The Low-Information Mayor?

In the New York mayoral race, Andrew Yang is aiming to run a city he doesn’t understand.

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Fire in the sky: Explosions light up the early morning darkness in Gaza after a government building was targeted by Israeli warplanes on May 18.

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“The decades before the Civil War, not a session of Congress passed without pistols being drawn in the Capitol.”

FRANK B. WILDERSON III

In the decades before the Civil War, not a session of Congress passed without pistols being drawn in the Capitol.”

FRANK B. WILDERSON III

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The Nakba Is Now

As the ongoing crisis has swept with stunning violence across all of the territory over which the Israeli state desperately tries to project its power—from Acre in the north to Gaza in the south—a new set of political circumstances is coming into sharp focus. To begin with, the violence this time is not just taking place—as it so often has in recent years—in absurdly lopsided “exchanges” of fire in and out of Gaza, pitting homemade Palestinian rockets against the large-scale devastation that only a modern military can inflict. It is also taking place across what Benjamin Netanyahu recently referred to as the “second front” in cities long under Israeli control. Mobs of Jewish supremacists, sometimes protected and sometimes actively assisted by state security forces, have been terrorizing Palestinian citizens of the state: smashing their shops, breaking into their homes, dragging them from their cars and beating them savagely in the street. Such events are routine in the West Bank, where settler violence against Palestinian residents is protected by the Israeli army and invariably goes unpunished. But such unbridled violence, especially on this scale, is more unusual on the other side of the 1949–67 armistice line, in cities like Haifa or al-Lydd.

Clearly, for an ever-increasing number of Jewish Israelis, the “enemy” is no longer simply Hamas or Islamic Jihad, or even the Palestinians living under the misery of military occupation in Jenin or in the open-air prison that is Gaza; it is also the second-class citizens of the state itself, who have long been seen as a “demographic threat.” With his carefully calculated talk of a second front, Netanyahu is doing his best to capitalize on this attitude, but it would be naive to blame him for originating it, as so many do when they bemoan the state’s rightward turn in recent years—as though the putatively left-leaning politicians of the past were innocent of such attitudes, or as though official Israeli racism were only a recent phenomenon, rather than one baked into the institutions and apparatuses of the state from its very beginning.

That moment of inception, which Palestinians refer to as the Nakba, is what we have been reliving these past weeks. The current crisis began, after all, with the renewal of attention to a long-standing Israeli endeavor to expel Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah, a Palestinian neighborhood in occupied East Jerusalem that fell to Israeli forces in 1967 and that the state claims as part of its “eternal” capital. As in countless other areas across the land, a group of Jewish settlers has been using legal proceedings (or, to be precise, the proceedings enabled by the Israeli legal system, which are totally at odds with the requirements of international law) to try to take over Palestinian homes and turn their occupants, already refugees, into refugees twice over. That process was on the verge of leading to yet another series of expulsions; indeed, while the fact may have been buried beneath the headlines about rockets and bombings, it was in protest against those looming evictions that Palestinians started marching.

That moment of inception (which Palestinians refer to as the Nakba) is what we’ve been reliving these past weeks: an inception that was never really—and never will be—completed, but that has continued in fits and starts ever since 1948. It is no coincidence that survivors of the Nakba have been saying that the sight of anti-Palestinian pogroms in the major cities has brought back all the trauma they experienced in 1948: The terror of such pogroms is exactly what drove them into the sea in Jaffa or Haifa, or forced them on the bitter march to exile in Lebanon or Jordan. But the spectacle of racial violence that has swept through cities from Acre to Jerusalem does not just look uncannily like Israel’s primal scene; it also reminds us that we are still living that same moment of origin—and that we have been all along. The Nakba is now. It always has been.
to lay claim to territory occupied by another and to remove them by any means necessary. In the past, that tended to be at the point of the bayonet or in the wake of a massacre; today, it’s more likely to come in the bureaucratic form of a court order issued by a legal system—the very embodiment of the banality of evil—that systematically privileges the rights of Jews over those of Palestinians.

To make this clear: While the Israeli courts and the Israeli state routinely enable the establishment of new Jewish settlements on Palestinian land, there is no mechanism in the Israeli legal system for a Palestinian family to reclaim the land or property forcibly taken from them by Zionist settlers or the Zionist state or its auxiliaries, such as the Jewish National Fund. On both sides of the 1949–67 armistice line, the state demolishes Palestinian homes and builds Jewish ones. There are no surprises here: The entire program of the state is, and has always been, built around the project of removing Palestinians and replacing them with Jews. Is it any wonder, then, that Palestinians resist—and that they have been resisting since long before anyone heard of something called Hamas?

But if the lynchings and pogroms taking place in Palestinian communities on one side of the 1949–67 armistice line represent the continuation and extension of the artillery and aerial bombardments pulverizing Palestinian communities on the other side of it, what that suggests is that the line itself is functionally meaningless. Here it must be stressed that the only thing the line has ever really denoted is the fact of the cease-fire that took place in 1949. It is not an official border, and Israel has famously refused to declare its borders. In other words, it no longer makes sense to use that armistice line as a way to distinguish the territory referred to as “Israel” from that referred to as “the occupied territories.” The same racial violence, driven by the same logic, occurs on both sides of this line, even if it takes quantitatively different forms (the lynching of a single individual over here, the obliteration of an entire family over there).

From the perspective of an increasing number of Israeli Jews, then, there is no substantive difference between “here” and “there,” this or that side of the 1949–67 armistice line. And while that attitude may be hardening, both enabling and enabled by increasingly right-wing Israeli governments, the infrastructure sustaining it goes back to the 1967 conquest, occupation, and colonization of the remaining parts of what had been Palestine in 1948.

For Palestinians, too, the 1949–67 armistice line has less and less meaning. The uprising that started in Sheikh Jarrah spread easily to the great mosques of Jerusalem. When the state and mobs of Jewish supremacists intervened to suppress that uprising, Palestinian citizens from Nazareth and the coastal cities rallied to the cause of Sheikh Jarrah and Jerusalem. When Israeli forces stormed the Aqsa mosque, trampling its prayer rugs and firing smoke bombs and stun grenades at worshippers, Hamas fired rockets from Gaza; when Israel bombed Gaza, demonstrators poured out of the refugee camps across the West Bank. When lynchings gripped the coastal cities, Palestinian youths came down from Jerusalem to reinforce the embattled communities of Jaffa and al-Lydd. And when they saw their people at home being battered and bombed, Palestinians in the refugee camps of Lebanon and in their far-flung global exile rose up in solidarity.

Israel has tried its hardest to separate Palestinians into discrete groups: West Bankers, Gazans, Jerusalemites, refugees, exiles, and the reviled minority inside the state whose enduring Palestinian identity is so unbearable that the state calls them “Israeli Arabs.” Indeed, the separations and restrictions that Israel has imposed on the Palestinian people are integral components of its apartheid system. The ongoing events remind us that Palestinians do not accept these attempts at colonial divide and rule:

They are one people with one homeland, even if they experience disenfranchisement and racial violence in somewhat different forms.

Although unspeakable trauma is being inflicted on an entire people, this is also a moment of clarity. The combination of the savage Israeli bombardment of civilians trapped in Gaza and the widely shared videos of pogroms and lynchings taking place in Hadfa, al-Lydd, and Jerusalem has stripped the Israeli state project bare of all the layers of denial, equivocation, and mystification with which it has cloaked itself for decades.

The stark reality is there for all to see: the hideous spectacle of a once apparently formidable state project unraveling into the elementary racial violence out of which it was born. The Nakba is now. And that one-state solution about which we have heard so much in recent years is not some far-off possibility but an actually existing reality. The only remaining question is what form that one state should take: apartheid or democracy. Palestinians know their answer to that question—and so do more and more people around the world.

Saree Makdisi is a professor of English and comparative literature at UCLA and the author of the forthcoming book Tolerance Is a Wasteland: Palestine and the Culture of Denial.
A protester poses for a photo in Bogotá on May 19. Colombians continue to take to the streets to demonstrate against President Iván Duque’s administration. After the withdrawal of a controversial tax reform, the demands have turned into a widespread expression of anger over poverty, inequality, and police brutality. Security forces have killed more than 40 demonstrators since the protests began on April 28.

**By the Numbers**

- **$236B**
  Total US military aid to Israel from 1946 to 2018

- **$38B**
  US military aid pledged to Israel from 2019 to 2028

- **0**
  Number of countries set to receive more US military aid than Israel between 2019 and 2028

- **59%**
  Share of US foreign military aid in 2021 set to go to Israel

- **51:1**
  Ratio of US military aid received by Israel to US humanitarian assistance received by Palestinians in 2021

- **50**
  Number of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, the US’s most advanced stealth aircraft, purchased by Israel from Lockheed Martin with US funds

- **1**
  Number of countries that are allowed to use US military aid for their own domestic weapons industry

---

**Obeisance**

To Mar-a-Lago lapdogs wend
To kiss Trump’s ring, lament his trials.

They’re piling high upon his lap.

The yelping can be heard for miles.

—Shreya Chattopadhyay
No Offense
David Bromwich

Censorship and the Good Life

They have your data…

HOW DO I KNOW WHAT I THINK TILL I SEE WHAT I SAY?” was a maxim of E.M. Forster’s—and a fine one. But the Simon & Schuster workers who petitioned to break their company’s contract with former vice president Mike Pence were sure they knew what he thought before he said it. To publish his memoir would be “legitimizing bigotry,” since they knew what he thought before he said it. To publish it would be “legitimizing bigotry,” since he had的理由没理由 Supreme Court judges confirmed his memoir would be “legitimizing bigotry,” since they knew what he thought before he said it. To publish it would be “legitimizing bigotry,” since he had理由没理由 Supreme Court judges confirmed his memoir would be “legitimizing bigotry,” since they knew what he thought before he said it. To publish it would be “legitimizing bigotry,” since he had

“H" Pence was the tool of Donald Trump, and Trump had to skin him alive.

Anti-Semitism? Many Israelis, grateful for Trump’s go-ahead to change their capital to Jerusalem, might disagree. Trump’s son-in-law and worldwide minister without portfolio, Jared Kushner, is Jewish; so is the man who served as his main presidential speechwriter, Stephen Miller. But Pence was accused of something worse than complicity in all the vices associated with Trump: He abandoned “a nation in crisis as the coronavirus ran rampant and killed more than half a million Americans.”

Assigned by the president to lead the Coronavirus Task Force, Pence was doubtless inadequate to the new and unprecedented burden, but no specific misconduct is mentioned by the signers. They simply demand a permanent ban on all deals with Pence or any other member of the Trump administration. They likewise demand a new policy of “ongoing reevaluations” of all authors “that promote white supremacist content.”

Does “white supremacist content” denote KKK pamphlets? Or most of European literature? No such embarrassing question was asked by Alex Shepard in an April 30 New Republic article on the controversy. Pence’s memoir, wrote Shepard, would “likely be the usual dreck of presidential aspirants, while the author cravenly glosses over the fact that his former boss incited a riot that nearly killed him.” Glossed over in that sentence is the one important, deeply conventional, but in the circumstances non-craven thing that Pence did on January 6: He refused to obey Trump and stop the election of Joe Biden from being certified. Whatever you think of his religiose politics and his otherwise yes-man posture, he executed the law against the will of a crowd that would have liked to skin him alive.

In a similar vein of flippancy, Farhad Manjoo on May 6 published a lead New York Times editorial titled “Hawley and Trump Aren’t ‘Silenced.’” Hawley’s downgrade in distribution and mainstream coverage, from being published by S&S to Regnery, constituted no real disadvantage, according to Manjoo, since getting smacked by the left played to Hawley’s self-interest. Instead, Manjoo quipped, we should see it as “a kind of creative culture-jamming,” akin to Solzhenitsyn’s dissident works being circulated in samizdat.

There is an archness to these presentations, a sarcasm on the edge of gloating, suggestive of the witticisms of permit-stamping cultural officials in a one-party state. The demotion of Hawley, says Manjoo, is “not an erasure, exactly, but instead a quiting,” and he goes on to cite the Silicon Valley jingle “freedom of speech is not freedom of reach.” A rhyme may sometimes sound like an argument, but this one dodges the question of who decides freedom of reach. For there do exist powerful people who—once they have collected enough information—think they can judge your rights from your spites and your wrongs from your songs. (The jingle mood is contagious.)

