaudits from editorial pages and the grand old party of Lincoln Project grifters and never-Trump commentators who want to tell Democrats how to clean up the messes Republicans made. But it is a recipe for political disaster.

The only way to prevent hyperpartisan and hyperstrategic Republicans from derailing another Democratic administration is to make it clear that the Republicans created the crises they now seek to exploit. Biden does not need to be the chief prosecutor. But he does need to recognize why prosecutions are just and necessary and to openly acknowledge and explain their necessity to the American people. He can echo Andrew Weissmann, a senior prosecutor in special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation of presidential wrongdoing, who argues that “Mr. Trump’s criminal exposure is clear” and says the next attorney general should investigate and, if warranted, prosecute Trump with the understanding that “being president should mean you are more accountable, not less, to the rule of law.” Weissmann acknowledges, “We do not want to turn into an autocratic state, where law enforcement authorities are political weapons of the reigning party. But that is not sufficient reason to let Mr. Trump off the hook.”

Weissmann expects that Trump will try to pardon himself, his family members, and his companies. Doing so will create an outcry, prompt legal and constitutional wrangling, and put pressure on New York Attorney General Letitia James and other state and local prosecutors to take up the mantle of accountability. “The president’s pardon power cannot be used to: (1) pardon state crimes, (2) remove federal civil liability, (3) pardon impeachment, or (4) pardon crimes that have not already occurred,” says Jill Wine-Banks, a former Watergate assistant prosecutor and executive vice president of the American Bar Association. “I supported indicting Nixon while in office and then after his resignation. The case for applying normal prosecutorial standards to Trump is even stronger.”

Even though state and local investigations do not come under his purview as president, Biden has a duty to defend them. That duty is to the rule of law, history, and the reforms his administration should advance to address Trump’s grifting and self-dealing, refusals to cooperate with federal investigations, abuses of office, and conspiring to overturn the election that deposed him.

Biden has to recognize that one of the best ways to enact good policies—and to retain the power to do so—is by maintaining a steady accountability message that calls out those who promoted the bad policies that must be replaced. That’s a lesson from Roosevelt, who never surrendered the accountability narrative and, notably, never lost his congressional majority or his reelection bids. Joe Biden must take that lesson and run with it.
WHAT THE RIVER BRINGS
AMIR KHADAR VIA M4BL

60 percent of the overall population. More than 20 million jobs were lost because of Covid-19; many will not come back without some kind of government intervention. The government’s disinvestment in services and infrastructure has affected all low-income, under-resourced communities, but communities of color have taken a disproportionate hit. That hit occurred before Covid-19 and has been exacerbated by it.

Instead of looking back to the years of Barack Obama—or worse, Bill Clinton—Biden must embrace a bold, forward-looking approach, even though he does not seem exactly bold or forward-looking. In fact, many of his cabinet appointees were plucked right from the Obama administration. Almost anything will be a relief from Trump’s pro-billionaire policies, but Biden and the corporate Democrats have their own wealthy friends. Brian Deese, Biden’s choice to lead the National Economic Council, and Wally Adeyemo, his pick for deputy treasury secretary, both have ties to BlackRock, which manages trillions of dollars of global assets. Others on the Biden-Harris team have been corporate board members and consultants, paid to maximize profits for their gluttonous clients. These are the interests that Biden’s new economic leaders are used to serving. We should be very skeptical that on January 20 they will immediately betray those loyalties to serve the rest of us.

Even if Biden had appointed a more principled team of economic experts, many Democrats already bemoan that they may not be able to accomplish much, because depending on the outcome of the Georgia runoffs, a GOP-controlled Senate would block their best efforts. That’s not an acceptable excuse. The Biden administration needs to take unilateral action wherever possible with executive orders, personnel decisions, and the imposition of regulations on corporations. As Biden transition adviser and Roosevelt Institute director Felicia Wong told The New York
Times, “There's a tremendous amount that can be done without Congress.”

And here is what is most necessary right now: emergency Covid-19 economic relief and a nationwide moratorium on evictions and foreclosures. The cash payments thus far have been woefully inadequate, and the suffering has been extreme. Based on data reported by 40 states, Northwestern University cardiologist Dr. Clyde Yancy found that one in every 1,830 Black Americans has died from Covid-19, a mortality rate almost two and a half times higher than that for whites. If Black people were dying from Covid at the same rate as whites, Yancy added, 13,000 more of them would still be alive today.

To track the real economy, Biden and his aides will need to resist resisting the stock market as a metric of economic success. It is not, and neither is the gross domestic product, which tells us an average while obscuring the disparities that coexist with economic growth. Even unemployment statistics are misleading and underestimate the problem. Millions of Americans in cities like Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis have simply given up looking for work, are struggling in the underground economy, or are incarcerated and therefore not reflected in most unemployment numbers.

Debt relief, especially for student debt, is also critical. The solution, though, is simple: Just eliminate student debt entirely. It is scandalous that so many hard-working students will spend a lifetime trying to pay off their principal because they dared to pursue an education. As a result of relentless campaigns by groups like the Debt Collective, the Biden administration is likely to propose some kind of debt relief. In a December 7 press conference, Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer announced that Biden is considering $50,000 in student debt forgiveness, which could be enacted via executive action. Bernie Sanders’ proposal to forgive the entire $1.6 trillion in student debt better approximates a just response to the crisis, but we are unlikely to see that from Biden’s administration.

Another thing Biden can do without Congress is to rigorously enforce existing laws that close tax loopholes, restrict corporate profits, and garner revenue for social programs. Raising the minimum wage for federal contractors to $15 an hour should also be a no-brainer—and even $15 is too low now. Health care, like education, should be a right and not a privilege. It is a shame that Biden refused to commit to Medicare for All during his campaign, and while he has given a nod to an improved climate policy, the Green New Deal is not on his agenda. It should be.

Finally, the Movement for Black Lives laid out a set of principles to combat racism with the Breathe Act, a far-reaching progressive policy that would be a game changer in terms of fighting the kind of systemic racism that Biden has said he opposes. The Biden transition team has reached out to various civil rights leaders, including the Movement for Black Lives, to listen to our concerns. But it has to do more than perfunctory listening sessions. The Breathe Act rests on four pillars: divesting from carceral institutions, which have failed to solve the issues of harm reduction and security; investing in community-based and community-led programs of accountability and harm and violence prevention; offering resources to build healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities throughout the country, including jobs and much-needed human services; and finally, making sure public officials are accountable to the communities they are sworn to serve, especially the Black communities that are most often neglected and ignored. These priorities embody the principle of self-determination and are the antithesis of Biden’s 1994 “lock ‘em up” crime bill and Clinton’s “abandon the poor” welfare reform policy.

According to the Movement for Black Lives’ Monifa Bandele, this omnibus bill “is a bold, new vision for community safety that ends mass incarceration and criminalization while channeling federal dollars into non-punitive, public-safety-focused interventions as well as the educational, health, and other social investments that communities need.”

Biden isn’t likely to enact all of these measures, but we must lean on him hard and we need to organize. We need to converge on Washington, DC, on Inauguration Day for a progressive (and mask-wearing) show of strength and unity. We should fill the streets, in DC and throughout the country, to remind Biden that the millions who elected him expect to see policies that will improve the lives not only of working people of color but of everyone—well, almost everyone. The 1 percent, of course, should see their power and wealth more fairly distributed. That is what a truly just transition would look like.

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**We should fill the streets to remind Biden that the millions who elected him expect to see policies that will improve our lives.**

Barbara Ransby is a distinguished professor of African American studies, gender and women’s studies, and history at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

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BY VARSHINI PRAKASH

**For a Green New Decade**

As a co-founder of the Sunrise Movement, I am committed to making the Biden-Harris administration the turning point in our fight to stop climate change and rebuild a just economy. Joe Biden ran on the most aggressive climate plan in history, but since control of the Senate remains uncertain as we go to press, how can his administration stop climate change in the first 100 days without a Democratic majority in Congress?

Let’s be very clear: Biden had the largest popular-vote percentage for a presidential challenger since Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. This victory happened because young voters—especially young Black, Latino, Asian, and Native voters—turned out at the highest rates in history. Biden won over these voters because he listened to our concerns, invited young people like me to help form his policy on such key issues.
Biden should establish an Office of Climate Mobilization, similar to the Office of War Mobilization created by FDR during World War II.

as climate change, and championed his bold new plans on the campaign trail. Biden said in the final weeks of the campaign that climate change is “the No. 1 issue facing humanity, and it’s the No. 1 issue for me.” And now, millions of voters are pressing him to bring that urgency into his presidency, as the window for saving our civilization closes by the day. Democrats need to deliver for the millions of young people and every other voter who felt this urgency and took a chance on Joe. That means Biden must use every tool in his toolbox to address the crisis, starting on Day 1.

Biden should immediately establish an Office of Climate Mobilization, similar to the Office of War Mobilization created by Roosevelt during World War II. The director of this office should report to Biden personally and have the authority to coordinate across executive agencies and offices to drive climate efforts, as well as to use the power of the federal government to engage industry and civil society. This office should possess authority in cabinet-level decision-making, budget-setting, and program implementation, and it should have formalized engagement with state and local governments in order to advance environmental justice, good jobs, labor rights, and economic development for underserved communities as a part of climate action.

Executive authority also gives Biden significant power to tackle the climate emergency. He shouldn’t hesitate for a moment to use that power against our collective foe, starting on Day 1.

One of the biggest mistakes of the Obama administration was in failing to use the full scope of the executive office until after his policies languished and eventually died in the Senate. What’s even more astonishing is that President Obama didn’t introduce a national Climate Action Plan until his second term, in 2013.

The 13 presidents since FDR have issued only about 700 more executive orders than the 3,721 that he did—99 in his first 100 days alone. It wasn’t just the number of executive orders that was important; it was also their scope. Through executive actions, Roosevelt created what we know as modern America, establishing agencies like the Rural Electrification Administration and the Civil Works Administration, which brought electricity to rural areas and created millions of jobs in an era of massive suffering caused by the Great Depression. Not only did these executive actions save people in dire straits, they helped FDR launch an era of progressive politics, during which it became common sense that our government would protect the well-being of people over wealthy interests.

But executive actions alone will not stop climate breakdown. We need the power of the federal government’s purse—investments—to address the crisis at scale. Regardless of who controls the Senate, Biden should propose legislation that will reinforce those policies and add these critical promises from his Build Back Better plan: creating at least 10 million clean energy jobs; spending $2 trillion or more on clean energy infrastructure over his first term; directing 40 percent of that investment to frontline communities; investing in sustainability in agriculture, buildings, and transit; and instituting the largest labor reform in generations through the Protecting the Right to Organize Act.

There is no time now for preemptive compromises or half measures. Biden should unequivocally champion his Build Back Better climate agenda, which has support from a super-majority of the public, and challenge GOP senators to oppose it. If Republican leaders use obstructionist tactics to oppose one of the largest job creation programs since the New Deal, Sunrise and other movements will mobilize and fight alongside Biden to pass this agenda.

Biden’s plan is a road map to victory in the court of public opinion and, if necessary, at the ballot box in 2022. No one should count on Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell to change his obstructionist ways, but putting forth the best possible legislation and building popular support for it increases the likelihood that Democrats will be able to negotiate key priorities in must-pass legislation with Republicans.
Building back better could help Senator Marco Rubio’s Florida recover from massive job losses from the pandemic and start creating resilient infrastructure to protect the state from rising seas. It could help Senator Joe Manchin’s West Virginia invest in new green industries and deliver clean air and water for coal communities. And it could spur the largest investment in US manufacturing into clean energy and electric vehicles in states losing good union jobs, such as Senator Rob Portman’s Ohio.