For a decade now, and especially in the past four years, a sector of the left has tilted toward the promulgation of censorship. And with some chance of success, given the enormous power of the media outlets that are cooperating for reasons of their own, including the four horsemen of surveillance: Twitter, Facebook, Google, and Amazon. To see this sickly handshake is dismaying enough. How much worse to find the same restrictionist mentality creeping into a free-speech fortress like PEN America.

Yet a PEN letter, sent to President Biden on April 29, asks him to establish “a disinformation defense and free expression task force.” This new authority should set down guidelines and goals for “engagement with social media companies on measures the platforms can take to defend against disinformation.” What is envisaged is a bureaucracy of Homeland Security for journalism and publishing—a Defence of the Realm Act, for the realm of the word. Since the social media giants work with the intelligence “community” in any case, the executors of “disinformation defense” presumably would pool their resources with the CIA, FBI, NSA, and other truth-curating government bureaus and agencies.

A follow-up memorandum signaled PEN’s approval of the decision by the Facebook Oversight Board to extend the ban on Trump for another six months. “Listening to his speech on the Mall,” a PEN statement had already said on January 11, “and
The shutdown of an attainted citizen in a public forum sets an extremely dangerous precedent. The shutdown of an attainted citizen in a public forum sets an extremely dangerous precedent. 

reading his tweets in the post-election period, it is hard to mistake Trump's intention to stop at nothing to rally his followers to resist the verified outcome of the November presidential election.” So PEN came close to endorsing a charge of incitement—one of the most tempting, elusive, hardest to prove, and hardest to refute of all accusations to pin on a reckless (or, for that matter, a misunderstood) speaker or writer.

Look again at the words “stop at nothing.” Craven opportunist that he is, Trump did stop at something. He didn’t march with the crowd; he gave mixed signals about how they should act; and late in the afternoon, he called them off—with an ill grace and tardily, in typical Trump fashion, but that isn’t the same as stopping at nothing. Precision matters when you are dealing with words. On the larger question of banning Trump, one may ruefully appreciate the enforced silence of the charlatan and buffoon and still agree with Angela Merkel that the shutdown of an attainted citizen in a public forum sets an extremely dangerous precedent.

This default to censorship probably owes something to a weakening of trust in the common-law principle of due process. Trust the messenger, these people say, not the message—and we already know whom to trust! The prejudice fits in nicely with the axiom that, given a certain category of accuser, all accusations should be believed. There may be more than one side to the story, but only one side is consistent with the good life.

It is a daunting prospect for a dissident journalist or editor to speak her mind in such a climate. The Silicon Valley speech-enhancers and reach-controllers seem to know us through and through, according to a choice set of indices and algorithms. And within limits, of course, they are right. They have your data. They can predict much of what you will do. But how can they tell what you think till they see what you say?

The shutdown of an attainted citizen in a public forum sets an extremely dangerous precedent.

The Century-Long Fight

A case of Black land reparations in California may signal a turning tide.

On April 27, a California state Senate subcommittee passed a bill to return oceanfront real estate stolen from a Black couple by white city officials in 1924 to the living descendants of its original owners. The vote brings the Bruce family one step closer to a restoration of their rightful inheritance. “This will be a precedent for this country,” Duane Yellow Feather Shepard, a Bruce family descendant and spokesperson, told me. “It needs to be studied by young people as to how they should proceed in trying to get justice for their families and their people in the African American nation within this white nation.”

Shepard’s ancestors, Willa and Charles Bruce, left New Mexico in the early 1900s, resettling in the California township now known as Manhattan Beach. In 1912, the couple purchased a plot of land for $1,225 and opened a seaside resort catering to a Black clientele, who were banned from other local beaches. As Bruce’s Lodge gained popularity, white terror inevitably followed. Visitors’ tires were frequently slashed, phony “10 Minute Only” parking signs were erected to cause inconvenience, and the Ku Klux Klan set a fire on the Bruces’ property and burned a cross near the house of a Black neighbor, one of the few who had followed the Bruces’ lead and made a home in the area. In 1915, City Clerk Lewellyn Price complained that the Bruces held “a coon picnic… attended by about seventy-five to one-hundred-and-fifty coon pullman porters and their friends,” which was “quite a detriment to the neighborhood.” Signs declaring “No Trespassing” were also strategically placed on or around a nearby property, forcing Black beachgoers to traipse a half-mile out of their way to reach the water.

“Wherever we have tried to buy land for a beach resort we have been refused, but I own this land and I am going to keep it,” Willa Bruce told Los Angeles Times in 1912, addressing what the paper called a “great agitation among white” neighbors. She added that it only seemed right that Black folks should have “a little breathing space” to enjoy the beach.

Despite the Bruces’ resolve, the Manhattan Beach Board of Trustees ultimately drove them out, using eminent domain to seize their land and property in 1924. City officials claimed that a park would be built on the site, though it would sit dormant for nearly three decades. The Bruces sued for $120,000, a tally that included $35,000 for each of the lots they had by then acquired, and $50,000 in damages. The case dragged on until 1929, when the couple were granted a paltry $14,500 as a settlement. Having spent their final pennies fighting eviction, Shepard told me, the Bruces left California destitute the same year. Willa suffered a nervous breakdown and died in 1935, and Charles passed away two years later. Shepard believes “the
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post-traumatic stress of being terrorized by the KKK” and having their livelihood ripped away contributed to their deaths. Frank Daugherty, a member of the board that effectively stole the Bruces’ land, wrote in 1945 that white residents believed “the Negro problem was going to stop our progress…. I always felt that it was a mean trick to make them leave their homes, but it was the only way out.”

The Bruces’ experience of land theft was, and remains, commonplace among Black Americans. A 2001 Associated Press investigation found that 406 black landowners, through unscrupulous legal means and white terror, “lost more than 24,000 acres” that are today “owned by whites or corporations” and are worth tens of millions of dollars. Examples include the Espys, a Black family who was given a pittance by an all-white jury after their land in Vero Beach, Fla., was seized in 1942 through eminent domain. In 1965, the Los Angeles Dodgers paid the city $1,500 an acre for a portion of the land, which the team used for a spring training facility. In 2001, the Dodgers’ land was purchased by Indian River County for $10 million.

During the early 1900s, in places across America, white vigilante mobs committed anti-Black pogroms and then seized Black-owned properties for themselves. “If you are looking for stolen black land,” Ray Winbush, who leads Morgan State University’s Institute for Urban Research, told the AP, “just follow the lynching trail.” From the 1950s onward, roughly 15 million acres—a staggering 90 percent of Black-owned farmland—was lost, largely seized by the US Department of Agriculture to settle debts accrued by Black farmers as a result of the department’s racist lending practices. The USDA itself and other federal agencies have admitted to this destructive legacy of racism in multiple reports dating back to 1965.

The Bruces’ land today is estimated to be worth somewhere between $20 million and $75 million. Bernard Bruce, grandson of Willa and Charles, fought to reclaim his grandparents’ land before he succumbed to Covid-19 in January 2021, at the age of 86. His efforts, bolstered by then-Councilman Mitch Ward, the city’s first Black elected legislator, led the City Council to rename the property “Bruce’s Beach” in 2006. California State Senator Steven Bradford, a coauthor of the bill to return the Bruces’ land—which is expected to become law—said “the City of Manhattan Beach, the County, and the State owe a debt” to the family and called the legislation “what reparations looks like.” But other officials in Manhattan Beach—which today is less than 1 percent Black—balked at giving the family an official apology. Council member Joe Franklin stated that “no resident living in Manhattan Beach now is responsible for the racist actions of 100 years ago.”

“We’re not looking for an apology—we want our land back, and we want restitution for that loss of revenue,” Shepard told me, though a city official said in 2020 that “public funds can’t legally be used to pay” for restitution claims. “All these people in Manhattan Beach complaining, saying why should they have to pay for what their ancestors did, are still benefiting from what their ancestors did. And we’re still suffering from what their ancestors did.” Shepard told me that the return of the land “will lift a burden on the family.” “It’ll be the end of a 96-year fight to get justice, by helping to rectify what was done to Charles and Willa Bruce. They fought for this land. They didn’t just walk away. They fought tooth and nail, with everything they had.”
Democrats Should Create More Federal Holidays

ED BURMILA

Democrats tend to leave easy points on the playing field out of a misguided sense of modesty, the term Joe Biden used recently when recounting his experiences in the Obama White House. By refusing to take a “victory lap” and crow about his accomplishments, President Biden argued, Barack Obama failed to maximize the political benefits from the things he did.

Political scientists call this the art of credit claiming: convincing voters that you are the reason something good has happened. Biden himself missed an opportunity when he declined to put his name on the $2,000—er, I mean $1,400—economic relief checks sent out earlier this year, as Donald Trump had done. Liberals tend to see that kind of politicking as tacky, which of course it is. It’s also important and necessary.

There’s nothing wrong with taking the layup, with doing some direct pandering to voters’ most basic interests. With control of the White House and Congress, and with the predictable pushback to Biden’s proposed infrastructure spending bringing his honeymoon period to an end, Democrats could make an easy play to curry favor with voters by creating new federal holidays.

Sure, some of the same people now loudly complaining that “no one wants to work” will oppose the idea of Americans working less for any reason. But it’s difficult to imagine that the issue would be, on balance, anything but a net political win. (The dearth of polling on the question “Do people like holidays?” suggests that the answer is not complicated.)

Creating a federal holiday requires a vote in Congress. Presidents can declare holidays unilaterally, but only for a single, nonrecurring date (such as when July 4 falls on a weekend, and a different date, like July 3, is given temporary holiday status). The worst-case scenario, politically, for a unified Democratic House and Senate proposing new holidays would be to force Senate Republicans to defend using their various obstructionist tricks to prevent passage. If Democrats can’t collectively win a rhetorical battle framed as “We voted to give you more holidays, they refused,” then perhaps politics is the wrong line of work for them.

There are obvious candidates for additional holidays—Juneteenth and Election Day leap to mind—but it’s worth remembering how little most Americans use holidays for their “official” purpose. Is Labor Day really used to solemnly remember the victories and sacrifices of the labor movement? Or is it just a three-day weekend at a point in the calendar when most of us could really use one? Growing up in Illinois, I learned firsthand that having Casimir S. Pulaski Day off from work or school was enjoyable even for the majority of people who neither knew nor cared who Pulaski was.

While the number of federal public holidays in the United States is below but roughly comparable to that of our peer nations, the absence of paid vacation time (or the meager amounts for many who have it) puts American workers at a serious disadvantage when it comes to leisure. And there’s nothing wrong with messaging that leisure is good, that quality of life is important. For all the political posturing around the joys of work, most of us are thrilled to take a day off when the opportunity arises.

One complicating factor is the disparity between salaried and hourly workers, since the latter are often not paid if they do get a holiday off. But the hourly pay on holidays is often at time-and-a-half or better, giving the pro-holidays faction an argument that people can still benefit economically, if not in additional leisure time.

The usual suspects like the Chamber of Commerce will wail and rend their garments over any proposal for new federal holidays, and right-wing media will try to turn it into a culture war issue regardless of whether Congress proposes Juneteenth or National Corn Dog Day (the third Saturday in March, obviously). Let them. The counterpoint—“Wouldn’t it be nice to have another three-day weekend?”—is formidable.

Expanding the holiday calendar is not the nation’s most pressing issue, but that is precisely the point. With other, more difficult issues that lack consensus still on the table and Republicans forever inventing more issues that pander to their base (“campus cancel culture”), Democrats need to find issues that enable them to do some posturing of their own. Arguing that Americans work too much and deserve some additional days off has a very limited downside.

It’s OK to do some politics. I promise. Democrats should learn to pick the low-hanging fruit when it’s available.

Ed Burmila is the host of Mass for Shut-ins, a podcast of leftist politics and historical arcana. His book The Politics of Evasion: Why the Democrats Keep Making the Same Mistakes will arrive in summer 2022 (Bold Type Books).
Dear President Biden,

You know and I know that you could learn a lot from Jimmy Carter's presidency. You are 18 years younger than our longest-living ex-president, but he was your friend and political ally in the 1970s, when you were a senator in your 30s. You were the first senator to endorse Carter’s miraculous run for the White House from complete obscurity. And when he won in 1976, you found yourself on the same political wavelength with the former Georgia governor. You both started out in politics as pragmatic populists: Democrats, but fiscal conservatives. You both opposed school busing and supported a woman’s right to choose—but opposed using federal funds for abortions.