If our representatives vote to deny relief, investment, and jobs to communities in this dire moment, it’s our job to kick them out in 2022. If Biden keeps the bold promises in his Build Back Better plan, he will be seen as a heroic outlier: a politician who kept his promises even when it meant taking on powerful interests. And Sunrise will be ready to mobilize to make it happen.

Two years ago, when we staged a sit-in at Nancy Pelosi’s office, we had just 15 active chapters. Now we have hundreds. Tens of thousands of young people have joined our ranks in 2020, and we’re ready to march and wake up leaders—outside their homes, if necessary—to move this agenda. We must bring the moral urgency of this crisis to the forefront and demand massive investments to recover from the pandemic.

But here’s the brutal reality of the climate crisis: Implementing a Green New Deal cannot possibly be accomplished in 100 days. Biden’s plan is only the start. Building a sustainable and just society will require many major reform bills at every level of government, and like the original New Deal, it will take years to fully enact. We will keep pushing Biden over the course of his presidency to embrace the full scope of the Green New Deal, because our lives depend on it.

Biden should act with the urgency of a mother in Louisiana, made homeless by two hurricanes this summer. He should act with the strength of a farmworker in California, laboring beneath soot-filled skies for low pay to feed the country. He should act with the dedication of a middle schooler who spent dozens of hours phone-banking to turn out voters, just for a chance at a survivable future. If Biden acts with urgency, strength, and dedication, our generation will never forget him.

The fact is, if we’re successful, the first 100 days of Biden’s administration will merely help us launch the Decade of the Green New Deal. To make this happen, we need tens of thousands more young people to join our ranks, take action, and gain skills for the long road ahead. I hope you’ll join me.

Varshini Prakash (@VarshPrakash) is the executive director and co-founder of the Sunrise Movement, a member of the Biden-Sanders Unity Task Force on Climate Change, and coauthor of Winning a Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can.

Even before Covid arrived, total household debt in the United States had reached a record-breaking $14 trillion, the result of decades of stagnating wages and slashed social services. The pandemic only reinforces the reality that mass indebtedness is a structural problem, the result of a system that forces people to borrow in order to make ends meet, rather than of poor individual choices. Millennials, in other words, are not drowning in student loans because of a collective penchant for avocado toast.

The only sensible solution is a policy of generous cash payments coupled with wide-scale debt relief. Research shows that people spent 30 percent of their 2020 stimulus checks to service debt, which means the government’s cash transfers were, in the end, a rather roundabout way of bailing out creditors—an absurd and wasteful outcome, given the profitability of the financial sector and the damage it has done to society as a whole. Student loans, medical debt, mortgage payments, rent, and municipal debt (that held by city and local governments) should all be reduced or eliminated outright. There are strong ethical and economic arguments for doing so.

Consider student loans. The Debt Collective, a union for debtors I helped found, has been leading the fight for full abolition on the moral ground that everyone should be entitled to free, quality higher education. At the same time, canceling all federal student debt would boost the economy by up to $108 billion a year, add up to 1.5 million jobs annually, and help close the racial wealth gap.

Similar arguments can be made across the board. For example, medical bills—including those incurred from Covid-19—have continued to pile up during the crisis, a problem made worse by the fact that nearly 15 million people lost their employer-based health insurance. Canceling medical debt would pull millions away from the brink of insolvency, increase spending in the broader economy, and reduce suffering and stress.

Of course, the government has not gone down this route. Instead of getting debt reductions, regular people have been granted insufficient reprieve through a confusing mix of moratoriums and half measures, including a temporary pause on student loan payments and the ineffective halt on evictions by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Municipalities are also in dire need of help. As a result of the coronavirus, many communities are facing budget shortfalls, which means shuttered social services, crumbling infrastructure, and layoffs—with an increase in household indebtedness as the inevitable result. As the lawyer and policy expert Robert Hockett told me, Donald Trump and the Republican Party have compounded the harm: Cities have had to incur costs, and debt, for expenses that in normal times would be covered by a functioning federal government. In November, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin stymied assistance to struggling communities by canceling the Municipal Liquidity Facility, which Congress established earlier in the year for that express purpose.

The Biden administration should utilize existing or emergency powers to make medical debts uncollectible.
“Congress should cancel rents and mortgages, cancel all rental debt, erase Covid evictions from people’s records, and pass a full eviction moratorium that bans filings, hearings, and all evictions,” said Tara Raghuveer, director of the Homes Guarantee campaign. “If relief is provided to landlords and others in the industry, it must come with strict conditions like rent control and restrictions on future evictions.” The Rent and Mortgage Cancellation Act, which Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar introduced in April, points in the right direction.

Canceling medical debt will require some ingenuity, because it is held by innumerable hospitals, private health care providers, and debt collectors—a reflection, said Jenifer Bosco, a staff attorney at the National Consumer Law Center, “of our patchwork system.”

The real solution to the problem is single-payer, universal health care; passing legislation so that past-due medical bills don’t negatively affect people’s credit scores would help as an interim measure. Bosco said the federal government could wipe out all medical debt it holds, including debt owed to military or veterans’ hospitals. Democrats could also look to Senator Bernie Sanders’s campaign proposal to erase over $80 billion in medical debt currently in collection by having the federal government purchase and extinguish it.

To aid municipalities, Congress could revive the State and Local Coronavirus Relief Funds portion of the Heroes Act, which passed in the House last year but has been blocked by the GOP-controlled Senate. That bill instructs the Treasury to provide grants for Covid-19-related expenses, replace forgone revenues, and help “frontline health workers, transit employees, teachers, and other workers providing vital services.” Cities shouldn’t have to borrow when the federal government can easily provide the funds.

If Democrats fail to regain control of the Senate, however, we will need to think creatively about approaches that don’t require Congress. Legal research spearheaded by Debt Collective co-founder Luke Herrine demonstrates that any sitting president already possesses the power to direct the secretary of education to cancel all student debt using an authority called “compromise and settlement.” Some conviction and a signature are all that’s required.

The CDC’s current eviction moratorium will need to be extended (it’s set to expire on December 31) and expanded to help renters. In a similar vein, the Biden administration should investigate and utilize existing or emergency powers to make medical debts uncollectible. It can also be more aggressive about oversight and compliance to ensure that people get the care they are legally entitled to from nonprofit hospitals, which are mandated to provide free or reduced-cost services to patients in need (so-called charity care).

As for municipalities, the Federal Reserve Board can offer state, territorial, tribal, and local governments 30-year loans without charging any interest or fees, and without any additional authorization from Congress as long as it rolls over the loans every six months. “Not only would this allow governments to refinance all
of their existing debt at 0 percent interest, saving an estimated $160 billion a year in interest payments, but it would also allow them to finance new public works projects to upgrade and green our infrastructure, make our communities more resilient, and expand social services,” said Saqib Bhatti of the Action Center on Race and the Economy.

Movements need to be ready to challenge a bipartisan consensus that denies relief to ordinary people while aiding the rich. As was the case during the last financial crisis, a stunning double standard has been in effect. With the Cares Act, Congress rushed to aid the private sector, rescuing and rewarding overleveraged companies for their risky financial decisions and stabilizing the corporate bond market. For corporations, the Federal Reserve lowered the cost of borrowing to unprecedented rates and bought up bad debt but chose not to impose conditions in the public interest (such as forcing the beneficiaries to retain workers, honor union contracts, curb stock buybacks, trim CEO pay, or advance climate sustainability). Movements will also need to push back against the centrist Democrats and cynical Republicans who are already invoking deficits as an excuse for austerity, even though they were busy showering hundreds of billions of dollars on the private sector only a few months ago.

We have the money to cancel debt, and doing so is in everyone’s interest. The problem is that the powerful rarely listen to reason. “It’s clear that we’re not going to convince [Congress] to relieve suffering through logic or data or stories,” Raghuvire said. “Instead, our movement must build the type of power to force our demands to be met. That means doing something really challenging: transforming an act of desperation into an act of power, withholding rent as a political strategy.” The Debt Collective is planning a campaign of economic disobedience—a student debt strike—to push President Biden to use the compromise and settlement authority to erase all student debt. Should he refuse to take bold action amid a deadly pandemic and a deep recession, it will be an abuse of power.

Many of the debts that weigh us down should never have existed to begin with and should be eliminated on that basis. But it’s not just about morality; it’s also about the math. The fact is, debts that can’t be paid won’t be paid. The Biden administration can face that fact, or it will face the rage and retribution of the people who have been left to drown.

Astra Taylor is cofounder of the Debt Collective and director of the documentary films What Is Democracy?, Zizek!, and Examined Life. She is the author of The People’s Platform and Democracy May Not Exist, but We’ll Miss It When It’s Gone.

Expanding the Union Base

**BY JANE McALEVEY**

The coming year will be incredibly challenging for the working class. Austerity is on the immediate horizon, resulting from the unwillingness of the bipartisan political class to challenge its largest donors by taxing the rich and corporations. The presidential election’s outcome will reduce attacks on immigrants and communities of color, but not enough. More workers will face dire conditions in 2021 than they did in 2009: massive unemployment and underemployment; a growing homelessness crisis because of imminent evictions and not enough income to meet rent or mortgage demands; and a severe health care crisis made catastrophic by a raging pandemic and nearly 15 million people losing their employer-based medical coverage in the first three months of the pandemic when they or their loved ones lost their jobs.

Joe Biden’s platform for the economy, part of his Build Back Better plan, would substantially advance the quality of life among the multiracial working class—but the prospect of getting any of those proposals through the Senate, no matter the outcome in Georgia’s runoff elections, isn’t realistic. To win much of the platform Biden ran on will require bolder leadership than he or the generation of neoliberal Democrats in his cohort have exercised in decades. And it will require both a Senate and a House that have more members of the Squad and fewer Joe Manchins. Much depends, then, on the actions Biden takes in his first 100 days in office to enable a change in the US power structure. We need executive-level directives that don’t require congressional approval to tilt the scales in favor of justice-seeking Democrats in 2022. (In the Senate, 34 seats will be up for election, with 13 Democrats and 20 Republicans defending.)

This means making moves that give a structural advantage to progressive forces, such as Biden immediately firing Peter Robb, the worker-hating general counsel at the National Labor Relations Board, to stop the endless bleeding of workers’ basic rights. (Yes, Biden can fire him.) It also means prioritizing fair unionization elections, ending current asylum and immigration policies, canceling student loan debt, and extending Covid-era mortgage payment and rent forgiveness—which, taken together, will create a larger base of people to more enthusiastically mobilize for the Democrats, not the Republicans, in the 2022 midterms. These are urgent actions because midterm elections usually have a lower turnout than presidential-year elections. They need to be in place to ensure Democratic turnout and convince a portion of the 80 million Americans who sat out this past election to vote in 2022 so we stand a chance to radically improve life on, and indeed save, the planet.

Many a headline has trumpeted the fact that Biden received the largest number of votes in US history (over 80 million). Donald Trump, however, received more than 74 million votes—the second-largest total in US history. Of the nearly 22 million more people who voted in 2020 than in 2016, a huge share went to a deeply racist, misogynist grifter. Those
numbers should leave little doubt that the forces behind Trump have been engaged in a lot of base expansion and organizing and then mobilizing those voters to the polls. And as was reflected in Trump’s share of the vote as well as the dismal down-ballot results, those reactionary forces are catching up to the already organized base of progressives and the diminishing base of unions. The only possible conclusion we can draw from these very disturbing numbers is that progressives in general—and unions in particular—must recommit to base expansion. That won’t happen by using the various magical formulas popular with most national union leaders and the media. (Sectoral bargaining and cutting worker-hurting deals with gig-economy companies, for example, are the current flavors of the month.)

What actually wins is the type of organizing that shifts people’s understanding of us versus them. Because of the power of Fox News and social media, people need help understanding how to make sense of their own lives. How we do this matters. It requires recommitment to an approach to union organizing that recognizes that the triple crises of race, gender, and class are inseparable. This approach deeply integrates the sum of those three forces into the theory of power and, thus, the theory of winning.

We should spend a lot more time with workers who are not in unions, don’t support unions, or think they don’t need a union.

I outlined this approach 10 years ago in my very first Nation article, published on the heels of the disastrous 2010 midterms. I identified two factors that continue to plague national union leadership: the tendency to confuse access with power, and the negative impact on union strategies of what I call the Democratic Party’s consultant-industrial complex. Right now, though, top union officials first need to just stop running with scissors. No sooner had Biden been declared the winner than national unions began fighting over which white man would be named secretary of labor. This is all the more embarrassing when you recall that, as far back as 1932, Franklin Roosevelt nominated a brilliant woman, Frances Perkins, to the job—and that was when the people who were considered workers or wage earners were mostly men.

Another disturbing indication that national union leaders haven’t learned the right lessons since 2010 is watching them demobilize their base, following cues from Biden’s people that we didn’t need to put people in the streets to protect the election results. Whether huge, nonviolent marches were actually needed to protect Biden’s victory is almost beside the point: The decision revealed that national labor leadership still confuses access with power. Unions got virtually nothing from eight years of Barack Obama trying to play inside baseball and be nice to Wall Street, and the little we did get—fair union election rules in 2014, six years in, since reversed by the Trump administration—was too late.

The only constituencies that won big under Obama were the two that actually confronted him and refused to acquiesce to backroom deals: the LGBTQ and immigrant rights movements. Demobilizing our base is never a good idea, especially when the right wing and the Trump forces continue to mobilize. Unions need to expand their base if Democrats are to stand any real chance in the future; simultaneously, they need to provide deep political education. The organizing strategies that achieve both winning more and helping workers understand who and what divides and oppresses them make up what I call whole worker organizing. It starts by identifying informal or organic leaders in the workplace and then engaging in structure tests, which reveal much more than polling ever can. Structure tests are mini campaigns that build and assess active participation among the ranks on immediate issues. They are a stark contrast to fly-by-phone opinion polls, forcing unions to regularly engage 100 percent
of the workforce in two-way conversations instead of just talking with workers who already support the union. Clearly, to expand the base, we should spend a lot more time with workers who are not in unions, don’t support unions, or think they don’t need a union. Targets include the 80 million people who didn’t vote in 2020 or the ones who pulled the lever for the party that couldn’t care less about killing them, literally.

Whole worker organizing doesn’t stop there; it extends the same methods into the workers’ communities. Once there’s enough trust and organization built inside the workplace, organizers among the ranks—supplemented by paid staff—help map the broader structures of power in the labor market in which they live, so workers come to understand the relationships their employers have to the political elite in the area. More important, they learn how to upend those relationships by dividing and conquering those forces and building new alliances with the many organized social sectors, such as those represented by faith leaders and civil rights groups, that often have more power than today’s unions in any single labor market.

Such alliances need to be built by the workers themselves, not union officials handing out contributions to local church groups. They help neutralize the employer in union elections and strikes, allowing more victories while uniting unions with movements fighting for more affordable housing and environmental and climate justice as well as combating violence against people of color and women. As workers come to see the network of power relationships at work and in their communities, they become highly educated voters, not just new union members or members with better contracts. In this type of union campaign, a broader working-class resilience is built across an entire community.

If unions had actually invested in whole worker organizing—based on the workplace but not exclusively in it and not exclusively about its issues—and if their research had been based on a geographic power structure analysis of the labor market rather than a sophisticated but ultimately futile company-by-company study, we’d have higher union density today than we did in 2000, not less. And we’d have a union movement both centered in and anchoring a broader, more powerful social movement.

The bad news is that we wasted a decade. The good news is that it’s never too late to start doing the work we must. There simply are no shortcuts.

Jane McAlevey is The Nation’s strikes correspondent and the author of A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing, and the Fight for Democracy. She is a senior policy fellow at the University of California’s Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.

BY ZEPHYR TEACHOUT

MONOPOLIES

Break the Stranglehold

From the time Joe Biden was a toddler until his mid-30s, wages in the country grew, and the wealth created by growth in the economy was shared by everyone. But by the time Biden hit 40, everything had begun to change. The incomes of those at the top grew strongly, while the wages of middle-class and poor people hit a wall. Labor’s power decreased, and monopoly power increased. It became harder to organize workers, harder to start new businesses, and easier for capital to organize. It was the early 1980s, and Ronald Reagan was president.

I have a dream that in the first 100 days of his presidency, Biden will lay out these stark facts and declare it his mission to bring growth and equity to this country—and to destroy the chasm that now exists between growth and shared prosperity. He will say, “Shared prosperity is the only kind worth fighting for, because the prosperity of those at the top has been made possible by massive, unprecedented wage theft, unfair competition, and the purchase of our politicians by powerful interests. The results have been increased inequality, decreased dignity, more instability, and the corporate takeover of our sacred democracy. As your president, I will make it my solemn responsibility to free America from the vice grip of corporate monopolization.”

In that speech, Biden will announce that the industrial policy of the United States will be to proactively support labor at every turn and to crush monopolies. He will direct the Department of Justice to rip up the antitrust guidelines written by Reagan and those who followed him—George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, all of whom framed their industrial policy in talk of “consumer welfare.”

The Biden guidelines will declare instead that the purpose of antitrust law is to protect democracy and to ensure a rough equality among citizens. Barry Lynn, author of the recent book Liberty From All Masters, argues that mere technical fixes will not be sufficient; we have to change the way the government approaches the whole problem of economic power in society. The biggest thing Biden could do, according to Lynn: “Get rid of the Reagan-era consumer welfare pro-monopoly philosophy. There is nothing more important than saying the purpose of the law IS to protect democracy and liberty, not to protect consumer welfare.”

Biden can roar into the White House with the vision laid out for him by Ted Kaufman, one of his transition team cochairs, who praised Franklin Roosevelt’s aggressive approach to monopoly abuses, saying, “FDR’s leadership brought us back into economic balance. There is no reason, through dedication and hard work, we cannot do the same.” From Kaufman’s lips to Biden’s ear.

In the first 100 days, to give energy and credibility to his challenge, Biden’s Federal Trade Commission should tear down the ideological wall that has limited the power of antitrust enforcers to stop capital from organizing. But he shouldn’t stop there. Biden can weave anti-monopoly policy throughout his administration if he takes the following steps:

§ Biden’s FTC should ban non-compete clauses in all employment arrangements. Noncompete clauses are contracts, written against the spirit of all antitrust laws, that can
make it nearly impossible for employees to look for work in the same field when they leave a job—which, in turn, makes it very difficult to bargain for decent wages or benefits.

§ Biden’s FTC should ban exclusive agreements by dominant firms. Monopolists use these agreements to make it difficult for new or smaller firms to succeed, by limiting their ability to get into various markets. Several organizations, led by the Open Markets Institute, have asked the FTC to issue such a ban, because exclusive agreements allow these corporations to abuse customers, distributors, suppliers, and workers.

§ Biden’s FTC should issue bright-line rules and clear market-share guidelines for mergers. These would build off the 1968 guidelines that served to deter mergers by dominant companies. For instance, in 1968, the FTC would ordinarily have challenged the merger of a firm with 10 percent of the share in a highly concentrated market with a firm that had 2 percent or more. New guidelines would ensure that big companies can’t eat their competition or potential competitors.

§ The National Labor Relations Board should issue rules clarifying that Uber and Lyft drivers are employees under federal law. That would give them the right to join a union, along with the power to negotiate over their working conditions, preempting much of California’s newly passed Proposition 22.

§ Biden should issue an executive order that strips the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs of its power to veto rules made by agencies. OIRA has operated as a mini–Supreme Court within past administrations by using cost-benefit analyses to reject key regulations as too damaging to the corporate bottom line.

§ Biden should direct the secretary of agriculture to use the department’s power under the Packers and Stockyards Act, a 1921 law that gives the president responsibility for protecting against concentration in agriculture. Using this power, his administration could ban abusive contracts between farmers and monopolist corporate meat packers, as well as block new mergers and undo prior bad ones.

§ Biden should direct his secretary of transportation to overturn the existing rule that gives airlines antitrust immunity.

§ Biden should direct the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to restructure the energy sector to promote decentralized sources of power, green technologies, and more robust supplies of renewable energy.

§ Biden should direct the Justice Department to pursue an aggressive legal agenda, beginning with launching a major investigation of Amazon.

§ Biden should task the Justice Department with pursuing an aggressive legal agenda, beginning with launching a major investigation of Amazon.

§ Biden should direct the tax authorities to negotiate with countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to stop transnational tax avoidance.

§ Biden should direct the Defense Department to issue new contracting guidelines. Over the past 40 years, presidents have loosened the rules on monopoly contracts, weakened procurement rules designed to ensure fair competition, allowed waivers of the Bay Area Act, and weakened cost-reporting requirements. Biden’s team should reverse this trend and go back to New Deal–era contracting principles.

§ Biden should direct the Justice Department with pursuing an aggressive legal agenda, beginning with launching a major investigation of Amazon for essentially requiring sellers to use its warehousing services. The department should not only continue the Trump administration’s litigation against Google for illegally establishing and protecting a search monopoly but also bring a lawsuit against John Deere, the machinery manufacturing giant, for not allowing farmers to repair their own tractors. And it should launch an investigation into hospital consolidation.

§ Finally, Biden should adopt the conclusions of the extraordinary House Antitrust Subcommittee report released in October, which calls for, among other things, breaking up the big tech companies into their component businesses, as Elizabeth Warren has also urged, and overruling bad Supreme Court precedents that make bringing antitrust cases harder.

There isn’t much time to act. The tentacles of today’s monopolistic companies reach into every corner of American life. Biden should harness the energy of the moment and seize the chance to free our country from the manacles of monopoly.
End the Forever Wars

Eight months into his presidency, Joe Biden will mark the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. While he shouldn’t wait until the literal anniversary to get started, 2021 marks an ideal opportunity to break decisively with what have come to be known as the forever wars—the open-ended US military involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and many other countries across the Muslim world. A generation of Americans with no memory of the 9/11 attacks is currently deployed in an increasingly aimless effort to avenge them that has now spanned three drastically different presidencies. Polling in recent years has shown consistent opposition to these wars, including from veterans, who have borne the brunt of policy-makers’ refusal to abandon a failed counterterrorism strategy.

For progressives and anti-interventionists, the early signs from Biden have been inauspicious. His inner circle on foreign policy will include Antony Blinken as secretary of state, Jake Sullivan as national security adviser, and Avril Haines as director of national intelligence. All are veterans of the Obama administration and played a significant role in formulating and directing military interventions, and all have leveraged their connections for profit in the private sector during the Trump era. In general, they are fervent believers in American global leadership, backed by military supremacy. The warm welcome this group has received within the Beltway foreign policy community—often derisively referred to as the Blob—suggests an imminent return to the pre-Trump status quo.

But the national mood has shifted dramatically since Barack Obama left office. Foreign policy is a space where many Americans across party lines are demanding a new direction, with clear support for withdrawing forces from Afghanistan and shifting resources from the Pentagon budget into domestic priorities. Democrats in particular support repealing the endlessly renewed post-9/11 Authorization for Use of Military Force, which has granted the executive branch virtually unlimited war-making powers, and which progressive legislators like Bernie Sanders and Ro Khanna have fought to rein in. A Biden administration that wants to maintain broad support and transpartisan appeal could feel pressure to chart a new course.