In January 1978, just one year into Carter’s presidency, you dropped by the White House to warn him that Ted Kennedy was already lining up support from the Democratic Party’s liberal wing to challenge him for the 1980 nomination. You warned Carter that both labor unions and the Jewish community harbored a “deep distrust” of his presidency. Carter was grateful for the warning, but he wasn’t surprised. He told his allies that he was going to “whip” Kennedy’s “ass,” and he did, defeating the Massachusetts senator in a string of hard-fought primaries. But the Kennedy challenge left a weakened Carter to face off against Ronald Reagan in the November election. And, of course, he lost.

There are some lessons here:

§ Never promise to never tell a lie. Carter’s consigliere, Charlie Kirbo, warned him, “We’re going to lose the liar vote.” And after Trump, we know the liar vote is pretty sizable.

§ It’s OK that you don’t drink. But unlike Carter, please do serve hard liquor in the White House. Most politicians and all journalists need to imbibe, and really, it won’t bust the budget.

§ While we’re on the subject, don’t try to balance the federal budget. Facing a $66 billion deficit—how quaint that sounds—Carter tried to bring down domestic spending and only alienated liberal Democrats.

§ Realize that trying to make the US broker peace between Israelis and Palestinians will cost you politically. Carter’s personal diplomacy took Egypt off the battlefield for Israel. But this only earned him the distrust—no, the enmity—of the Jewish American establishment, and consequently he became the first modern Democratic president to lose a majority of the Jewish vote. As for the Israelis, remember what Carter learned: They talk about peace, but all they really want are those West Bank settlements. Also, don’t forget how deft Bibi Netanyahu was at humiliating Barack Obama; he’ll do the same to you, even as he once again “mows the lawn” in Gaza and fans sectarian hatred inside Israel. I know, I know, you want to be “evenhanded” about this dangerous neighborhood.

But it turns out Carter was right to warn us that Israel was choosing to become an apartheid state.

§ Beware of dictators. Carter had good intelligence that Chile’s Gen. Augusto Pinochet had ordered the assassination of Orlando Letelier with a car bomb that exploded not far from the White House—and he always regretted not indicting the Chilean dictator. Unfortunately, you’ve already got the same problem with the murderous crown prince of Saudi Arabia.

§ On national health care: Carter’s major mistake here was not to keep Ted Kennedy inside the tent by endorsing his bill for national health insurance. Kennedy’s expensive bill didn’t have the votes anyway—so when it went down in defeat, Carter could have garnered liberal backing for his own, more measured bill, providing all Americans with universal catastrophic health insurance. The lesson here is that you need to give the Squad and the progressive wing of the party no excuse to desert the Biden tent.

§ It’s OK to put solar panels on the White House. But if, like Carter, you try to impose a windfall profits tax on the oil companies, know they will hire thousands of lobbyists to destroy your congressional agenda. Ditto Big Tech. So prepare for a big fight.

§ Carter preserved millions of acres of Alaskan wilderness as a national monument—and Alaskans are still hanging him in effigy. So if you do the right thing for the environment, know that the locals will blame you.

§ When it comes to reshuffling your administration, don’t take any advice from Gerald Rafshoon, Carter’s communications director, who told him to fire his cabinet secretaries en masse. Just fire them one by one on late Friday nights, when the pundits won’t notice.

§ If you take a 10-day retreat at Camp David, don’t come back and warn the American people that “owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning.” Voters will think you are un-American.

§ Carter signed the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, and the law triggered a special prosecutor’s investigation of his top aide, Hamilton Jordan, who was accused of buying cocaine at Studio 54—a wholly false accusation fabricated by Roy Cohn. (Yes, that Roy Cohn.) Fortunately, Roy Cohn is long dead, so you won’t have to worry about him. But the lesson here is to keep your administration squeaky clean.
§ Yes, transparency. But maybe you are right not to host too many press conferences. Carter held one every two weeks for the first two years, until he realized it was just annoying everyone. Cultivate influential reporters and be grateful that Sally Quinn writes about religion now.

§ Don’t read 300 pages of memos a day; it's too much detail. Don’t work long hours in the Oval Office, and never turn down dinner invitations from the publisher of The Washington Post. Jeff Bezos may not be as gracious company as Katharine Graham, but he is even more powerful.

§ Don’t let your staff use the White House tennis court. They will only complain that you are paying too much attention to minutiae when you make them sign in to reserve it.

§ Know that senators from West Virginia stand in a special category. Carter had to listen to Robert Byrd’s bluegrass fiddling—and let him pave any dirt road in the state. Senator Joe Manchin should be given the same perks.

§ Don’t hire a prickly Polish aristocrat who obsesses about the Russians to be your national security adviser. Zbigniew Brzezinski poisoned Carter’s relations with his secretary of state, Cy Vance. Let your secretary of state run your foreign policy.

§ Don’t spend more time on foreign policy than on domestic affairs. Carter was seduced by the illusion that he could get more things done abroad. As James Carville said of the 1992 election, “It’s the illusion that he could get more things done abroad. As James Carville said of the 1992 election, “It’s the economy, stupid.”

§ Embrace the pork barrel. Carter pissed off too many congressmen by vetoing water projects, particularly US Army Corps of Engineers dams that everyone knew were damaging the environment. Let them have their water projects. Get their votes for things that matter.

§ Know the importance of racial justice. As a Southern white man, Carter understood this. During his presidency, he appointed scores of Black and Latinx people to the federal judiciary. Just realize that if you do the right thing on race, sometimes it means you will not get reelected.

§ Also, if you do the right thing, don’t tell people that’s why you’re doing it. Otherwise, the voters will think you are sanctimonious.

§ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, if you happen to be attacked by a killer rabbit while quietly fishing in a Georgia pond, never, ever defend yourself with an oar, because most Americans love rabbits—even those that can swim—and they will accuse you of animal abuse. And then you might become a one-term president.

Sincerely,
Kai Bird

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IN OUR ORBIT/DAVID COLE

On Principle

Radical lawyer Michael Ratner championed hopeless causes to hold the powerful to account.

Shortly after the George W. Bush administration started bringing so-called “enemy combatants” to Guantánamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba in 2002, Michael Ratner, a lawyer in New York City, gathered a group of colleagues at the Center for Constitutional Rights to discuss filing a suit on the prisoners’ behalf. When I asked him, some years later, what chance he thought he had of prevailing, he answered, “None whatsoever. We filed one hundred percent on principle.”

Michael Ratner did everything “one hundred percent on principle.” And much of it seemed, at least at the time, hopeless. He filed more impossible-to-win lawsuits than perhaps any other major lawyer of the past 50 years. With the Center for Constitutional Rights, where he worked for over four decades, he went to court to challenge the invasion of Grenada, the funding of the contras in Nicaragua, the interdiction of Haitian refugees, the ban on traveling to Cuba, and the invasion of Iraq. Not many of these lawsuits succeeded. They were filed “on principle.” Ratner’s principle was to challenge the abuse of power wherever he saw it.

But when he did win, he won big. With Harold Hongju Koh and a team of Yale law students, he successfully challenged the Clinton administration’s detention of Haitian refugees at Guantánamo in the 1990s. And his suit on behalf of enemy combatants, Rasul v. Bush, after losing in the lower courts, won in the Supreme Court and was the first of several landmark rulings rejecting the Bush administration’s claims of unchecked power in the “war on terror.” The case ensured that Guantánamo detainees could challenge their detentions—and helped create the pressure that forced the Bush administration to release more than 500 of the men detained there.

Ratner died of cancer in 2016 at the age of 72, but he devoted much of the last year of his life to writing a memoir, Moving the Bar: My Life as a Radical Lawyer, which was published posthumously in May by OR Books. It is a beautiful and compelling account from one of the leaders of the legal left.

“Radical lawyer” is in some sense an oxymoron. The law is anything but radical; it resists change, favors the status quo, and is often used as a tool by those with power to maintain their advantage. But Ratner showed that one can indeed be both a radical and a lawyer—by acting “one hundred percent on principle,” and by using the law on behalf of the vulnerable to hold the powerful to account.

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The Low-Information Mayor?

In the NYC mayoral race, Andrew Yang is aiming to run a city he doesn’t understand.
As I walked along Manhattan’s 11th Avenue one day in late April, the wind seemed as if it were trying to blow the plywood outdoor-dining huts over and rip the spindly trees from the ground. I arrived early to the Gotham West Market food court. My date, Andrew Yang, showed up unfazed by the violent weather, as buoyant as he appears on TV.

A candidate for mayor of New York City, Yang is a businessman and failed nonproﬁteer with no experience governing and a hodgepodge of centrist, liberal, banal, and just plain quirky opinions. He has some potentially interesting ideas—a public bank, for instance—but he also loves solutions involving philanthropy and public-private partnerships. And right now, although Eric Adams, an ex-cop and a more conventional politician, has been pulling ahead recently, Yang is polling well with every demographic, including those identifying as progressive or liberal. With his name recognition, he could easily win a race made less predictable by the city’s new ranked-choice voting system. The former executive of a small test-prep company, Yang may well become the next mayor of the biggest city in the United States. I wanted to know how a Mayor Yang would address the concerns of the progressive movement, from racial injustice to affordable housing to the climate crisis.

Given the inhospitable weather, we decided to eat indoors (a pandemic ﬁrst for me). Yang, wearing his usual dark blue blazer over a dress shirt with no tie, exuberantly assured me that the pizza here—from Corner Slice, an upscale enterprise aesthetically evocative of a vernacular New York pizza shop—is “the best.” I decided to have a slice, inexplicably, with a knife and fork, it was a tabloid scandal—but particularly for Yang, who has drawn mockery for his lack of authenticity as a New Yorker. His social media posts have reﬂected confusion on points ranging from the meaning of “bodega” to the trajectory of the A train, and he’s been roasted for being a “bandwagon fan” of the New York Knicks. In this light, it seemed bold of him to consume a pricey square slice of pizza with a knife and fork of these inequities.” But, he insisted, Yang is pretty sure “him” referred to a prominent person. He told me he donated to Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign in 2016. He also said he voted for Cynthia Nixon, the Sex and the City actress turned education activist who challenged Andrew Cuomo for governor in 2018. Still, his politics are largely those of a centrist or conservative Democrat, friendly to school privatization schemes and cops. He did not join any of last summer’s protests over George Floyd’s unconscionable murder by a police ofﬁcer, though he has met with family members of people killed by police violence and did attend a vigil for the victims at a church, an event he went out of his way to describe as “very peaceful.”

I asked Yang about education. After three decades of struggle and lawsuits by public school parents and community activists, the state legislature decided this year to fully and equitably fund New York City’s public schools. Parent advocates won the court battles years ago: The state was found guilty of underfunding city schools and had been under a court order to allocate billions of dollars to the city’s public schools to enable them to provide “a sound basic education” to their students, most of whom are Black or brown. But it took much more organizing and protesting, and the election of a progressive legislature, to ﬁnally put that funding in the state budget this year. The city will also be ﬂush with new federal reopening funds. This seems like an exciting opportunity to address the persistent racial and economic segregation and inequality that has plagued the system.

What’s Yang’s plan? He listened politely but a little blankly, as if much of this information was new to him.

“I mean,” he said doubtfully, “I would love to make progress on some of these inequities.” But, he insisted, the most urgent issue is reopening the schools. The topic has become a signature one for Yang, and it shows how attuned he is to the moment: Many parents are, indeed, desperate to have their kids back in school full-time. Not having school, sports, and normal sociability has been devastating for some children’s mental health and for most kids’ development, he emphasized. I’m a public school parent, and it feels good to have our suffering acknowledged by a prominent person.

I pointed out, however, that he wouldn’t be taking ofﬁce until January 2022. Mayor de Blasio has said that all students can go back to school full-time in the fall. Some elementary
school students are already attending full-time, and city officials say more may have the opportunity to do so later this spring. High school sports are back. Teachers have had the chance to be vaccinated by now. Many adults in the surrounding community have, too (at this writing, more than half of Manhattan, more than a third of Brooklyn and Staten Island, and more than 40 percent of Queens has been fully vaccinated). Won’t this be a settled issue by the time Yang takes office? “You’d hope!” he said skeptically, “but I’m really concerned.”

Yang has crusaded against other pandemic measures that are likely to be irrelevant to his mayoralty, calling for fully reopening the bars. A few days before we met, he held a press conference denouncing the Covid rule mandating that food be served with drinks. That’s a matter of policy decided by the state, not the city—and the legislature repealed it the next day.