The Democrats’ 2020 platform, to which Biden and his inner circle are theoretically committed, explicitly recognizes the need to end the forever wars. It promises to “bring the troops home” and to use force only “when necessary to protect national security and when the objective is clear and achievable—with the informed consent of the American people, and where warranted, the approval of Congress.” It specifically calls for an end to the US-backed Saudi war in Yemen, a humanitarian catastrophe, and for reversing Trump’s curtailment of travel and remittances to Cuba, a major positive legacy of Obama’s second term. It also calls for ending the Trump administration’s rush to war with Iran and for recommitting to the Iran nuclear deal, which Blinken helped shape. And unlike the party’s 2016 platform, it recognizes “the worth of every Israeli and every Palestinian” and opposes annexation of the West Bank and Israel’s settlement expansion—although it does not recognize the existence of an “occupation,” and Blinken has made it clear that Israel can count on US military aid no matter what.

To the extent that this language is promising, it represents a push by progressive groups and the Sanders campaign to influence the party’s direction ahead of last summer’s convention. But it doesn’t necessarily reflect how Biden’s team sees the world. So far, there is little indication of genuine soul-searching over Obama-era policies like the troop surge in Afghanistan, the expansion of George W. Bush’s targeted assassination program, the authorization of regime change in Libya, or the war in Yemen.

To avoid a repeat of the Obama administration’s greatest foreign policy mistakes, Biden and his advisers would be wise to recognize the subsequent shifts in both public opinion and strategic reality and to work to change the underlying US relationships in the greater Middle East. In particular, the Trump administration’s uncritical indulgence of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states must be repudiated, and there should be a swift diplomatic reset with Iran, to make clear to foreign autocrats that Jared Kushner’s corrupt approach to diplomacy was an aberration.

Rooting out the transnational corruption exemplified by Kushner will require more than just a new diplomatic approach; it will require a coordinated effort to stem the flow of illicit capital across borders and to crack down on lobbying efforts by foreign governments in Washington. As with ending the forever wars, Biden, like many of his Democratic primary rivals, is theoretically committed to such a crackdown. To follow through, he will need to take aggressive executive actions, many of which would really be domestic policy shifts with significant international implications. For instance, he could broaden the definition of “lobbyist” and impose bans on former government officials serving as lobbyists or vice versa; expand transparency measures on tax information for public officials; amend the global Magnitsky Act to target corrupt officials throughout the world, in both rival and friendly countries; and shut down international tax havens that benefit both US and foreign oligarchs. Biden could thus send a clear message that US foreign policy is no longer for sale to the highest bidder—although that message risks being muddled, given that the core members of his national security team have secured lucrative consulting contracts between their stints in government.
The US relationship with China will be an especially treacherous and central concern when Biden takes office. After two decades of relatively stable relations, during which China policy was heavily influenced by the US Chamber of Commerce and by global capital’s desire for cheap labor and weak regulations, both Democratic and Republican leaders increasingly view China as a rival and a threat. China’s initial mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic, the growing recognition of US-China trade’s deleterious effects on America’s economic and political health, and the ongoing cultural genocide in Xinjiang and the repression of civil liberties in Hong Kong are all legitimate reasons for this shift.

But at the same time, the Biden administration should resist the temptation to spiral into a new Cold War with Beijing, the consequences of which would be disastrous for both countries and the entire world. A Biden ad run during the 2020 campaign that struck a crude anti-China tone, and that provoked vocal criticism from both anti-interventionist and Asian American activists, hinted at this danger. Biden must avoid the further militarization of East Asia and instead focus his attention on renegotiating trade policies to prioritize labor, climate, and human rights. Under Biden, Washington should champion progressive, innovative, and multilateral approaches to transnational problems, from climate change to borderless pandemics—a process that will necessarily require cooperation with China, home to nearly one-fifth of the world’s people, which would be severely undermined by a new arms race. The 2020 platform calls for extending New START and other non-proliferation agreements and for negotiating new arms control treaties with China—a commitment that Biden must be held to in office.

None of this will come easily to Biden or his administration, but the American public, exhausted by the pandemic and two decades of war, is in no mood for military adventurism. The trillions of dollars the United States has squandered on the Pentagon since 9/11 could have been spent on universal health care, housing, and infrastructure at home and on diplomacy and nonmilitary aid abroad. Biden has rightly pledged to rebuild the State Department, which has been gutted by Trump, but he could also frame any withdrawal from militarism as a step toward reinvesting in the health and well-being of the United States. This shouldn’t be mistaken for Trump’s crude America-first nationalism; rather, it should be understood as a genuinely democratic process that reestablishes Washington’s accountability to the people. The Trump era in general and the pandemic in particular have badly tarnished America’s reputation; if Biden wishes to restore American global leadership, the best way to do so would be to demonstrate that the United States is capable of providing basic services to its own people.

Unfortunately, even if Democrats win the impending Senate runoff elections in Georgia, it seems clear that Biden will be severely limited in his ability to pass major legislation. Instead, his domestic agenda will likely be limited to executive orders and a handful of centrist compromises on managing the pandemic and its economic fallout. On foreign policy, however, a Biden administration will enjoy a relatively free hand and can be more directly responsive to the demands articulated by an active progressive base.

The good news is that progressive activism and intellectual infrastructure is far more robust than it was at the beginning of Obama’s first term, including on foreign policy, where new organizations like the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft are committed to shaking up the foreign policy consensus. Biden may be an instinctive centrist, but he cannot govern without the support of the growing progressive wing of his own party in Congress; nor can Democrats prevail in the future without buy-in from the younger generation, which leans left. Holding Biden accountable for a foreign policy that breaks with 20 years of war and recommits to human flourishing will necessarily be a collective effort. Democratizing foreign policy will, by definition, be a bottom-up project.

The Biden administration should resist the temptation to spiral into a new Cold War with China.
Time to Deliver

AMERICA IS MOVING FORWARD FROM THE DARK DAYS OF DONALD TRUMP’S presidency. Critical numbers of working people of all races joined young, Black, brown, and Indigenous voters to propel us to victory. We organized progressives in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan to help take back those states. Thanks to decades of on-the-ground organizing in Georgia and Arizona, we flipped those states blue. And we kept our gavel in the House of Representatives through remarkable turnout, including in swing districts where eight incumbents ran and won while supporting Medicare for All, and four ran and won while supporting the Green New Deal.

Progressive ballot initiatives also won across the country. Florida overwhelmingly passed a $15 minimum wage. Voters in Colorado passed 12 weeks of paid family leave while also rejecting an abortion ban. Four states, red and blue, legalized recreational marijuana. And Arizona raised taxes on the rich to increase funding for public education. Make no mistake: Voters approved a progressive agenda. We also gave President-elect Joe Biden a clear mandate to fight for us, to respond to the root causes of suffering, and to transform this country so people can thrive, not just survive.

As we celebrate our tremendous victories, we must pay attention to why more than 74 million people voted to reelect Trump. We also have to understand why Democrats lost seats in the House and failed to pick up more in the Senate. It’s clear that too many people no longer believe that government has done enough to help lift all boats. Worse, they see that both Democratic and Republican administrations have allowed and promoted policies that benefit the wealthiest. Working people have watched their incomes stagnate and fall, even as the incomes of the richest people rise. They have seen Grandma cutting her pills in half because she can’t afford her prescription. They have cried as their families are torn apart because of cruel immigration laws and criminal injustice. And they have sat inside smoke-filled homes as the planet burns.

The solution to this is clear: a progressive agenda that makes a transformative difference in people’s lives. Biden’s platform was the most progressive of any recent nominee because our movement worked with his campaign to push forward bold policies. Now it’s time to deliver on them. With President Biden, Congress must take immediate action on critical priorities. The Congressional Progressive Caucus, which I chair, is ready to make that a reality, and that is why our members overwhelmingly passed reforms that make us more organized, effective, and ready to meet this governing moment. Working inside and outside of Congress, we are ready to fight for an agenda that lifts people up.

First, we must deliver expansive Covid-19 relief that meets the scale of the crisis and directly takes on the disparate harm it has caused to Black, Indigenous, and other vulnerable communities, starting with the country’s 140 million poor and low-income people. This relief should stay in place until the economy recovers, and it must put money directly in people’s pockets through generous stimulus checks, expanded unemployment insurance, and other social safety net benefits that include everyone, regardless of immigration status. It must also include rental and mortgage assistance, cancellation of student debt, and an immediate raising of the federal minimum wage to $15 an hour.

The relief package must invest heavily in state and local infrastructure and in direct government aid to small and medium-size businesses, through a program like my Paycheck Recovery Act, so they can get help and keep workers on the payroll. We also need to ensure that everyone has access to free testing, contact tracing, and vaccines, while also creating 200,000 new public health jobs.

Second, we need to put people back to work, give workers more power, and transition to a clean energy economy. This is the moment to create millions of new clean energy jobs. We can invest in a clean energy infrastructure package that transforms our grid, supports public transit, and fixes crumbling roads and bridges—all while building our communities through new and better schools, water systems, and broadband. We can dramatically curtail air, water, land, and climate pollution and invest in resilience jobs that enable communities to prepare for and respond to climate-related disasters.

We should negotiate or renegotiate fair trade policies that protect domestic manufacturing, strengthen worker power and environmental protections, and expand workplace democracy. We must also finally invest in a family infrastructure that builds a strong caregiving economy with living wages, benefits, and rights for child care, public education, and domestic workers.

Third, we must absolutely guarantee health care for everyone. It was unacceptable before, but it is egregious that during a pandemic, at least 87 million people are uninsured or underinsured. As we work toward a Medicare for All, single-payer health care system, we can immediately achieve some foundational pieces while improving Medicare’s coverage, by automatically enrolling in Medicare anyone who loses their job, expanding Medicare to lower the eligibility age to 50 and cover everyone up to age 25, and lowering prescription drug prices through the negotiating of critical drugs across all payers. We must also increase funding for community health centers and rural hospitals while protecting health care options for women.

Fourth, we must expand voting rights and get money out of politics. We just witnessed voter suppression at work, and we must return the vote and the voice to the people. By building on HR 1, which the House passed in 2019, we can fix and expand voting rights in America and provide statehood for the District of Columbia.

Fifth, we must confront racism in all our communities, so we can build an economy that builds a strong caregiving economy with living wages, benefits, and rights for child care, public education, and domestic workers.
Even as we celebrate our victories, we must understand why 74 million people voted to reelect Trump.

and racial diversity in top management. We must also restructure our tax system so that Wall Street and the wealthiest corporations pay their fair share. In addition, Congress must finish the work started this session to end monopolistic practices so we can protect consumers and small businesses.

This is a brave and just agenda. It is the way forward. And progressives inside and outside of Congress are ready to make it a reality.

Pramila Jayapal is the chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus and the US representative for Washington’s Seventh Congressional District.

OE BIDEN’S CENTRAL CAMPAIGN MESSAGE FOCUSED ON A FIGHT TO “RESTORE the soul of America.” Now we are in a fight for the soul of the Biden presidency. Like Barack Obama’s presidency, this will be a constant terrain of struggle—at times hostile, at times open to progressives and social movements. And while progressives did not succeed in getting our candidate at the top of the ticket, we know we can now lead our party through the wilderness with a bold and urgent vision. Here are five ways progressives must press that vision:

**1) The fight for the soul of Biden’s administration and personnel.** Progressives breathed a sigh of relief when Ron Klain was chosen as chief of staff over Bruce Reed and Steve Ricchetti, two men ideologically hostile toward them. Reed is a deficit hawk who is infamous for, among other things, his role as an architect of Bill Clinton’s 1996 welfare “reform” and as the executive director of the Bowles-Simpson commission, which sought to push Democrats to work with Republicans on cutting programs like Social Security. Ricchetti was a lobbyist for Big Pharma and worked for industry groups vehemently opposed to Medicare for All.