**Weird thing about Andrew Yang is that everything he says sounds reasonable unless you know anything about the topic.**

Yang strongly opposes any vaccine mandates. His response to such a mandate from the state was “completely muddled.” Biden’s vaccine mandate for all federal workers, and for those who will work in congregate settings such as nursing homes, has been signed into law. But Yang is against it—decrying the state of New York’s vaccine mandate as an example of the government invading the private sector. But he has not advocated for a full repeal of such laws unless the federal government also repeals them. “The federal government made this law, and the state made this law,” he said. “If the federal government repealed it, then the state would.”

**All cops are beneficial? Andrew Yang strongly opposes reducing the size of the NYPD.**

He’s famous for giving more prominence to the idea of a universal basic income, which is intriguing, but his proposal is neither universal nor basic (just $2,000 a year for some of the poorest New Yorkers). Yang, courting the city’s Orthodox Jewish community, has praised the academic quality of the Orthodox yeshivas, but years of research, lawsuits, and testimony by graduates show that many of them don’t meet their obligations to provide even a basic education. He’s floated the idea of a city takeover of its transit system, which seems sensible—if you don’t know that the funding is controlled by the state, a knowledge gap that met with consternation from experts interviewed by *Politico.*

Yang benefits from being much more plugged into the zeitgeist than progressives are. The left lacks a clear message on school reopening. Several left-wing education groups even counterprotested Yang’s reopening rally on May 1. You could disagree with the feasibility of the rally’s demand—fully reopen now!—but to counterprotest means what? Don’t reopen school, even as the pandemic wanes and the federal money pours in? Yang speaks to another visceral issue on most apolitical people’s minds and overlooked by New York’s NGO left: high murder rates. In a time of constant news alerts about shootings and stabbings in the city—New Yorkers may remember the terrifying “A train slasher” this winter—calls to defund the police (though correct), coming from people largely silent about such violence, can seem tone-deaf. In fact, given how often high crime leads to far-right political reaction—please note that Brooklyn and Staten Island Republicans have endorsed Guardian Angels founder and racist madman Curtis Sliwa for mayor—we may be getting off easy with Yang, who speaks in measured tones about stopping both crime and police violence.

So far, no left mayoral candidate is as good at running for office as Yang is. In last year’s state Senate and Assembly races, New York’s left—including but not limited to NYC-DSA—ran charismatic, visionary candidates who addressed broadly popular priorities like taxing the rich, single-payer health care, renters’ rights, affordable housing, stopping police violence, and funding public schools. They won big. In contrast, the progressive candidates for mayor—Maya Wiley, Dianne Morales, and Scott Stringer—have been unremarkable.

Yang is also not vulnerable on the things that trigger the most outrage on the well-informed left, since that is not his base. When Yang was caught awkwardly shrugging off a sexist joke, Wiley took him to task in an Internet ad. Her scolding manner and stern visage offered a bracing reminder of why some voters preferred Trump to Hillary Clinton. Stringer has hemorrhaged endorsements because of a sexual harassment accusation, while Yang has been unharmed by complaints of sex discrimination and anti-Blackness by a few former employees. None of these charges have been proven, but among Stringer’s base of nonprostitutes and political activists, he’s toast even without any evidence, while Yang’s “base”—that is, most
people—probably aren’t paying much attention.

Yang sometimes floats ideas that are absurd and terrible—a casino on Governors Island, a crackdown on street vendors—and then backs off from them amiably. He issued an appalling statement in support of Israel, then walked it back after criticism from Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and his own staff. Despite his “bro” reputation, he doesn’t exude toxic masculinity; he can change course when he’s wrong. To follow his campaign statements, then, is to constantly oscillate between alarm and relief.

**T**he week before our lunch, on Earth Day, I met Yang for the first time. I went out to see him give a press conference in the Rockaways, a coastal area of Queens that was devastated by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. It was a cold day, and the area felt gray and deserted. From the A train I saw buffleheads, cormorants, and a couple of egrets. Rockaway Community Park, the site of the press conference, is at the base of what used to be the Edgemere Landfill. The area is owned by the city, but only a small portion of it is clean enough to use as a public park. Yang is here in support of a proposal to install solar panels on the still-toxic part of this property. When I got there, I met Tina Carr, the policy director of AC Power, a group that promotes and develops solar energy projects on landfills and brownfields. She called the idea a “no-brainer” and was thrilled to have Yang’s backing.

Yang, sporting the cheery orange and blue striped scarf he always seems to wear in cold weather, praised the project quickly but sincerely, then expounded a bit on getting rid of burdensome red tape. He meant this to be in support of helping the environment, but this kind of language is, of course, beloved by pols and libertarians.

A TV reporter asked about a letter signed by hundreds of prominent Asian and Pacific Islander American progressives declining to support Yang because he is not progressive enough. Yang was on surer ground here. He’s clearly aware that his base is the apolitical: “I take exception to, frankly, trying to categorize people in various ideological buckets. Most New Yorkers are not wired that way.”

A journalist who lives in the Rockaways asked about ferry service to the area. Yang has criticized the New York ferry service, since it is heavily subsidized by the city and its ridership is low. “It’s heavily subsidized, but we need it,” the man said. “This is a transit desert.”

Yang wasn’t sure about that one. He said he’d look into it.

If you’ve ever knocked on doors or made phone calls for a political campaign, you’ve probably encountered that guy who doesn’t know the issues but won’t commit to your cause because, he says, he has to do his own research. “Andrew Yang is that guy,” said Susan Kang, a political science professor at John Jay College and a cofounder of NO IDC NY, which successfully ousted a group of conservative Democrats from the state legislature in 2018. (Kang is also one of the signatories to the anti-Yang letter.) If you’ve encountered that guy, you may have suspected that he isn’t, in fact, planning to do any research.

Who wouldn’t love the idea of turning toxic municipal properties into solar farms? But the rest of Yang’s climate plans are vague compared with the lengthly specifics that some of his mayoral competitors, especially Stringer and Kathryn Garcia, have provided. And when I interviewed Veekas Ashoka of the Sunrise Movement NYC, along with some of his colleagues, Ashoka asked why Yang’s climate plan accepts the Biden administration’s climate targets: As one of the richest and most progressive cities on earth, shouldn’t we aspire to do better than the federal government, to be leaders on this issue? Another youth climate activist I interviewed separately made the same criticism.

When I raised the climate activists’ exhortation with Yang over our pizza lunch, as angry winds continued to batter Gotham West Market, he beamed disarmingly. “I love that point!” he exulted. “I would love to drive past those goals.”

I asked if he’d ever researched the matter of the Rockaways’ ferry service. He admitted he hadn’t.

Yang’s press secretary told him it was time to go. As we stood up, a man in a Columbia Sportswear fleece waved him down, shouting, “Mr. Yang, we’re behind you!” He got a selfie with the candidate. The Yang fan was Jay Underwood, a principal at George Jackson Academy, a private school for gifted, mostly low-income boys. I asked Underwood why he’s so excited about Yang. He praised the candidate’s “connectivity” and reflected on what a role model Yang would be for his students, many of whom are Asian American. Underwood acknowledged sheepishly, “I don’t know much about policy issues.”
Reflections on

Indoor sport: The titles assigned to De Hooch’s work—here, Two Ladies and Two Gentleman in an Interior (a.k.a. The Visit)—barely hint at the depth of feeling.
Reflections on a Life Indoors

Pieter de Hooch, Instagram, and me.

BY BENJAMIN MOSER

What is the perfect place to live? If a year ago you thought you’d found it, you probably reconsidered as lockdown dragged on. Back then, it didn’t really matter if the paint was flaking and the furniture was shopworn and the kitchen was long in the tooth. You could always step outside, go to a restaurant, take a trip. After only a few weeks of confinement, we realized how important it is to be able to step into other rooms.

For many of us who’ve been able to work from home—or whose jobs simply disappeared during lockdown—the only “other rooms” we’ve had are in our phones. And while the lockdown may be ending in some places and for some people, the pandemic is not over, no matter how close we keep thinking we are to getting to Overness. It’s not over where I live, as I’m reminded every so often by one of those little phone alerts that make me realize, with horror, just how much time I’d been spending there on my phone: I “averaged” six or even seven hours a day—doing what, exactly, I was never sure. Some legitimate stuff—writing e-mails, talking with friends, working my way through a recipe—but mostly not. And most of the not was Instagram.

I joined Instagram around 2013—a bit late. I did so only because I was working on a biography of Susan Sontag. I was reading reams of writing about photography, coming to understand its history and its practitioners, its debates and its controversies, yet I realized that, apart from some vacation snapshots, I had never taken a photograph. I had no real experience of the thing I was writing about.

A friend suggested Instagram. He gave me some tips, which were less about the art of photography than about the art of not being obnoxious on social media. Don’t post more than once a day, he said. Please spare us your cappuccino. Remember that pictures of kids aren’t interesting to people who don’t know the kids. It’s a social network, so try to think about what other people will find interesting.

It turned out that it was easy to discover what other people liked because they would literally “like” it, and you could see the numbers. I poured energy into photographing the fascinating arcana—Grecian urns, rare manuscripts—that I encountered on my travels. I devised evocative descriptions. My recherche images tanked. People wanted sunsets and guys in swimsuits; the Eiffel Tower never failed to wow.

The longer I was on Instagram, the more I realized that I wasn’t that different. There was a very specific thing I wanted to look at: romantic gardens, castles, churches, and, especially, interiors. I could scroll through page after page of beautifully decorated, beautifully photographed rooms, the dawn or evening light falling just so on a flower, a vase, a rug. In these pictures, people hardly appeared.

Would people have ruined the effect? Maybe. The accounts showing comfortable rooms had hundreds of thousands of followers. I realized that I had stumbled across a powerful fantasy. It was a fantasy that I shared, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it was a fantasy that had shaped my entire life. The strange thing is that I had never thought about it before, at least not consciously.

At some point between December 17, 1998, and February 27, 1999, I went to visit my sister. I am not sure of the exact date, but I know what those months meant in terms of my own life. In the spring of 1998, I had graduated from college and moved to New York City. My sister was a few months from graduating from Amherst. We met in Hartford, and went to see a show at the Wadsworth Atheneum.

It was a retrospective of the paintings of Pieter de Hooch, a painter I had never heard of, and those were the dates it ran. I hadn’t heard of many artists, and the more I learned and studied, the more I realized how much there was to learn and study. In order to continue my education after college, I read art magazines and went to every exhibition I could. It didn’t matter what it was about or who the artists were.

I don’t remember most of what I saw in those years, but I remember the De Hooch exhibition clearly because it was the first time I had ever felt the charm of the Dutch. His pictures showed spotlessly clean middle-class rooms where, bathed in warm light, brightly clad people were taking part in some peaceful activity: getting ready for school, chatting with neighbors, playing with the dog.

Those rooms breathed refinement and civilization. Anyone who visits a palace fantasizes about what it would be like to live there, but nobody ever thinks that they will actually move in to Versailles or the Winter Palace. The appeal of De Hooch’s Holland was that you could so easily see yourself in those perfect rooms. It was a vision so welcoming that I never forgot it. That, I thought, is the place to live.

That weekend in Connecticut, I did not suspect how quickly a series of coincidences would bring me to those rooms—or how much of my life I would spend in them. Before long, I would be living in a 17th-century Dutch house, with windows (and beams and courtyards and doors) that looked exactly like those in De Hooch’s paintings. Only the people looked different; but the people weren’t the point.

The longer I was on Instagram, the more I realized what I wanted to look at: castles, churches, gardens, and, especially, interiors.

Benjamin Moser is a Nation contributing writer. His biography of Susan Sontag, Susan: Her Life and Work, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2020.
At first, living in the Netherlands was the Instagram fantasy. In later years, the light started to fade. The reality of Dutch life—reptilian politicians, neglecting to vacuum, unanswered e-mail—muscle its way in. It made me forget the silvery light falling through latticed windows onto blue-and-white ceramics. The place became a bit too peopled. Then lockdown came, and I started scrolling through Instagram. And I remembered Pieter de Hooch.

There aren’t many books about De Hooch. Maybe this is because, as Jan Lievens suffers in comparison to Rembrandt, De Hooch suffers in comparison to his neighbor and acquaintance Vermeer. Or because, like many Dutch painters whose radicalism in their own day has grown invisible to us now, he seems so unchallenging—the equivalent, in painting, of a high-end interiors magazine.

There’s been only a single, partial show about him since the one I saw right after college. One suspects that exhibition was a long-cherished dream, since it was put together by the Wadsworth’s then director, Peter Sutton, who wrote the catalog and who, nearly two decades before, had written the standard work on De Hooch. In a cruel, curt paragraph in that book, Sutton summed up what was known of the artist’s life:

De Hooch was born in Rotterdam in 1629, had moved to Delft by 1652, was employed by a linen merchant and joined the guild in Delft in September 1655. Contact with the painter Hendrick van der Burch was established in these years and after settling in Amsterdam in 1660 De Hooch is known to have encountered works by De Witte. He evidently remained a resident of Amsterdam until his death in the madhouse in 1684. Throughout his life De Hooch seems to have been relatively poor.

Those last two sentences brought me up short. Death in the madhouse. Relatively poor. They seemed incompatible with De Hooch’s tranquil, composed rooms. In his pictures, you can almost see dust floating in the light streaming through the windows. You can imagine the crackling of logs in the hearth. You can hear the swish of the maid-servant’s broom on the floor, the snore of sleeping puppies. These are pictures of a dream.

This is why the titles bestowed on them by scholars—Woman With Children in an Interior; A Party of Figures Around a Table—seem so disappointing. The barest descriptions were chosen, their poverty pointing to the embarrassment of putting into words the feelings these paintings really evoke: A Young Man’s Yearning for Love; My Beloved Grandmother; Dead These Many Years.

You could describe them in other ways, too. You could name them for furniture, for atmosphere: Afternoon Light on a Gilded Wall Covering; Study of Bricks and Tiles. The people inside these paintings aren’t really the point. The most important people stand outside those rooms and imagine themselves inside. They are the people looking at them: us.

The world into which De Hooch invites us is rigorously edited. His subjects are conviviality, friendship, and family. His deepest feelings seem to have been reserved for scenes of mothers and small children, and though he was a father of seven himself, he hardly ever paints fathers. Men are shown as accessories to women; the love of couples is suggested mainly by the offspring those unions produce.

Yet it is a world suffused by love, a world in which little unpleasantness intrudes. The time and place are instantly recognizable, but the works seem to exist outside of time; and as I looked at these paintings again during the interminable lockdowns and isolation of the months of Covid, I felt the way I did when looking at those pictures on Instagram. More than enjoying such pictures, I needed them.

De Hooch’s work can be divided into three distinct phases—or, as we shall see, four. The earliest consists of paintings of humble people, often soldiers, in taverns and inns. They’re sitting around drinking, playing games, killing time. The setting is the countryside, the village; the rooms are like places where livestock might be kept, with floors of clay or mud or the barest wooden planks.

The tavern and the village give way to the middle-class urban home in his second phase, a shift that coincided with his marriage to Jan-netgen van der Burch, a woman from Delft. De Hooch moved there from Rotterdam in 1654, the year that the explosion of a gunpowder magazine destroyed a huge area of Delft and
killed Carel Fabritius, who was traditionally seen as the link between Rembrandt and Vermeer.

The city's devastation, which attracted other painters, never appears in De Hooch's works. Nothing intrudes on the contentment of the happy home. His first children were born in 1655 and 1656, but if another artist might have experienced such an eruption as an interruption, it was a liberation for De Hooch, and in the years of his children's infancy, he painted his greatest works.

In these pictures, De Hooch, more than any other artist, created a nation. It was a country where, as all foreign visitors remarked, cleanliness was next to godliness (“One doesn’t dare spit in the rooms,” a Frenchman marveled in 1651), and where children were cosseted. Foreigners thought they were spoiled: “Never before had a people produced so many images of tender and contented families,” Sutton writes.

This middle-class land of clean and happy homes was an artistic invention. The farther back one goes in the history of art, the more one realizes how many such inventions there are, and how little we could see or say without them. So many forms and expressions that seem too obvious to have necessitated an inventor turn out, upon closer inspection, to have had one; we often know their names.

“Pliny names the first painter to have distinguished males from females, the first painter to show three-quarter views of heads as well as veins and drapery folds, the first painter to paint open mouths and teeth and expressions, the first painter to depict objects realistically,” wrote the scholar Christopher Wood. “Aristides of Thebes was the first of all painters who depicted the mind and expressed the feelings of a human being.”

In De Hooch's paintings are other inventions, too, including his trademark doorkijkje, a window or door that opens onto another space. This trick demands deviousness. The painter needs to fool the brain into combining two separate perspectives into one, the way our two separate eyes make us combine a split image into a whole. De Hooch was figuring out the technique right as he began painting mothers and children.

You can see its beginnings in a painting from just before this breakthrough, Soldier and Serving Woman With Card Players. The people cluster in the left half of the painting, lit by some light that comes from the place where we are standing. The right half is dark—except for a tiny golden streak, a brush-stroke glowing like a Mark Rothko or a zip by Barnett Newman. It would soon expand.

This brushstroke dates from around 1655, when De Hooch would step out of the tavern and head into the home. When he did, the little streak grew. In Mother and Child With a Sweeping Woman, the other room suggested in the earlier painting has opened onto a small, bright vestibule; and in the picture's imperfections, we see how hard it is to unify these spaces, and the light that enters them.

The muddled, muddy floors have been given way to brick and tile. This gives the rooms up a bit. And, conveniently, it gives the painter a neat geometric grid along which to plot his perspective. But the transitions are rough. If De Hooch had simply closed the door to the vestibule, the picture would have been perfect. Because he opened it, the strains show. The little room has come strangely unhinged.

Soon—we can't know how soon, but in the early years of marriage and fatherhood—he resolves this difficult technical question, and his pictures start to burst with views—down streets, through windows, out of doors—that turn some of his paintings into labyrinths. Light streams in from all sorts of unexpected directions, and the pictures take on a warmth and an openness that matches their subjects.

The paintings of the late 1650s are among the most sheerly beautiful that the Dutch produced at the height of their glory. Perhaps this success inspired De Hooch to exchange stuffy, conservative Delft for the booming capital, Amsterdam, where he moved in the early 1660s. There, he began the third phase of his career: taking families out of their middle-class homes and placing them in palaces.
De Hooch and Vermeer: “One of those partnerships which advance the history of art in ways the two might not have achieved individually.”
—Peter Sutton

There are other differences, too: De Hooch’s colors are darker, less jewel-like than Vermeer’s. But as we see in De Hooch’s first real masterpiece, A Merry Company With Two Men and Two Women, we are in the same world. As usual, the title tells us nothing except that the picture features four people in an interior; we visualize it better when learning that great connoisseurs once took it for a Vermeer.

The figures are grouped around a table and lit, as in so many Vermeers, from a window whose lower shutters are closed. The light, coming from the gray skies that settle like a blanket over Holland for so many months in the year, creates a feeling of privacy, of intimacy. The scene invites us to dream of what life could be in a peaceful land.

...
greatest works, their quality of stillness— their distance from the madding crowd.

In 1976, the discovery that he had died insane cast an entirely new light on these pictures. Here, at last, was an explanation, though one that raised its own unanswerable questions. What was the nature of his mental illness? When had it begun? Was his illness responsible for his lapses? Or was it his deteriorating economic position—his inability to work as in his younger years—that drove him mad?

De Hooch’s late period is not, like that of Frans Hals or Rembrandt, an apotheosis; it is a shipwreck. And when his work is compared, once again, to his neighbor Vermeer’s, it raises another question. Attributions vary, but Vermeer left around 34 works. He died at 42. What if De Hooch had died at the same age, a year or two after he moved to Amsterdam, and painted none of his late works?

He would still have painted more than Vermeer—but not by much, especially if we deduct the pictures from his years of apprenticeship. There would be about the same number of great paintings, around 30. Many of these are better than the lesser Vermeers. If the two bodies of work were placed side-by-side, not everyone would agree—not instantly—as to which of them was the greater artist.

Taped to my phone in the year of the plague, I felt an almost physical relief when, turning away from the pain of the world, I could flip through pictures of sunlit rooms. And I started thinking about Pieter de Hooch once again. I read about his madness, contemplating the divorce between the reality of his life and the alternative facts of his paintings, and I remembered an afternoon I once spent in The Hague.

My father was in town. A lawyer, he had discovered that the trial of Slobodan Milošević was open to the public, and wanted to see it. I could think of many ways I would rather spend the day than hearing about mass rapes and racist massacres, but I went because I was curious to see a monster who had destroyed so many people—indeed, entire nations.

In his gray suit, the monster looked—you guessed it—banal. The question being discussed was the makeup of a chain of command that had authorized a massacre in Bosnia, and whether the ultimate power resided in Belgrade—with Milošević—or with the Bosnian Serb army in Pale. The discussion was no less boring for being a question of life and death. Afterward my dad and I went to the Mauritshuis.

This was almost exactly the scenario that Lawrence Wechsler described in Vermeer in Bosnia, a book I read a few years later. In it, Wechsler told of a judge who, after a day of listening to stories of rape and murder, would go to that same museum in order to wash off the stench. The contrast brought him to an insight that never left me, since it brought me so close to the real appeal of those images of conviviality:

“When Vermeer was painting those images of peacefulness and serenity, Europe was awash in vicious wars.”

—Lawrence Wechsler, Vermeer in Bosnia

Vermeer’s serenity was interrupted by his early death. Would he have been able to keep up the pose if he, like De Hooch, had lived another coarse, hungry decade? The ugliness he kept so carefully at bay crept into De Hooch’s later pictures in all kinds of ways: not in direct depictions of the depredations Wechsler
An Afropessimist on the year since George Floyd was murdered
Notes of a (Minneapolis) native son.

BY FRANK B. WILDERSON III

LAST YEAR, AS I SAT IN MY STUDY IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AND WATCHED videos of the Minneapolis Police Department’s Third Precinct station on Lake Street burning in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder, a memory eddied up in the flames.

It’s one or two in the morning. Lake Street runs like a deep scar down the southern arm of the city. I’m idling in my parents’ green station wagon at a stoplight with a couple of teammates from the football team. Marcus, Ray, and me; three Black, intrepid, rusty-butt boys out looking for a thrill. Curtis Mayfield croons “Freddie’s Dead” on the eight-track player. A blunt passes from Marcus to me, in the front, then to Ray in the back seat. Soon, a contender pulls up beside us. White boys in letter jackets from a rival school. Their engine revs. Their windows roll down. They say, “Eat shit and die!” “Got to bring ass to get ass!” we yell back. Green winks the light. First car to the corner of Lake and Cedar wins.

We’re spotted by a patrol car. The white boys peel off long before they reach Cedar. The cops give chase to us, not the white boys. I careen right onto Cedar and make a hairpin turn into Pioneers and Soldiers Memorial Cemetery. I kill the ignition and take my foot off the brake so that the red eyes of the brake lights die. We scrunch down and wait. I don’t know how long we crouched below the windows. Somebody farted. Everybody laughs. Marcus asks Ray for a roach clip so the joint won’t go to waste. “After the revolution,” he says, sputtering smoke in the moonlight, “my grandkids’ll be like, ‘Grandpa Marcus, what’s a fascist pig?’ I’ll be like, ‘Don’t you worry, baby, I’ma take you to a museum—they got some on display.’ ”

Though we laughed at the joke, we treasured its inevitability. A world with no 5-0: life as it would be after the revolution. In 1972, we thought of revolution as a question of when—in five years, six, or maybe, on the outside, eight—not if. Only the time line was up for debate. The FBI director died in May that year. All summer long I wore a T-shirt like a bulletproof vest. It read, J. EDGAR HOOVER IS ALIVE AND WELL IN HELL. We were going to have our revolution. My dreams then weren’t of fair legislation or police reform. I loved football, chocolate, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao. I read Ramparts magazine, often aloud, the way Billy Graham read his Bible. The People’s Army of Vietnam had launched a spring offensive. It demoralized Nixon’s brass as much as the Tet Offensive had demoralized Johnson’s in 1968. When Saigon fell, we mused, America’s demise would not be far behind.

The war would come home. “Two, three, many Vietnams”: Che Guevara still called us from the grave. In 1972, a deep, abiding sense that Black liberation was inextricably bound to anti-colonial struggles around the world and working-class resistance at home went without saying for most people on the left, including that teenage boy who answered to my name. “Racism,” Fred Hampton said more than once, “is just a by-product of capitalism.” That was good enough for me.