Klain’s appointment was followed by the announcement that Ricchetti had been given a less prominent but still influential position alongside Representative Cedric Richmond, one of the top Democratic recipients of donations from fossil fuel companies. The Sunrise Movement, Justice Democrats (the organization for which I work), and others criticized the appointments of Ricchetti and Richmond and said their selection only underscored the need for Biden to staff his administration with progressive leaders free of corporate influence. Since then, Biden has appointed progressives like Xavier Becerra, Deb Haaland, Jared Bernstein, and Heather Bouchey to his administration. That number, however, is paltry compared to the 40 percent of Democrats in the House of Representatives who are part of the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

Senator Chris Murphy has warned that Mitch McConnell, the current and potentially future Senate majority leader, may stonewall Biden’s cabinet selection process—presumably as a spur for choosing more GOP-friendly nominees. Instead, Democrats must make it clear that they defeated Donald Trump by more than 7 million votes. If McConnell chooses to obstruct the process, Biden should announce that he is ready to stock his cabinet with a slew of acting or recess-appointed officials in response.

**2) The fight for the soul of Biden’s policy agenda.** The president-elect has said he plans to use his mandate to deliver results on the greatest crises of our time: public
health, climate change, systemic racism, and the economy. His appointment of John Kerry as climate envoy demonstrates that Biden is making climate action a priority. After progressives pushed for an Office of Climate Mobilization, Biden chose Gina McCarthy and Ali Zaidi, allies of the climate movement, to lead domestic climate policy. He can also use his executive power via the Treasury to shift financial flows from fossil fuels to climate solutions, while directing his cabinet to create millions of jobs by beginning transition to all federal buildings toward 100 percent clean energy.

3) The fight for the soul of the congressional Democrats. The Congress that will usher in Biden’s presidency will be far more progressive than the one Obama faced in 2009, with enough power to hold Biden accountable on policy. The Squad (Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley) has grown with the addition of progressive leaders like Jamaal Bowman, Cori Bush, Marie Newman, and Mondaire Jones. The Congressional Progressive Caucus has already passed a major reform package that will make it a more organized and cohesive force under Representative Pramila Jayapal. The defeat of a number of conservative Democrats has given the members of the progressive bloc increasing leverage in negotiations with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. This bloc is already using its leverage to push for a more robust Covid relief package that includes $1,200 stimulus checks.

Considering that McConnell may still control the Senate and that Democrats may well lack the willpower to eliminate the filibuster, progressives will have to push Biden to use every tool at his disposal to deliver on behalf of the American majority that elected him. This is particularly critical given that the vast majority of congressional Republicans have spent the weeks since the election amplifying Trump’s attempts to orchestrate a coup. Now the same Republicans will demand a say in the Biden administration’s and the Democrats’ legislative priorities.

Progressives should remain vigilant, lest Biden yield to his impulse to strike a grand bargain with the Republicans. In any such deal, McConnell would simply get the president and Democratic leaders to swallow as many poison pills as possible to ensure a demoralized and demobilized Democratic electorate in 2022. Any compromises with him could lead to even greater fissures than already exist between the progressive and corporate-friendly wings of the Democratic Party (a result that probably wouldn’t upset McConnell).

4) The fight for the soul of our multiracial democracy. The most fundamental questions our democracy faces in the coming months will be: How hard will the Democrats fight for the majority that elected them, and how hard will the Republicans fight to enshrine minority rule in our institutions?

The United States may be the only country in the world where a party can win the national majority of votes for the presidency and both legislative chambers without being able to govern. Progressives dedicated to a multiracial social democratic vision can find common cause with more narrowly partisan Democrats in warning that, as we have seen, power makes the Republicans more extreme and authoritarian, not less. As the GOP becomes more committed to preserving minority rule through gerrymandering, the ever-deepening rural bias of the Senate, and packing the courts with right-wing judges, progressives may become the most loyal partisan force in the party by demanding that Democrats explicitly resist minority rule and govern for the American majority.

Even if Democrats lose both of the Senate runoff elections in Georgia, the party will still represent 20 million more people than McConnell’s “majority.” Sooner or later, Democrats will have to confront the fact that Republicans can continue to hold on to political power without ever having to compete for the votes of the majority of Americans.

5) The fight over public sentiment. During Obama’s two terms, we witnessed the rise of movements like the Dreamers, Occupy Wall Street, the Fight for $15, Black Lives Matter, and the movement against the Keystone and Dakota Access pipelines. Movements outside the halls of power shine a light on urgent issues, shape public opinion, and bend the impossible into the inevitable. Since Biden comes from a political tradition based more in triangulation than in any clearly held policy views, social movements will have to create the political space for the next Democratic administration to act at the scale of the crises that Americans are facing.

The most transformative presidents in American history never fully embraced the social movements of their time. Instead they seized the political space created by those movements. Lincoln was not an abolitionist, Franklin Roosevelt was not a socialist or trade unionist, and Lyndon Johnson was not a civil rights activist. It was the relentless struggle in the streets and at the ballot box, as well as the efforts of unapologetic dissenteres in the halls of Congress, that shaped these presidencies. “You’ve convinced me. Now go out and make me do it,” Roosevelt allegedly told the legendary activist and organizer A. Philip Randolph as the latter pushed FDR for labor and civil rights reforms.

Insurgent tactics and demands may irritate party leaders, but that friction serves to move politics toward greater freedom and justice.

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Spread Far and Fast

What can we learn from the 1918 pandemic?

BY RICHARD J. EVANS
facilities were overwhelmed. At Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan, “people were dying in beds, on stretchers and in the corridors. In the pediatric wards, children were packed three to a bed.” Doctors and nurses were working virtually around the clock. “We didn’t have time to treat them,” said one. “We didn’t take temperatures; we didn’t even have time to take blood pressure.”

Governments, medical services, and ordinary citizens were unprepared. Famous people began to fall ill; the British prime minister was so badly affected that reports said it was “touch and go” whether he would live or die. Special hospitals were hurriedly constructed to deal with the extra burden of thousands upon thousands of sick and dying patients. In the morgues, bodies were stacked one on top of another, identified only by tags tied to their left feet. The families of victims resorted to stealing coffins, so great was the shortage caused by the massive rise in demand.

Medical opinion was uncertain in the face of the new disease. Only as it spread did a better understanding of it develop, and in the meantime, all sorts of dangerous home remedies were tried, from gargling with disinfectant solution to ingesting kerosene administered on a lump of sugar. A more agreeable way of disinfecting the digestive tract, recommended by some, was to down several straight whiskeys or tumblers of gin. One young man in North Carolina reported wearing a bag of asafetida around his neck. “People thought the smell would kill germs,” he wrote. “So we all wore a bag of asafetida and smelled like rotten flesh.”

In some cities, including New York, schools and theaters remained open, and officials continued to play down the seriousness of the situation. When medical authorities, concluding that the disease was spread by droplet infection through coughing and sneezing, recommended the wearing of face masks, residents of San Francisco were particularly resistant: One downtown attorney in the city described an official order to wear a mask as “absolutely unconstitutional.” The police did their best to enforce the regulation. On occasion, they could go too far. One public health officer, according to a local newspaper report, drew his gun when a man refused to comply; the man “closed in on him and in the succeeding affray was shot in the arm and the leg” before being taken to a hospital, where he was arrested, while being treated for his wounds, for refusing to obey the officer’s order.

Public health precautions worked, but they were applied only patchily. In Manchester, England, the city’s chief medical officer managed to get the schools closed and the sick placed in lockdown, which was said to have saved many lives.

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how many people died. Arnold claims that global deaths totaled “upwards of 100 million.” However, other recent estimates put the figure more plausibly somewhere between 17 million and 20 million. This was still catastrophic, given that the world’s population at the time stood at around 1.8 billion.

The high death rate and the onset of unusually severe pulmonary symptoms were also a result of years of privation, poor nutrition, and stress caused by the war, which had a serious effect on food supplies. In Germany, for example, more than half a million people died of malnutrition and associated diseases as a consequence of nearly five years of the Allied blockade, and food supplies in other countries were interrupted by submarine warfare and the disruption of peacetime trade patterns.

The disease’s origin is thought, though not with any great certainty, to have been in a genetic mutation that took place in the influenza virus in 1915 in the United States, possibly in Kansas. But this was not recognized at the time. On the contrary, in another striking parallel to the present-day pandemic, conspiracy theorists in the United States began to claim that the disease had been deliberately manufactured by the Germans, who had taken it across the Atlantic by submarine and offloaded it on America’s East Coast. “Let the curse be called the German plague,” one said. Of course, the flu was rampaging across Germany as well.

One thing, however, is certain: The disease did not originate in Spain, nor was it particularly virulent there. It got its name because Spain, as a neutral country in World War I, did not suffer strong state censorship of the news media, as the combatant nations did. Journalists there could widely report on the early stages of the pandemic, while their colleagues in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, on the one hand, and Germany and Austria-Hungary, on the other, were often hindered by restrictions imposed in order to prevent the enemy from getting the impression that the population was anything but flourishing.

Like the current pandemic, the Spanish flu hit populations unevenly. Although it is the elderly and the sick who are the worst hit today, in 1918 it seemed to be young, otherwise healthy adults. South African workers returning home from the gold mines of the Rand were crowded onto trains, where they began to die in huge numbers. One newspaper reported that their corpses lined the tracks, and one ticket collector refused to go into the carriages designated for Black riders “because there was so much illness there.” Everywhere the poor, living in cramped conditions, malnourished, and weakened by existing health problems, suffered the most. The disease stoked prejudice on all sides. White South Africans called it the “black man’s sickness”, Black South Africans called it the “white man’s sickness.”

On November 11, 1918, the vast crowds that thronged the squares of Europe’s and America’s great cities to celebrate the end of the war spread the virus more efficiently than almost anything else. Returning ships laden with troops did the rest. In Australia, after a long period during which quarantines were effective in warding off the importation of the disease, the pandemic arrived in January 1919, and precautionary measures, prepared over several months, were put into effect. Bars were closed, churches stopped holding services, and even public telephone booths were sealed off. The authorities issued proclamations telling people to wear masks. Despite all this, some 15,000 died on the sparsely populated continent, the situation worsened by growing differences among Australian states over how to deal with the problem.

One of the many virtues of Pandemic 1918 is that it ranges across the globe, so we get a useful picture of just how widespread the disease was. Arnold knows how to tell a good story and brings home the human dimension of the pandemic. But after a while, the stories all start to seem rather similar, and one begins to long for deeper analytical penetration. There’s no way of telling from this book, for example, which countries or cities combated the pandemic most effectively and why. This homogenizing approach makes it in some ways difficult to extrapolate lessons from 1918 for today. But lessons there surely are.

The first one is that governments need to be prepared for something like this. At the beginning of the 1890s, a pandemic dubbed the Russian flu killed an
estimated quarter-million people in the United States and around 100,000 in the UK; perhaps a million died worldwide. Nearly three decades later, few seemed to remember it or show any concern about a recurrence. Those who did and managed to take effective action saved many lives. But action then, as now, was patchy. With an airborne infection like influenza, spread by people breathing on one another and by residues with the virus lingering on surfaces of many different kinds, a coordinated policy—imposing quarantines, closing places where people crowd together, and getting everyone to take hygienic precautions, notably frequent handwashing—is essential.