Now, from my coastline of old age, I see how the funeral procession of Black death that litters this landscape tells a different story. Anti-Black racism is not a by-product of capitalism or patriarchy—or even colonialism. Nor is anti-Black racism in any way analogous to any other paradigm of oppression. Anti-Blackness is its own beast—a conceptual framework that cannot be analogized to capitalism, or any other ism. Nor is it a by-product of any oppressive necessity other than its own. The need to disavow the singularity of anti-Black violence, and the impulse to disguise Black suffering and rage (the need, that is, to characterize anti-Black violence as “class oppression” or even “white supremacy,” for that matter, and the impulse to disguise Black suffering as “exploitation of the working class” or as a kind of suffering that’s common to all people of color), are a need and an impulse that are shared by the police and the protester. Black people find ourselves trapped in the vise grip of a pincer move between two juggernauts: the state and our allies. Black people are hemmed in by two strategies of containment that, at first blush, appear not only to have nothing in common (who in their right mind, one might ask, would equate the left and the state?) but are so hostile to each other (the left calling for the police to be defunded and the police characterizing protesters in the streets of Minneapolis, Portland, and New York as domestic terrorists) that it seems they couldn’t agree on lunch—much less a pincer move against Black people.

In 1972, we thought of revolution as a question of when—in five years, six, or maybe, on the outside, eight—not if.

The word “strategy” may be a bit misleading, because it implies the pincer move against Black people comes about through conscious, if not coordinated, efforts by the left and the state. This is not the case. The state kills and confines Black bodies. The left kills and contains Black desire, erases Black cognitive maps that explain the singularity of Black suffering, and, most of all, fatally constricts the horizon of Black liberation. There are important differences. The rub of the anti-Blackness that saturates these desperate strategies lies elsewhere—in the shared unconscious beneath their disparate conscious acts.

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ILLUSTRATION BY KIM DEMARCO
In 2016, revelations from Dan Baum’s 1994 interview with Watergate co-conspirator John Ehrlichman reemerged in Harper’s. Ehrlichman was assistant to the president for domestic affairs under Richard Nixon—which meant he was Nixon’s drug policy adviser. As Baum recounted to NPR:

[Ehrlichman] told me an amazing thing. I started asking him some earnest, wonky policy questions and he waved them away. He said, Can we cut the B.S.? Can I just tell you what this was all about? The Nixon campaign in '68 and the Nixon White House had two enemies: black people and the anti-war left.… We knew that if we could associate heroin with black people and marijuana with the hippies, we could project the police into those communities, arrest their leaders, break up their meetings and most of all, demonize them night after night on the evening news. And he looked me in the eyes and said, “Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”

If there had ever been any doubt that the War on Drugs was a cynical political tool manufactured in the Oval Office, Ehrlichman’s confession laid such doubt to rest. But what’s most instructive is what the confession reveals about the place of Black people in the unconscious of the state. The structure of the Nixon administration’s anxiety about the white anti-war left was very different from the attitude toward Black people. Nixon and his cronies were at war with the ideas of the white left. But they were not at war with the ideas of Black people—they were at war with the embodiment of Black people, the threatening presence of Black bodies.

The besetting hobble of multiracial coalitions is manifest in the ways Black members become refugees of the coalition’s “universal” agenda. In social movements dedicated, for example, to prison abolition, the “selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone”—to quote Noam Chomsky’s definition of how consent is manufactured and consensus enforced—and the way debate is bound within premises acceptable to non-Black coalition partners, work to crowd out a deeper understanding of captivity and anti-Black violence by limiting the scope of the dialogue to those aspects of state violence and captivity that non-Black coalition partners have in common with Blacks. It’s sometimes as blunt and straightforward as our coalition partners simply telling us to “stop playing Oppression Olympics.”

Our coalition partners were policed for their transgressions, and the counter-hegemonic ideas that they embodied. We were shot for breathing while Black.

Burn it down: The Third Precinct station of the Minneapolis Police Department in flames on May 28, 2020.

Our coalition partners were policed for their transgressions, and the counter-hegemonic ideas that they embodied. We were shot for breathing while Black. Our coalition partners were policed for their transgressions, and the counter-hegemonic ideas that they embodied. We were shot for breathing while Black.

In the 1980s, I taught creative writing at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. The novelist Toni Cade Bambara gave a weekend workshop for teachers and advanced fiction writers. Before leaving town, she agreed to have dinner with me. During dinner, as I recall, she lamented the breakup of a coalition to fight rape in Philadelphia comprising Black women and white women. The white women had put forth a motion that they launch a campaign to educate the police about rape and how it affects their lives. The Black women were completely against this. The white women made comments about how they must try to weed out good cops from bad cops. The Black women scoffed at this. The white women said the Black women were too hasty in their rejection and had not put forth reasons that were good enough or offered an alternative plan. The meeting disintegrated, and, as Bambara lamented, so did the coalition.

Twenty years after dining with Toni Cade Bambara, I began to witness different manifestations of the same conundrum that the Black women in her coalition faced. As a graduate student of critical theory and, at the same time, as an activist in San Francisco Bay coalitions dedicated to abolishing the prison-industrial complex, lobbying Congress and President Bill Clinton to pardon political prisoners who were former members of the SDS, AIM, the Black Panthers, and the FALN, or organizing (unsuccessfully) to stop the passage of legislation that would allow children as young as 14 to be prosecuted as adults and warehoused in adult prisons, I saw how episodes similar to the one Bambara had described kept repeating themselves. Our coalition partners were policed for their transgressions, and the counter-hegemonic ideas that they embodied. We were shot for breathing while Black. Black flesh stimulates a dread more fundamental than the fear of transgressions: the fear and loathing of Black bodies.

Bambara’s coalition between white women and Black women broke down not due to some ineffable, murky misunderstanding, but because the fissures in the room revealed a structural antagonism between the women, and this revelation was too much to bear. Even though white women are positioned as victims of violence in relation to white men, they are simultaneously positioned as beneficiaries, if not perpetrators, of anti-Black violence. They are on the policed side of violence against non-Black women, but they are on the policing side of anti-Black violence. They had little enthusiasm for that conversation.

Saidiya Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America illustrates the double bind Black slave women faced when appealing to the courts for redress in the event of rape:

If the definition of the crime of rape relies upon the capacity to give consent or exercise will, then how does one make legible the sexual violation of the enslaved when that which would constitute evidence of intentionality, and thus evidence of the
crime—the state of consent or willingness of the assaulted—opens up a Pandora's box in which the subject formation and object constitution of the enslaved female are no less ponderous than the crime itself or when the legal definition of the enslaved negates the very idea of “reasonable resistance”?

We should read Hartman’s book as an allegory of the present, because the “Pandora’s box” is precisely what the white women in Bambara’s coalition were anxious about. What kinds of political strategies of redress can be deployed by a sentient being who is always already outside of the political and, most importantly, whose exile white women depend upon for their own categorical coherence?

It is not just that the injury of rape does not translate for Black women in the same way it does for white women; it is that injury itself is the categorical inheritance of non-Black women—in the absence of any coherent notion of consent, the concept of injury has no representational supports within Blackness. We are confronted by two regimes of violence that are irreconcilable. This was the spanner in the works of that feminist coalition. More broadly, it is the spanner in the works of every multiracial coalition I’ve been a part of. But this paradox is rarely addressed because Black people are not given the space to express how our suffering and the violence that underwrites our suffering is not analogous to the violence and suffering that dominates our allies. It is as though the collective unconscious of the coalition knows that to open that can of worms would be to face the ways in which our allies, though enemies of the state, remain antagonists of the Blacks.

Hartman suggests it would be more precise to say that consent is not constitutive of Black subjugation; ergo, the sexual violence against Black women cannot even be theorized as a violation. What happens, then, when Black women (and men) are raped if Blackness and consent cannot be conjoined? This is the paradox that a suffering for which there are no words presented to the coalition. But coalitions, typically, are unwilling to entertain problems that arrive without solutions. The regime of violence that structures and saturates Blacks makes us objects of accumulation, rather than alienated subjects of exploitation.

The unwillingness of the white women to give the Black women space to develop their sharp refusal of the white women’s proposal (police education) into a deeper explanation as to how and why Blacks are not recognized as subjects of rights, claims, and consent was why the coalition fell apart.

What do the cops and the coalitions have in common? One flank of the pincer is composed of the police, the army, the prison-industrial complex, and the ancillary formations of civil society that bestow legitimacy, such as the media and the church. The opposite flank is the terror of our allies, who dress us up as workers, women, gays, immigrants, or postcolonial subjects: mirror images of themselves that fulfill the need to disavow—and the impulse to disguise—the singularity of Black suffering.

The stakes of this pincer move are high because they crowd out Black people’s capacity to be captured by our own imaginations. Our allies’ pincer move threatens the imagination and the enunciation of Black thought and thus should not be trivialized as an ensemble of bad attitudes that can be overcome through dialogue. This prong of the pincer is as constitutive of an anti-Black world as the police and the prisons. It doesn’t simply kill or warehouse Black desire the way the state kills and warehouses the Black body. It terrorizes us through an interdiction against Black performance, coupled with a demand for Black performance. The coalition craves and applauds Black energy, exuberance, and righteous indignation—as long as Black suffering doesn’t tag along.

In early June, as George Floyd was laid to rest and the third precinct stood gutted on Lake Street where Marcus, Ray, and I had raced dreaming of a world with no 5-0, I could not believe what I saw on the news. Coalition partners, from anarchists, to socialists, to non-Black supporters of Black Lives Matter, to the Minneapolis City Council, all calling for the abolition of the police! My mind and my body surged with the same exuberance that 48 years ago had surged through the bones of a boy who loved football, chocolate, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao, when Marcus laughed, “Don’t you worry, baby, I’ma take you to a museum—they got some on display.” I grinned from ear to ear and thought, “Marcus wasn’t jivin’—it’s finally coming to pass.”

But within weeks, the joke slipped back through my fingers like four decades of sand. For one hot summer moment, the cries of our allies had been authorized by the demand that Black suffering embodies; and their political desire was animated by a kind of Black desire that is normally crushed between them and the state.

That moment did not last. “Abolish” mutated into “defund,” “defund” melted into “delay,” and the zeitgeist shifted from unfettered Black rage to sober tutorials on activist websites and affinity gatherings on how to massage a message that was already massaged, to win the hearts and minds of Middle Americans as they watched us being gunned down on Instagram and the news. Black death, once again, was weaponized by our allies to incarcerate Black demands, kill Black desire, and soothe the psyches of everyone but us.

I called neither Marcus nor my grandkids. I closed my eyes and tried to see that pulse to disguise—the singularity of Black suffering. Black people find ourselves trapped in the vise grip of a pincer move between two juggernauts: the state and our allies.
Stephen Breyer has served admirably on the Supreme Court for 27 years. Now it’s time for him to retire.

For the Sake of Justice

By Elie Mystal
In 1993, Stephen Breyer, then the chief justice for the First Circuit Court of Appeals in Boston, was hit by a car while riding his bike. He suffered a few broken ribs and a punctured lung. Despite the accident, Breyer left his hospital bed just a few days later and traveled to the White House to interview with President Bill Clinton about an opening on the US Supreme Court.

The interview didn’t go as Breyer might have hoped. Clinton ended up choosing Ruth Bader Ginsburg to fill the vacancy left by Byron White’s retirement. But a year later, another Supreme Court justice retired: Harry Blackmun.

Blackmun, of course, was the conservative Nixon appointee who famously became a liberal stalwart on the bench. It was Blackmun who wrote the majority opinion in Roe v. Wade, which, I’m sure, is not something Nixon had in mind when he appointed him. Blackmun’s shift to the left (or, some would say, the court’s shift to the right) was so decisive that he refused to retire during the long winter of the Reagan and George H.W. Bush presidencies. When he finally did, at age 85, Blackmun observed: “It hasn’t been much fun on most occasions, but it’s a fantastic experience,” which sounds like what a gravedigger would say on the day his pension vests.

Blackmun’s pragmatism, and his determination to wait until a Democratic president could nominate his replacement, created a second opportunity for Clinton to appoint a justice—and a second opportunity for Breyer. At 55, the former law professor was touted as a moderate consensus builder who would ensure an easy confirmation at a time when Clinton was worried about the midterm elections and his own reelection campaign. He was confirmed 87-9 by the Senate.