Arnold pours scorn on mask wearing as useless, and maybe the thin gauze masks people wore in 1918 didn’t offer a great deal of protection for the individual. But in the present pandemic, evidence has accumulated over the months to show beyond doubt that modern masks are highly effective in preventing the spread of the disease. Lockdown measures have been equally successful in limiting the impact of the coronavirus. South Korea, which had plans ready to deal with a new epidemic as a result of previous recent flu outbreaks, managed to roll out an effective testing program and then isolate carriers, including those without obvious symptoms. As a result, in a population of more than 50 million, there have been some 600 deaths from the disease at the time of writing, despite its return in late August.

South Korea’s relative success in controlling the virus has nothing to do with a supposedly more obedient population, one more willing to submit to government controls. In Greece, a country with just over 10 million inhabitants, the first wave of the virus was kept under control. The first case was confirmed on February 26. Within three weeks, schools, theaters, cafés, bars, and similar places were closed; within a month, all non-essential movement within the country was banned, the tourist trade suspended, and a package of financial support measures introduced. Greece’s moderate conservative government took advice from medical scientists on the country’s rapidly convened coronavirus task force and decided that saving lives should take precedence over continuing normal economic activity. It was only with the arrival of the second wave of the pandemic, which followed a period of relaxation of controls, that infections and deaths began to rise, with Greece reporting some 3,600 deaths from the pandemic by the middle of December.

Countries that have not followed medical advice or implemented a coherent national policy have fared less well. In particular, states led by populist politicians who are hostile to science, especially with regard to the climate crisis, have seen soaring numbers of deaths—more than 300,000 in the United States and over 180,000 in Brazil, both countries where the president openly dismissed the pandemic as trivial, scorned precautionary measures, and refused to take scientific advice. Health policy during the pandemic has become politicized, along the lines of the climate crisis, with catastrophic results.

Pandemics have always produced conflicts between saving lives, on the one hand, and sustaining the economy, on the other. Here, as in the climate crisis, too many politicians have seen only the negative, short-term impacts of preventive measures and decided to sacrifice human lives on the altar of profit. This conflict between economic interest and medical science isn’t an aspect of the Spanish flu that Arnold’s book has much to say about, though it’s clear that state authorities’ denial or trivialization of the pandemic in its early stages was governed above all by economic considerations.

Despite our tendency to look to the past for lessons and despite some obvious parallels, it’s important to recognize that today’s situation is very different from 1918’s. People then did not have to contend with populist politicians who refused to take action against a deadly disease. Science now is better equipped to deal with pandemics, though in some political circles skepticism about scientific advice has increased, and there is a far greater tendency to politicize the issues it raises. Above all, the 1918 pandemic happened in the final stages of a catastrophically destructive world war, which weakened people’s resistance to disease in myriad ways and paved the way for a second wave of the infection that turned out to be much more serious than the first. This is not the case with the present pandemic, and the second wave of infection that is underway in many countries is unlikely to prove as devastating as in 1918, not least because, so far, it seems to be mainly affecting younger people and so is relatively mild in its impact.

What is truly alarming, however, and without precedent in 1918 or any other year in the modern era, is the way that large numbers of people are denying the evidence presented by medical science and refusing to take medical advice that would help prevent the spread of the disease. There have been major demonstrations in a number of countries—including the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany—that have linked the pandemic to wild and demonstrably false conspiracy theories like QAnon, with its undertones of anti-Semitism, its distrust of science, and its far-right ideology.

The degradation of political discourse such theories represent can only do harm to our democratic political order. In the early 1920s, after the Spanish flu, fascism and Nazism began to make waves, too, fueled by the unscrupulous falsehoods spread by propagandists like Joseph Goebbels. When the Nazis began to describe Jews as “parasites” and “viruses,” the language of medicine was being used as a tool of racial abuse that would end in mass murder. The political situation today may be different, but the threat to reasoned and evidence-based political discourse—and, through this, to the safety and security of all our lives—is no less severe.
The Outsider
Joe Sacco's comics journalism
BY JILLIAN STEINHAUER

Here's a memorable scene near the end of Joe Sacco's latest book, Paying the Land, that encapsulates his ethos as a comics journalist. For the project, he made two trips to Canada's remote Northwest Territories to interview members of the Dene Nation about their relationship to the land and resource extraction.

At the time of his visits, the gas and oil industries had been established in the region for years, but a global petroleum glut had paused operations. Sacco and his guide, Shauna, visited several towns and heard a range of Indigenous perspectives on drilling and fracking, which provide jobs and economic opportunity but also endanger the habitats and cohesion of communities. What he found was that the complications surrounding resource extraction were inextricable from larger issues the Dene have been facing for generations. Sacco couldn't parse the conflicts over oil and gas without understanding the Canadian government's ruthless program of colonization, enacted via unjust treaties and the residential school system. He also couldn't understand it without following the Dene's resistance to the government and their fight to regain control of their land and maintain their independence and identity.

In what has come to be his usual style, Sacco intersperses the voices of his subjects in Paying the Land with the history of the region and some of his own thoughts on what's at stake. Compared with his previous work, however, he remains relatively in the background. He listens, narrates, and recurs as a familiar presence wearing a cable-knit sweater and his trademark round glasses, which stand in for his eyes (Sacco has drawn himself with blank frames since his first book). But he doesn't speak or comment often, which makes the scene near the end especially notable.

In Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories, Sacco and Shauna travel to the defunct Giant Mine, a site of gold extraction for more than 50 years. When ore processing stopped there in 1999, it left behind 237,000 tons of a lethal byproduct—arsenic trioxide dust. “Where to put it?” Sacco wonders, before answering, “Well, down the mine of course!” He explains that a remediation project rigged frozen storage chambers deep underground; cascading, angled panels show the pair descending and touring one of them. On the next page, Sacco walks alongside the massive machinery and muses about his journey to meet the Dene. “I will leave here with many unanswered questions about my indigenous hosts,” he writes, “but right now…my biggest query is about my race, about us.” He asks in a series of text boxes laid across drawings of the dark mine, “What is the worldview of a people who mumble no thanks or prayers, who take what they want from the land, and pay it back with arsenic?”

It's a remarkable moment, a swift and scathing indictment of the people Sacco represents—white, settler, Western. This type of self-critique is rare in mainstream Anglo-American journalism, which adheres to the myth of the reporter's neutrality or else revels in indulgent subjectivity. But rigorous inward-facing critique is common in Sacco's work. For him, journalism is about asking questions, relaying information, and uncovering truths, not only about one's subjects but also about oneself. Throughout his books he exposes the mechanics of his process in such a way that the reader can never forget that their narrator is a biased, privileged outsider. He sees it as a matter of ethics. “The important thing for me isn’t so much objectivity, it’s—I want the journalists to admit their contexts, their prejudices somehow,” he has said. “Objectivity to me is a different word than honesty.”
That honesty is a crucial part of Sacco’s decades-long project. Whether covering the lives of Palestinians in the occupied territories, Bosniaks and Serbs in the former Yugoslavia, or the Dene, he seeks out difficult and painful stories and tells tales of war and oppression that many people may not want to hear. Sacco’s oeuvre is built on using words, images, and a potent combination of the two to make visceral the realities of historical trauma. As Hillary Chute wrote in her 2016 book, *Disaster Drawn*, his work “is about an ethics of attention, not about producing the news.” And as a white Western man, he’s keenly aware of the power his attention holds.

Comics have flourished as a genre for memoir and nonfiction stories since the 1970s, but the use of the form for journalism has been much slower to catch on. It has gained traction over the past decade or so with the release of books like Josh Neufeld’s *A.D.*, about Hurricane Katrina, in 2009, and Sarah Glidden’s *Rolling Blackouts*, about the effects of the Iraq War in the Middle East, in 2016, as well as with digital publications like *Symbolia* (now defunct) and *The Nib*. In recent years, *The New York Times* has also begun to run drawn reported pieces in its opinion section, bestowing mainstream visibility on the field. But when Sacco started out, this kind of work barely existed. According to Chute, in fact, he coined the term “comics journalism” himself.

Born in Malta in 1960 and raised in Australia before his family moved to the United States in 1972, Sacco began drawing comics as a child. His interest in journalism took hold during high school in Portland, Ore., where he worked on the student newspaper, and he went on to study the subject at the University of Oregon.

After college, Sacco returned to visual storytelling while leading a peripatetic life. He moved to Malta in 1983 and published a series of romance comics, then back to Portland, where he cofounded a monthly comics newspaper called the *Portland Permanent Press*, which folded, after a year, in 1988. Next he moved to Los Angeles, where he worked for the comics publisher Fantagraphics and founded a satirical magazine called *Centrifugal Bumble-Puppy*. In 1988, he left the United States for a four-year stint that included touring Europe with a rock band and living in Berlin.

Sacco’s work during these years was often satirical and autobiographical, drawn in what’s known as “bigfoot” style, which features expressive characters with exaggerated bodies inspired by Robert Crumb and other underground comix pioneers. Still, politics and military conflicts weren’t far from his mind. In one piece from the period, he captures his mother’s memories of the violence of World War II in Malta; another focuses on his obsessive following of the Persian Gulf war of 1991 while going through a breakup. These early comics, which are collected in the 2003 book *Notes From a Defeatist*, indicate the direction that Sacco’s work was moving in, but it was one trip in particular that set the course of his career.

Between 1991 and 1992, Sacco spent two months in Palestine and Israel. It was the waning days of the first intifada, when Palestinians rose up against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and were met by a military response. Over a thousand people died, the majority of them Palestinians, while images of Palestinian boys and men throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at Israeli soldiers abounded. Sacco was, he later explained, “furious at” the American news media, which he thought mischaracterized and misrepresented the reality of the situation and the power imbalances between the two countries.

“There are two ways in which Palestinians are portrayed—as terrorist and as victim,” he told an interviewer for Al Jazeera. “There may be truth in certain situations for both descriptions, but Palestinians are also people going to school, who have families, have lives, invite you into their home, and think about their food.” He wanted to see what was happening for himself and hear from Palestinians in the occupied territories directly.

On his trip, Sacco spent time in Palestinians’ homes, where he shared meals and interviewed them about their lives. He turned his notes into a series of comic books published between 1993 and 1995. They weren’t commercially successful, but they were a rarity in the American media: Unflinchingly honest about the Palestinian plight, they depicted an open, hospitable people describing the horrific yet quotidian nature of their suffering. The following year, Fantagraphics released *Palestine* in two volumes, and Sacco won an American Book Award. (It has since been collected in one book.) “There is nothing else quite like this in alternative comics,” wrote a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*—which, as if to drive the point home, miscategorized the work as fiction.

Given the milieu in which Sacco had been working, *Palestine* is firmly grounded in the traditions of underground comix and New Journalism. Its style is cartoonish—in fact, he heard complaints that his depictions of people in the first issue were stereotypical and offensive, and he tried to adjust accordingly—and the tone is often sarcastic and outlandish. Sacco plays a starring role as the self-conscious protagonist in search of some kind of truth. It’s not his most sophisticated work, but it is a crucial document for tracking the inception of long-form comics journalism.

The basics of Sacco’s methodology are already evident in *Palestine*. From the start, he doesn’t shy away from depicting violence, but he also uses art to bring the setting to life: the muddy refugee camps, bare-bones dwellings, and bustling cities. “To me landscape is a character somehow,” Sacco has said of his work, and indeed, it’s part of how the reader comes to understand Gaza and the West Bank in this book. It helps Sacco do something that’s harder to pull off in prose and reportage alone: He creates a sense of the everyday life that forms the backdrop for, and is disrupted by, acts of brutality.