Twenty-seven years later, Breyer finds himself in much the same position as his predecessor was at the start of Clinton’s first term. Like Blackmun, Breyer is still in good physical and mental health. He has served this past quarter century with dignity and decency. He has written around 200 majority opinions and has been a solidly liberal voice on the court, albeit a moderate and pragmatic one. No doubt, there is more he wants to do. But Breyer is 82. He is mortal. And like Blackmun before him, it is time for him to seize the opportune moment and retire.

There is no sense in being delicate about the issue: We’re all going to die, but Breyer is going to die sooner rather than later. And the risk that he’ll do so under a Republican administration is simply not one most progressives paying attention want to take.

The urgency of the situation has inspired a rare outpouring of public calls for Breyer to step down as soon as the current Supreme Court term ends in June. Demand Justice, a group focused on reforming the courts, launched a “Breyer Retire” campaign this spring, complete with a petition and a billboard truck that circled the Supreme Court. (Full disclosure: I was recently asked to join its board.) Paul Campos, a constitutional law scholar, made a desperate case for such an outcome in a New York Times op-ed headlined “Justice Breyer Should Retire Right Now.” And in April, New York Representative Mondaire Jones became the rare elected official to publicly call for Breyer to do so. “There’s no question that Justice Breyer, for whom I have great respect, should retire at the end of this term,” Jones said. “My goodness, have we not learned our lesson?”

Predictably, a small propriety caucus within the Democrats has pushed back, if tepidly, against these calls. Senator Diane Feinstein, herself 87, recently told CNN that Breyer’s retirement would be a “great loss” and suggested that “producing for whatever the constituency is” was enough. Others, including President Joe Biden, have emphasized that retirement is a personal decision the justice should make without outside pressure.

That’s all very nice and practical, given that there’s nothing anybody can do to force Breyer to give up his lifetime job. He can stubbornly stay for as long as his body will let him—but the reality is that he shouldn’t. It is a bad, illogical, personally selfish decision to stay, even for just another year. The Democratic majority in the Senate is tenuous. In the event of the death of a single Democratic senator from a state with a Republican governor, that majority evaporates. Mitch McConnell and his fellow Republican senators have proved that they will not confirm any justice appointed by a Democratic president. Every day that Breyer stays is a day the Republicans get another spin on the random wheel of death, looking to get just one more vote to block his successor.

And that’s assuming Breyer wants to play Hamlet for only a year. Waiting until after the next presidential election, or even until after the upcoming midterms, would be straight-up political malpractice.
We have all just witnessed the consequences of leaving these decisions to fate. In 2012, after Barack Obama won a second term and Democrats picked up two seats in the Senate, bringing them a three-vote majority, some (myself included) suggested it was time for Ginsburg (may her memory be a blessing) to retire. Ginsburg, by that time, was already an 80-year-old cancer survivor. While the legend of the “Notorious RBG” was growing, Father Time remained, then as now, undefeated.

But Ginsburg refused. The calls for her to retire were muted by accusations of sexism, and those accusations were not entirely off base. Antonin Scalia was an obese 75-year-old in 2012, and I doubt conservatives would have been clamoring to get him off the court had Mitt Romney won that election. At the same time, it seems that Ginsburg really believed Hillary Clinton would succeed Obama in the White House, and the prospect of being replaced by an appointment from the first woman president inspired her to serve through one more election cycle.

That decision didn’t work out well for the country: Clinton did not win, and Ginsburg did not outlive the ensuing Republican administration. She died after the election that would replace Donald Trump had started, and Republicans greedily rushed to fill her seat with Amy Coney Barrett—a woman, yes, but one who is an active threat to all of the issues and constituencies Ginsburg held most dear. By trying to be replaced on her own terms, Ginsburg created an opportunity for Republicans to undo her work.

Ginsburg perhaps thought herself irreplaceable. Breyer might, too. It’s an understandable affliction that befalls people who can change entire industries or protect whole classes of people with a single sentence. But Supreme Court justices are not indispensable—their votes on the court are. Women, people of color, and the LGBTQ community don’t need Stephen Breyer to defend our basic rights; we need five votes to do that work. There are plenty of people who can vote the way Breyer would (some of them are even members of the various vulnerable communities constantly under attack), and most of those candidates can continue to vote that way long after he has slipped this mortal coil.

Unfortunately, Breyer doesn’t appear to see things this way. He appears to think his value (and the value of any justice) is in their individuality, not in the reliability of their opinions. Ironically, the very qualities that made Breyer a safe, consensus pick for the Supreme Court in the first place might now make him obstinate in the face of calls for his retirement. Breyer is no ideologue. He does not believe that party affiliation is the critical factor in court decisions. He’s been quoted saying that “politics goes out the window” once justices ascend to the court and that “where there are differences [in opinions], those differences are drawn less on the basis of...politics.”

Breyer has been an unflagging proponent of comity and collegiality on the court, writing in his 2005 book Active Liberty that he “never heard one member of the Court say anything demeaning about any other member of the Court, not even as a joke.” But when Breyer recently dissented from Barrett’s first majority opinion (a victory in service of authoritarianism that limited the scope of the disclosures required under the Freedom of Information Act), he wrote simply, “I dissent,” shocking court watchers by omitting the customary phrase “with respect” from the sentence. He later edited his dissent to make sure it included that word for posterity. Because, sure, while Barrett is the product of raw partisan politics, someone who was picked specifically to take away reproductive rights—rights that Breyer has spent his career defending—that’s no reason to hurt her feelings.

These views on comity and the fundamentally apolitical nature of his calling might explain why Breyer is staffing up. Reports indicate that he’s already hired his law clerks for the 2021-22 term. That’s a strong indication that he plans to stay on for at least another year and punt the conversation about his retirement to the brink of the 2022 midterm elections.

Partisan pressure might make Breyer dig in his heels. In March, Noah Feldman observed in Bloomberg News: “The more the timing of his retirement is depicted as a partisan objective, the less he will want to do it. To be seen to retire ‘in order’ to let Biden pick his successor would betray Breyer’s own career-long objective of making decisions based on what is right for the country, not for one party.” Where I see a court that is 6-3 in favor of conservatives, Breyer likely sees nine individuals trying to noodle things out the best they can.

With Ginsburg’s passing, Breyer is the most senior liberal on the court, meaning that when it’s time to write the dissent that he, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan will surely be writing, he will often get to choose who writes them. It’s a power he hasn’t had before, and one that could be used to build consensus, if that were a thing. I imagine Breyer will enjoy that role, given his belief that conservatives on the court can be reasoned with.

Breyer’s views on the apolitical nature of the court, and his new power to shape it, would be interesting if they weren’t so provably false. In reality, the court is divided by partisan politics, whether the justices wear their MAGA gear underneath their robes or not. Writing about Breyer’s belief in the possibility of consensus building in The Yale Law Journal, professor Paul Gewirtz called this notion “illusory.” And that was in 2006.

Trump promised to appoint only justices who were against women’s rights, and senators like Josh Hawley promised to confirm only such justices. Does anybody sincerely believe that
Trump’s appointees to the court (Barrett, Neil Gorsuch, and alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh) agree that “politics goes out the window” when that issue comes up? Is there any doubt that those three are more politically strident about the issue than the justices they did replace: Ginsburg, Anthony Kennedy, and, in the case of Gorsuch, Merrick Garland, whose rightful seat he occupies instead? Breyer can live in a world of wishes, rainbows, and unicorns where consensus building is a thing, but I submit that those of us who have some of our human rights on the line do not have the luxury of watching Breyer tilt at windmills while he plays chicken with death.

I submit respectfully, of course.

Breyer is a good guy, and it is fundamentally sad that he needs to retire simply because the stakes of losing his seat to the Republicans are too high. It’s sad that we have to call on justices to retire based on some actuarial table of life expectancy and the number of votes available in the Senate. The only American who will be asked more about his retirement in 2021 than Stephen Breyer is Tom Brady.

The truth is that lifetime appointments are an absurd way to staff a federal judiciary in a country that shrugged off monarchy two and a half centuries ago. But there are alternatives. The solution to the reality of Breyer’s advancing age is to expand the number of seats on the Supreme Court and thus make each individual justice less important. Indeed, progressives should be focusing their energy on achieving these long-standing judicial reforms, instead of having to flash the lights on and off until Breyer figures out it’s time to go home. We can do better than this. We can be a country that doesn’t have to beg octogenarians to quit.

Breyer is against court expansion, but he is open to the idea of term limits. He has said, “I think it would be fine to have long terms, say 18 years or something like that, for a Supreme Court justice. It would make life easier. You know, I wouldn’t have to worry about when I’m going to retire or not.”

I won’t presume to tell Breyer how to make his life easier, but I can tell him how to make life easier for the country. He’s had this job for 27 years. He shouldn’t make everyone else worry about a 28th.

No further documentation has been discovered about De Hooch’s own death, or that of his wife, or that of the four children who, presumably, survived them. Besides this document, the only information that we have about his last years is the record of the baptism of another son in 1672. The year of his son’s death is also that of his last dated painting, so we can probably assume he didn’t live much longer.

When the younger Pieter was sent to the madhouse, the other surviving children were 15, 12, and 7: a young household still. But the man who had painted mothers and children with such tenderness had grown old. He had already buried two children, and his son’s illness must have been severe for his parents to commit him to an institution as ugly as a 17th-century bedlam.

The portrait that emerges from this new information does not, therefore, change much about the artist’s decline: a torturous home life, an attempt to keep producing at a time of economic meltdown. He must have known how inferior these later works were. For any artist, it would have been a source of pain and reproach to watch inspiration ferment into drudgery. But he had rent to pay, mouths to feed.

For this artist, this fate was especially cruel. His deepest feelings were reserved for scenes of the happy home, of contented women, of bright children. Everything suggests that the man who created these images was a loving husband, a proud father; and if the rooms and relationships were surely messier in real life, the emotions these images stir are too convincing not to reflect the artist’s.

Or a longing of the artist’s. It was a longing of mine, too. When I think of De Hooch, I wonder how he looked back at those masterpieces. It is one thing to look forward to happiness. It is something else to look back on it when it is lost.

A tragic as de Hooch’s death in the madhouse seemed, it was, at least, an explanation, a drama. These spare facts—a once-great artist churning out half-deranged pictures for a quick buck and brought to this pathetic end—delivered us back into the realm of the historical novel and held out an invitation to fill in the blanks. Even without speculation, these facts offered a kind of redemption for his work.

But in 2008, the art historian Frans Grijzenhout discovered that the De Hooch who died in the Amsterdam madhouse in 1684 was not the artist. It was his son, also named Pieter, who had been committed five years earlier, at the request of his parents. He was 24 and had trained as a painter. His parents undertook to “supply him with linen and wool and wash and change him properly.”
The New Party Bosses

How did our once-raucous party system become the pacified purview of elites?

BY ERIC FONER

In “the four lost men,” an elegiac short story written in the 1930s about his dying father’s memories of life in post–Civil War America, Thomas Wolfe memorably conjured up the era’s presidents: “My father spoke then of the strange, lost, time-far, dead Americans...the proud, vacant, time-strange, and bewhiskered visages of Garfield, Arthur, Harrison and Hayes.... Who was Garfield, martyred man, and who had ever seen him in the streets of life?... Who had heard the casual and familiar tones of Chester Arthur? And where was Harrison? Where was Hayes? Which had the whiskers, which the burnsides: which was which? Were they not lost?”
Wolfe’s words are frequently quoted to illustrate the seeming irrelevance of national politics in what Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner called the Gilded Age, when it did not seem to matter who occupied the White House, since real power was enjoyed not by presidents but by the robber barons who were transforming the United States into the world’s foremost industrial economy. Can anyone today identify a single accomplishment of Benjamin Harrison or Chester A. Arthur? Who can explain in plain English what the heated battle over the “free coinage of silver at 16 to 1” was all about?

Jon Grinspan does not cite Wolfe in his new book, *The Age of Acrimony*, but it is easy to imagine him doing so. Not, however, to underscore the pointlessness of Gilded Age politics, but as evidence of late-19th-century Americans’ intense identification with the two major parties. Wolfe’s four lost men may have lacked charisma and accomplished almost nothing while in office, but, Grinspan argues, Americans were far more passionately invested in national politics then than they are today. And if you think our current moment of hyperpartisanship, political polarization, abusive language, widespread efforts to suppress the right to vote, and violent clashes over electoral outcomes is unprecedented, think again. As far back as the 1790s, opponents called George Washington a British agent and Thomas Jefferson a lackey of revolutionary France. In the decades before the Civil War, not a session of Congress passed without punches being exchanged between lawmakers and knives and pistols being drawn in the Capitol. But the high point of this kind of acrimonious politics came in the Gilded Age.