In terms of its storytelling, *Palestine* foregrounds ordinary people’s voices and places them in context—often in
REJECTING CIVILITY AND SUPPORTING DISRUPTIVE ACTION IN THE FIGHT FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

“Powerfully reveals how civil discourse has been weaponized throughout history to... bolster white supremacy, and oppress marginalized people.”
-CRYSTAL MARIE FLEMING, author of How to Be Less Stupid About Race

“I can’t imagine any book that could tell you more about this country or about the human spirit.”
-GLORIA STEINEM

“Overturn[s] simplistic descriptions of Mrs. Parks with extraordinary research, writing, and compassion. . . a must-read for young people.”
-BRYAN STEVENSON

“The definitive untold history of young people getting into ‘good trouble’ for racial justice.”
-BETTINA LOVE, author of We Want To Do More Than Survive

contrast—with official narratives. In the first chapter, Sacco devotes a spread to the 1917 Balfour Declaration, in which Britain announced its support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. “We do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country,” Sacco quotes the United Kingdom’s foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, saying as he sits in an armchair in a book-lined study and delicately holds aloft a cup of tea. Two pages later, a Palestinian man sits on the floor in a dwelling in the Jabalia refugee camp and explains that he lost his home in 1948 during the Nakba. When he took his family back to the site many years later, his entire village was gone. “There is no sign that we ever lived there,” he says. His words float atop a drawing of the family looking out on a stretch of bare land with a lone truck driving through it.

Juxtaposition—the whiplash produced by placing contrasting perspectives and timelines alongside each other—is central to Sacco’s project. It serves as a reminder that dates, documents, and declarations don’t account for the reality of lived experiences. It also helps him put into practice a credo laid out in the preface to Journalism, a 2012 collection of his short-form work: “The powerful should be quoted, yes, but to measure their pronouncements against the truth, not to obscure it.” If, as the expression goes, history is written by the victors, then Sacco has given himself the job of revising it on behalf of the victims.

Nowhere in his body of work is this truer than Footnotes in Gaza, a hefty and meticulous book that uncovers the circumstances of two Israeli massacres of Palestinians during the 1956 Suez crisis. As part of the operation, Israeli forces invaded the Gaza Strip on their way to Sinai, in an effort to root out Palestinian armed militants who were supported by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s government. In the process, they rounded up and killed hundreds of civilians. Israeli leaders downplayed and tried to justify the massacre, claiming that the Palestinians had been noncompliant and “unruly,” that some had been armed and rioted, and that there had been Egyptian instigators among them.

Sacco finds otherwise. He first learned about the episodes not quite from a footnote, but in passing in a Noam Chomsky book, which cites a United Nations report stating that 275 Palestinians had been killed in the town of Khan Younis and its adjacent refugee camp and 111 others in the Rafah camp. While reporting from Gaza, Sacco became curious about the two massacres, eventually returning to focus on them and to speak to survivors. He went to the UN archives and read the original report, as well as others he could find, and enlisted the help of Israeli researchers. But little had been written about either incident.

Footnotes in Gaza is a remarkable work of comics journalism and history that arranges dozens of voices and past and present events into a horrifying yet deeply empathetic assemblage. As in Palestine and Safe Area Goražde, his 2000 book about the siege of the titular town during the Bosnian War, Sacco’s primary method for narrating the massacres is to pair the texts of people’s recollections with drawn reenactments. He often re-creates the
interview process by showing his subjects looking straight ahead as they speak, so the reader assumes Sacco’s listening position. And whereas the characters and scenes in *Palestine* are highly stylized, sometimes to the point of looking grotesque, by 2009, when *Footnotes* was published, he had shifted more toward realism. Most of the speakers in the book are old men, and he draws their creased and weary faces in careful detail.

Sacco knows that eyewitness accounts can be unreliable, and he acknowledges it by sometimes placing disparate versions of events side by side and highlighting the discrepancies. This is particularly true of his treatment of the Rafah episode, in which, after being violently rounded up, Palestinian men were put through a long screening process. Sacco is forthright about the fallibility of memory and the psychic toll of trauma here. “While anyone would remember a two-second flurry of clubs rising and falling onto skulls and flesh…and the continuous gunfire as the schoolyard filled up,” he writes, “what about the next eight- or ten-hour stretch when the gear shifted down to the slow, bitter, but relatively systematic sifting of men?”

Even with the inconsistencies and conflicts, the collection of remembrances in *Footnotes* doesn’t throw the whole story into doubt; instead, it builds up a bulwark that reinforces the common truth: The mass killings did happen, despite the Israeli government’s attempts to minimize them. The art bolsters that conclusion, as with the growing number of images of the dead. Their multiplicity, the space they take up on the page, seems to challenge their erasure from official records. In the account of the Rafah incident, especially, images of fearful men holding their hands above their heads and being beaten and shot recur like an oppressive and inescapable refrain.

That cumulative effect is arguably one of the most important qualities of Sacco’s work. Traditional long-form journalism is character-driven: Writers tell the story of a place and time through one or two representative protagonists. Sacco’s approach is more populist, like oral history. Using the form of comics, he’s able to build a picture of an event or issue through a diversity of voices, images, and experiences, always working from the bottom up. In doing so, he pushes against a colonial mindset that sees world events through the lens of heroes and leaders.

**Random Assignment**

It seems to want to rain but can’t.
It fades to pink, an argument.
Relinquish the dream.

You can’t ever get what you want,
You can’t please any of the people
Any of the time.

Time just lies there,
Not fast or slow,
Any more than a line.

I wonder if the very small ants are afraid
Of the big ants, if they ever cross paths.
I wonder if happiness is ethical.

I’d like to do it all again
In silence now, in darkness,
A wasp in a fig.

ELISA GABBERT
bush, which was traditionally a defining aspect of Dene existence: Some remember it proudly as a time of self-reliance, while others remember nearly starving in subzero temperatures. Sacco has never shirked complexity, but it’s an impressive feat that he manages to hold space for all these issues and voices to comfortably coexist.

There is, however, one unifying factor, a trauma at the heart of the Dene’s estrangement from the land they’ve long revered and respected: the residential school system, which Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission labeled “cultural genocide” in a 2015 report. For nearly 150 years, the government took First Nations children away from their parents and communities and placed them in religious schools, where they were forced to speak English, subjected to strict rules, and often abused.

Sacco tells the tale of the residential school system largely through the first-person stories of those who attended it. Renderings of them as adults, speaking to Sacco, appear amid drawings of their younger selves experiencing what they’re describing. The work becomes an actualization of their memories, in the process visualizing the haunting grip of historical trauma. In one passage, interviewee Paul Andrew recounts the physical brutality: “In residential school you got hit and you never know why you got hit,” he says, as images of his 8- or 9-year-old self being slapped ricochet across the middle of the page. Below, Sacco places portraits of the boy, as he’s being yelled at by a nun and a priest, side by side with the adult Andrew, their faces set in a similarly pained expression. Boxes of words hover in the space between them, as Andrew recalls how the abuse was also emotional and spiritual: “You’re not good enough. That’s why we got to remake you. Because you’re not good enough.”

Unlike the structure of Sacco’s previous books, in which the core conflict is woven throughout the story, the narrative of the residential schools is concentrated in one section in Paying the Land, and it doesn’t appear until halfway through the text. That decision reflects a crucial difference in this new work: Although, like other Sacco titles, it involves him visiting and reporting on an oppressed community as an outsider, the subject isn’t war or an uprising. There are fewer specific events to chronicle and more sentiments and arguments to convey, which at times makes for a less cohesive story. But the shift allows him to move away from mostly depicting misery to rendering a more complex, affirmative world. This comes through in the richly detailed art and the formal experiments that open up new depths in his work.

The clearest example of this is the book’s opening, a 19-page recollection of growing up on the land, narrated by Andrew: “You learn about relationships and connections with the land and the animals,” he says. “You learn how important they are to you, how important the world is, essentially.” As Andrew describes his people’s traditions—building a boat every year, for instance, and traveling long distances by dog sleigh—Sacco fills the pages with a proliferation of images. Scenes of bush life flow into one another without panels or borders, creating the feeling of a dreamscape informed by the aesthetic of a scrapbook. The effect is immersive, and the only interruption is Andrew’s face, which appears in a black rectangle, like a narrator from another time.

At one point, Andrew explains the Dene’s holistic approach to life. When you arrive at a camp, you generally aren’t given specific instructions. Instead, “you look at what needs to be done and you do it,” he says. “So you find yourself in the circle. You work yourself in[to] the circle of that community.” Amid these words, the young Andrew stands alone in the center of the page with buckets of water in both hands. He’s surrounded by a ring of white space, beyond which others in the camp form a larger circle as they attend to their tasks.

This image—of the individual within the group—recurs at the end of the book, when a young man named Eugene Boulanger tells a story of going out to hunt caribou. The trip was part of a reality TV show about younger Dene connecting with their heritage, but for Boulanger it became a spiritual experience. He explains that while he was alone in the mountains, “I had the omniscient moment where I saw myself in the continuum of my ancestry, the ancestors a long time ago doing exactly what I was doing exactly where I was doing it.” Sacco draws him near the center of the page, standing over the body of the caribou with a knife in his hand. Around him there is that same ring of white space, and then several images of his Dene forebears carrying out the same task. “I felt that this 22-year circle had been closed,” Boulanger says.

Using these two moments as bookends, Sacco turns the theme of the circle into a visual motif as well as a formal structuring device. It works beautifully, not just because of the power of his artistry, but also because it affirms what he’s been saying all along in his work: that people and events are interconnected, and time doesn’t only move in one direction. Sacco went to the Northwest Territories in search of stories about what’s buried underground. He returned with something deeper.
The Roving Eye

John Wilson’s DIY urban histories

BY VIKRAM MURTHI

JOHN WILSON RARELY APPEARS ON-SCREEN IN HIS HBO docuseries How To With John Wilson, despite being its star and namesake. When he does, he’s usually standing in front of a reflective surface, like a mirror or window, and holding a camera, with his eye peering through the viewfinder, staring straight ahead. The series documents his seemingly habitual need to film everything around him. He compulsively chronicles his life from behind the camera, observing his immediate surroundings and preserving an image of fluctuating New York City neighborhoods.

Wilson’s dual roles as a memoirist and archivist don’t typically place him in the frame, but his ubiquitous voice-over contextualizes and dictates everything we see. Eventually, some patterns emerge in his footage: the piles of trash that fill New York’s streets, milling crowds circulating through Midtown Manhattan, NYPD officers either on the job or loitering about, and leashed dogs defecating on the sidewalk. But Wilson’s camera prefers to fix on people engaged in unguarded private moments in public, surrounded by strangers and with the specters of gentrification and urban renewal irrepressibly present. His gaze quickly becomes our own, and we see the world through his eyes, where seemingly everyone can be alone in a crowd.

Each episode of the docuseries follows Wilson as he ostensibly explains how to do something, like “Make Small Talk” or “Split the Check.” Instead of step-by-step instructions, however, he uses the topic as a springboard to explore his pet interests, broadly staying on theme but rarely on task. The format of How To remains consistent and familiar while allowing for maximum flexibility. “How to Improve Your Memory” starts with Wilson’s attempts to remember his grocery list using the memory palace technique (a memory enhancement strategy that associates information with an imagined spatial environment) and ends with him attending the first-ever conference on the Mandela effect, where people share conspiracy theories about the origins of collective false memories, such as the spelling of popular brand names like Oscar Mayer (which some remember as “Oscar-Meyer”).

“How to Put Up Scaffolding” takes the form of a film essay that traces the history of the seemingly ever-expanding presence of scaffolding in New York City and its role in an environment that is forever under construction. In “How to Cover Your Furniture,” Wilson details his daily struggle to keep his cat from clawing his furnishings, but it eventually transitions into a look at the anti-circumcision movement, culminating in an interview with a man who showcases his foreskin extension device. Wilson’s footage is primarily what dictates each episode’s structure and ensures that every installment feels distinct, so that How To can be a memoir or a travelogue or an instance of observational cinema, depending on the material.

Wilson’s filmmaking instincts are generally comedic, with the humor in How To assuming multiple forms. Sometimes it takes the shape of interviews with various local eccentrics eager to be on camera, somewhat similar to the material in Nathan for...
You, the former Comedy Central series from Nathan Fielder, an executive producer on How To. At other times, the humor lies in Wilson’s vocal delivery, especially its halting cadence (peppered with “uh” and “um” and split-second pauses), or his snarky descriptions of events, as when he describes a faulty Ronald McDonald float in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade as “Ronald’s deflating carcass...being pulverized in the middle of 42nd Street while spectators watched in horror.” The comedy in How To always works in tandem with its anthropological inclination. Unlike Fielder, Wilson doesn’t necessarily strive to create chaos but rather observes the mundane absurdity that comes from living within it.

Apples

The townspeople paste wax apples on the trees, glow shyly out their windows as the Dictator struts past the monument of his father strutting past nothing at all. Yesterday, the Dictator dressed the Butcher’s boy in the uniform of his own son. Today, at the orders of the Dictator, guards shot the boy.

In the town of his childhood, the Curator is a tourist. He touches his mother with the language with which he does not touch his work. In the painting, bored bored Eve chomps on an apple. In the tongue of his work, he acquires her.

At the banquet: pigs choked with apples, music wrung from the townspeople’s anguish. The meat in the soup is human meat. The Dictator’s ring is made of gold yanked from the teeth of corpses.

The Censor bloats with what he knows. His sons bloom in neat rows. An orchard grows inside his wife. He prunes her on Sundays.

Under the earth, the Butcher’s boy, laughing, eats an apple. The core rises, light with rot. The Dictator admires the fruit of his land.

CLAIRE SCHWARTZ

Vikram Murthi is a film and TV critic based in Brooklyn.
explicitly personal nature of his approach that sets Wilson’s series apart from everything else on television. This is partly because we see almost everything from his perspective and his voice frequently rings in our heads. But it’s also because so much of How To feels like it was pilfered from a home video collection that would exist with or without a show to broadcast it. We learn in “How to Improve Your Memory” that Wilson keeps a handwritten diary listing everything he’s done every day for more than a decade, and this preservationist attitude extends to his filmmaking.

The HBO show feels like a natural progression from his DIY work, albeit with a scaled-up budget and a larger platform, which isn’t something that can be said about the myriad content options that populate streaming platforms. How To is sui generis because it never gives the impression that it’s been engineered to fit the taste profiles of a given demographic. It looks and sounds entirely like itself, like something that Wilson himself would watch.

The season finale of How To features footage shot before and during the initial Covid-19 lockdown this past March, a time when people were stockpiling groceries and toilet paper for what we hoped was a brief period of limbo. The Covid-specific material has historical value, if only because Wilson, who has the freedom to downshift to a one-man crew and take on all the liability, could still operate a TV production when almost everyone else could not. Still, it’s telling that he doesn’t reach for grand statements and mostly filters his lockdown experience through his relationship with his sweet, elderly landlady, with whom he watches Jeopardy! and sometimes shares dinner. Since she’s in precarious health, Wilson keeps his distance and acutely feels the separation, despite living right above her. By intimately filming his own surroundings and relationships, he perfectly encapsulates the physical and emotional displacement that has become standard during this time.

It’s this simple way of working that elevates How To beyond the realm of mere comedy into something more meaningful: a diaristic art piece that reflects modern life through the prism of an everyday urban historian.

The Sound of Relief
Open Mike Eagle’s songs of redemption
BY STEPHEN KEARSE

After his slow, decade-long ascent from laid-off schoolteacher to buzzing indie star, Los Angeles rapper Open Mike Eagle suffered a series of setbacks. In 2019 he and his wife divorced, a reunion with his old rap crew Hellfyre Club fell apart, and his Comedy Central variety show, The New Negroes, was canceled after one season. Those upsets form the backdrop to Anime, Trauma and Divorce, the rapper’s whimsical and introspective take on an old trope: the breakup album. By turns goofy and pensive, the record uses pop culture as a vehicle for self-examination and restoration.

The album’s titular subjects are linked by Open Mike Eagle’s relentless hunt for relief—from anxiety, from awkward situations, from the financial strain of making music independently (a long-running theme in his work). His signature mode is a kind of sharp-eyed repose, an outlook bolstered by his easygoing delivery. No matter the topic he’s addressing, be it police violence or living paycheck to paycheck, he speaks leisurely, as if overcoming difficult situations always begins with re framing them, taking them at your own pace.

Anime, in this sense, is Eagle’s ideal speed. Beloved for its expansive tonal range, which can accommodate scenarios as surreal as robot
The album’s lithe, spectral production is as varied as Eagle’s writing. Produced by a corps of rap and electronic producers and mixed by Jackknife Lee, a veteran rock engineer and producer, the beats alternately smolder, coating Eagle’s verses in darkness and shadow, or shimmer, imbuing his rhymes with warmth and light. These colorful yet weightless arrangements never overshadow Eagle’s racing thoughts, fitting the album’s theme of presence and candor. “Death Parade” and “WTF Is Self Care” sound like they were recorded live from his brain.

Eagle has described this record as a meaningful departure from his past work, which tended to center his observations rather than his feelings. Emotions are certainly more pronounced here than in his previous music, but he remains guarded, as on “Bucciarati,” another nod to *Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure*. “Part of me struck an original trauma / Part of me wears an invisible armor,” he raps, his words coded yet weighted. The song as a whole is a kind of mood board of dread, with Eagle mapping out his distress rather than confessing it outright.

What prevents the song from feeling without meaning is Eagles’ willingness to admit the truth of his pain. His lyrics are candid, his performances weighted. The song as a whole is a kind of mood board of dread, with Eagle mapping out his distress rather than confessing it outright.

What’s truly fantastical, he implies throughout the album, is his rap career. “Asa’s Bop,” a breezy track anchored by a lovely, gibberish chorus performed by Eagle’s adolescent son, pokes fun at the precarity of his chosen profession. “We belong / We pretend we legitimate / Half Joestar / Half Shinji the idiot,” he jokes. His assessment, particularly of his fellow wayward rappers, stings because there’s no bitterness to it. He and his peers, especially those who choose to be independent from the major labels, are living their dream; it just happens to be unglamorous and Pyrrhic. “Every-thing Ends Last Year,” the album’s fulcrum, addresses Eagle’s failures head-on. Rapping in a weary sigh, he describes his marriage, his canceled show, and his defunct rap crew with a single, defeated descriptor: “ended.”

Stephen Kearse is a contributing writer for *The Nation* and has contributed to *The Baffler, Pitchfork, and The New York Times Magazine.*
Letters

It’s Up to Biden


Like an off-year election, a runoff is an election without a presidential candidate on the ballot, and voter turnout is normally reduced. But at this crucial moment, motivating everybody who voted on November 3 to return and vote again in January is Biden’s responsibility. That’s because the Republicans, without Trump in the picture, will likely spread fear that an unrestrained Biden, together with a Democratic Senate, is a potential disaster. And as the Democrats can’t use an anti-Trump message in the runoff (because Trump is gone), they need substantive ideas and policies.

So it’s up to Biden. Still, let’s face a few facts. Biden ran for president before in 1988 and 2008, during which time he never won a single primary. In contrast, Bernie Sanders—less well-known, without corporate funding, and scorned by the Democratic National Committee—won 23 states in 2016.

Biden was on course to continue his losing streak in 2020 when he received the mother of all endorsements, from James Clyburn in South Carolina, and the rest was Covid history. It’s not as if the American people have been beating the drums for decades for Biden; he still needs to prove himself.

Moreover, of the top three Democrats in the House—Speaker Nancy Pelosi, majority leader Steny Hoyer, and majority whip Clyburn, who at 80 is the youngest (a few months younger than Pelosi)—none is particularly inspiring. And it’s hard to recall what passions the lackluster Senator Charles Schumer ignites.

Victor Sciamarelli

Doing the Work

Re “Why the Left Should Ally With Small Business,” by Stacy Mitchell and Susan R. Holinbek [Nov. 30/Dec. 7, 2020]: All the Democratic bashing aside, it is important to link the vote between small businesses and workers gets reestablished. We can also look overseas to certain countries that have even been able to organize domestic workers into unions. Progressives trying to get leadership positions on committees that address monopoly power will also be helpful. Rural broadband, PBMs [pharmacy benefit managers], and breaking up agricultural monopolies are areas ripe for bipartisan legislation and are worth pursuing. Ultimately, progressives need to do the work to make legislation that can be voted on and enacted.

This is a crucial area of growth that is consistent with Democratic principles.

Michael Sleet

Correction

“Fort Everywhere,” by Daniel Immerwahr [Dec. 14/21, 2020], misspelled the name of a New Mexico military base to which thousands of Navajos were forcibly moved in 1864. It was Fort Sumner, not Fort Sunter.

Comment drawn from our website letters@thenation.com

Please do not send attachments.
In recent decades, as Indigenous communities in Mexico and Guatemala have faced new levels of economic precarity and violence, thousands of Indigenous migrants have made New York City their home. Though each Indigenous group comes with its own language, culture, cuisine, and religious and oral history traditions, what many of them share is an idea of reciprocity and mutual support—“giving, returning, and receiving”—as a social organizing system. These concepts and practices are embodied in words and phrases like *tequio, faena, la mano vuelta, mayordomías,* and *compadrazgo,* expressions that have no direct translation in English but that all imply an individual’s responsibilities to the collective and the obligations that come with being part of a community. Over the course of the pandemic, I have been documenting the ways these traditional practices have sustained and protected Indigenous communities during a dark time in the city’s history. —Cinthya Santos Briones

**PHOTO ESSAY**

**Giving and Receiving**

**Breaking bread:** Próspero Martínez, a Mixe migrant, has become a leader of the food pantry at the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn.

**Loss:** Elias Guzmán, who is Me’phaa, holds a portrait of his brother, Victorio Hilario Guzmán, who was killed in a hit-and-run while making deliveries on his bike.

**Feeding community:** Natalia Méndez Saavedra, a Mixtec migrant, is the co-owner of La Morada restaurant, a refuge and political meeting space for undocumented migrants.

**Weaving solidarity:** María José Prudente, who is Ñuu Savi, runs a collective embroidery group in which Indigenous women can discuss social justice issues.

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

How are you working around or smashing through the systems that shape your life?

Diagnosing and repairing our malfunctioning democracy

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Have you ever said to yourself “I’d love to get a computer, if only I could figure out how to use it.” Well, you’re not alone. Computers were supposed to make our lives simpler, but they’ve gotten so complicated that they are not worth the trouble. With all of the “pointing and clicking” and “dragging and dropping” you’re lucky if you can figure out where you are. Plus, you are constantly worrying about viruses and freeze-ups. If this sounds familiar, we have great news for you. There is finally a computer that’s designed for simplicity and ease of use. It’s the WOW Computer, and it was designed with you in mind. This computer is easy-to-use, worry-free and literally puts the world at your fingertips.

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