A curator of political history at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., Grinspan draws on an impressive array of memoirs, letters, and scholarly works. Thanks to his position in a history museum, he is also intimately familiar with the material culture of politics, and he directs the reader to the “incredible variety of campaign paraphernalia”—the banners, placards, broadsides, buttons, and other items—displayed during electoral campaigns. The result is a compelling portrait of the central place of national party politics in Americans’ lives and how this began to change around the turn of the 20th century. Grinspan shows how a raucous democratic system in which the vast majority of the electorate voted gave way to a more sedate and exclusionary political culture that, in the name of political reform, erected more and more barriers to participation by working-class Americans.

The word “democracy” does not appear in the Declaration of Independence or the US Constitution. The founders considered unrestrained democracy as dangerous as tyranny. To keep popular enthusiasms under control, they provided for an Electoral College to choose the president; a Senate elected by state legislatures, not the people; and a Supreme Court whose members served for life. But by the 1830s, as Alexis de Tocqueville discovered when he visited the United States, the idea of democracy had become a defining feature of American life (at least for white men). To Tocqueville, democracy meant far more than a particular set of electoral institutions. It was one of the “habits of the heart,” as he put it: a culture grounded in individual initiative, belief in equality, and an active public sphere.

With the Union’s victory in the Civil War, these democratic sentiments became even more deeply entrenched in American life. Many Americans believed that the advent of what one congressman called a “pure democracy,” purged of slavery and racial injustice and confidently addressing the dislocations caused by the rapidly industrializing economy, was at hand. Instead, Grinspan argues, Gilded Age political campaigns subordinated substance to mass spectacle, with huge nightly parades of torch-bearing partisans, incessant political rallies, and spellbinding oratory laced with scurrilous attacks on opponents. In saloons and on urban streetcars, Americans engaged in fistfights over politics. On Election Day, armed men employed by local political machines tried to prevent supporters of the opposing party from casting a ballot.

Presidential elections between the Civil War and the end of the 19th century, Grinspan writes, were “the loudest, roughest political campaigns in our history.” One magazine described them as “the theater, the opera, the baseball game, the intellectual gymnasium, almost the church,” rolled into one. The election of 1884, which pitted Democrat Grover Cleveland against Republican James G. Blaine, was “the dirtiest, most disgusting and disgraceful our nation has ever known,” in the words of one contemporary observer. Republicans dwelled on the fact that Cleveland had fathered an illegitimate child, Democrats on Blaine’s record of financial malfeasance. Yet no matter how mediocre or corrupt, political leaders were revered by their followers. Who today would call a presidential candidate the “Plumed Knight,” as Blaine became known in 1884?

Despite, or because of, the rowdiness of politics, voter turnout was extraordinarily high in this period. The election of 1876, remembered today for the compromise that made Rutherford B. Hayes president and ended Reconstruction, brought to the polls 82 percent of eligible voters, the highest participation rate in American history. Eight and a half million men voted in 1876, nearly as many persons as visited the great Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia that year during its entire six-month existence. Turnout would have been even higher if violent white supremacists had not prevented numerous African Americans in the South from casting a ballot. (Had Black voting rights been secure, the result of the disputed election would not have been disputed; Hayes would have handily won several Southern states and, with them, the presidency.)

Once in office, these politicians behaved not as statesmen seeking to address the nation’s problems but as members of “organized crime syndicates”: They were mostly interested in distributing the spoils of office. Before the war, large numbers of congressmen (including Abraham Lincoln) served one term and then returned to their districts. In the Gilded Age, they “hung around.” Politics had become a full-time profession, and officials spent much of their time dispensing patronage to supporters at

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home. With the size of the federal bureaucracy greatly enhanced as a result of the Civil War, there were plenty of positions to distribute.

Yet despite the presence of all these professional politicians, little significant legislation was enacted. One reason for both the intensity of political competition and the lack of substantive accomplishment, Grinspan suggests, was that the parties were so evenly matched. In three of the five presidential elections between 1876 and 1892, the candidates were separated by less than 1 percent of the electorate. Twice, the candidate who received the most popular votes lost in the Electoral College. No president between Ulysses Grant and William McKinley was reelected. Only for brief periods did the same party control the presidency and Congress.

In the 1870s, a group of political reformers emerged who self-consciously styled themselves the “Best Men.” Distgusted by the spectacle of campaigning, the high levels of spending and taxation by urban political machines, and their own lack of political influence, they sought to make American public life less vulgar. It was easy enough to blame corrupt politicians for the degradation of politics. But reformers increasingly blamed democracy itself. The problem, the purported Best Men insisted, was that too many people were voting, especially working-class Americans—immigrants in the large cities, African Americans in the Reconstruction South—who were easily swayed by demagogues. The real dividing line in Gilded Age politics, Grinspan notes, was not such issues as the currency, the tariff, or the rights of the formerly enslaved, but rather politics itself: those who benefited from democracy and those who wanted to curtail it.

One of the most influential statements of the latter position came from the historian Francis Parkman, in an 1878 essay titled “The Failure of Universal Suffrage.” The honest middle class, he wrote, found itself trapped between “an ignorant proletariat and a half-taught plutocracy.” But while Parkman disdained the rapaciousness of the robber barons, he made it clear that the country’s working classes posed the greater danger. Democracy, Parkman complained, transferred power “from superior to inferior types of men,” resulting in the reign of “organized ignorance.” One solution to what he called the problem of “promiscuous suffrage” was to limit the number of people voting. During the 1870s New York Governor Samuel J. Tilden headed a commission that sought to do precisely this: It proposed a new charter for New York City that imposed a hefty property qualification to take part in elections for the Board of Finance. Voters overwhelmingly rejected it; people generally do not agree to disfranchise themselves.

Unwilling to plunge into the distasteful world of political campaigning and lacking the clout to weaken the grip of electoral democracy on the halls of power, the era’s self-described reformers sought to upgrade the quality of officeholders by shielding them from partisan politics. They seized on the idea of civil service reform in the hope that basing government employment on passing an examination rather than having a connection with a political boss would “finally separate politics from government.” Unfortunately, this reform, implemented in 1883 in the wake of President James A. Garfield’s assassination by a man universally described as a disappointed office seeker, did as much to weaken democracy as it did to purify it. Political appointees had been expected to pay a portion of their salaries to their party; this was how both major parties financed themselves. Now, forced to look elsewhere for funds, the parties increasingly turned to corporations and the wealthy. “Men who already had money stepped in to bankroll campaigns,” Grinspan writes. We still live with the consequences.

Beginning in the 1890s, so-called reformers adopted a new approach to curtailing democracy.

by the early 20th century, what Grinspan calls an “incredible transformation of American politics” had taken place. One result of “the withering of partisanship and the cooling of political passion” was a precipitous decline in voter participation. By 1924, for the first time in American history, fewer than half the eligible voters cast ballots. The ratification in 1920 of the 19th Amendment enfranchising women represented the greatest expansion of democracy in the nation’s history. But as
A gifted writer, Grinspan tells this story in a highly engaging manner. The reader is swept along as if in the midst of one of the era’s mass parades. Grinspan peppers the book with tidbits of information that illuminate larger trends, pointing out, for example, that while in the 19th century virtually every newspaper was affiliated with a political party, by the early 20th, fully a quarter had proclaimed their political independence. He frequently reaches for novelistic effects, unexpected juxtapositions, and quotable turns of phrase.

Sometimes Grinspan’s style can overwhelm the substance. Despite a passing mention of the idea that membership in a mass political party provided a “tribal” sense of identity in a fractured society, we do not really learn why Americans devoted so much energy and emotion to political campaigns or why they voted as they did. We learn a great deal about the mechanisms of politics, but far less about party ideologies. “Mostly,” Grinspan writes, “each side just opposed whatever the other side stood for.”

Grinspan demonstrates how central party politics was to American culture during the Gilded Age. But he displays a surprising impatience with the movements outside the two-party system and with the numerous historians who study them. He says little about the deep sense of social crisis in the late 19th century, when many Americans feared they were “standing at Armageddon” (to borrow the title of Nell Irvin Painter’s history of this period). He chides scholars for devoting more attention to “radical solutions” and “tiny minorities”—for example, labor unions, socialist clubs, and the Farmers’ Alliance—than to the major parties. Historians, he suggests, should concentrate on the winners. They have “devoted great efforts to understanding the Populists” and William Jennings Bryan’s campaign for president in 1896, he observes, “but McKinley won.”

Grinspan, for the most part, also ignores those Gilded Age radicals who did, in fact, attract large followings. Henry George, the country’s leading proponent of the “single tax” on land, whose book Progress and Poverty was among the century’s best sellers, makes only a very brief appearance when he runs against Theodore Roosevelt in the New York City mayoral race of 1886. Edward Bellamy, whose futuristic novel Looking Backward inspired the creation of hundreds of socialist Nationalist Clubs in the 1890s, goes unmentioned. So does Ida B. Wells and her crusade against lynching. These figures may not have overturned the two-party system, but they did help to change the political discourse. And the era’s third parties—Greenbackers, Populists, local labor parties—placed the rapidly expanding gap between rich and poor on the agenda and pioneered the graduated income tax, public regulation of corporations, and other initiatives that would later come to fruition.

As for the other end of the social scale, The Age of Acrimony contains no mention of financiers such as J.P. Morgan who, at the turn of the 20th century, remade American capitalism by creating the monopolistic corporations that would dominate the economy for many decades. The years straddling 1900 were a moment not only of political transition, as Grinspan demonstrates, but also of other changes in American life. This was when the United States, thanks to the Spanish-American War, acquired an overseas empire; when the Jim Crow system became firmly entrenched in the South; when the Census Bureau announced the closing of the frontier; and when conservative jurisprudence took hold on the Supreme Court, as the justices ignored the abrogation of Black Americans’ constitutional rights while shielding corporations from public regulation. Of course, it would be unfair to criticize an author for not producing a book he did not set out to write. But changes in the functioning of democracy cannot be understood in isolation from these transformative developments.

Despite these omissions, The Age of Acrimony speaks directly to the current moment, when grassroots upsurges are both forcing the political system to confront longstanding inequalities and inspiring assaults on the practice of democracy itself, as state after state seeks to limit the right to vote. It reminds us that now, as then, American democracy is a terrain of conflict, forever a work in progress.
At Macondo Pharmacy

Telling the story of undocumented America

BY GAIUTRA BAHADUR

In her introduction to The Undocumented Americans, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio reveals that some names and physical descriptions have been changed to protect the vulnerable. Or maybe, she adds playfully, they haven’t. Readers are thus forewarned when, midway through the book, she offers “Macondo” as the name of a pharmacy that sells prescription drugs to uninsured immigrants. The name of the pharmacy, the same as that of the famous fictional town in Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, hints at an underlying goal of Cornejo Villavicencio’s debut: In order to capture—and protest—the ways that the press and politicians misrepresent undocumented Americans, she has sought to tell their stories in a radically new way that fuses journalism and creative writing.

On one level, Cornejo Villavicencio’s mission is straightforward: She wants to chronicle the crises—in particular the health crises—that undocumented immigrants face in the United States. But she also wants to rescue them from simplistic cultural portrayals as either victims or villains, noble workers or criminals, by introducing us to actual people rather than stereotypes: human beings with the full range of flaws, quirks, desires, pursuits, and relationships. To do so, she insists, she must go beyond conventional reportage and mirror the surreal ways in which they experience their lives by experimenting with a form of magical realism.

As a child of undocumented immigrants herself, Cornejo Villavicencio can experiment in this fashion with some authority. An accomplished journalist who describes herself as “a so-called DREAM-er,” Cornejo Villavicencio is both the reporter and the subject in her book, both a researcher and an object of research. The Undocumented Americans is, in many ways, a memoir—“a high-energy imaging of trauma brain,” in her words—but it’s also an indictment of the hypocrisies of a system that makes and keeps the undocumented ill, both physically and psychologically. As she diverges from reportage into creative nonfiction, she also gestures toward what might be called “magical journalism,” an approach appropriate to documenting the surreal inconsistencies of the undocumented condition.

When Cornejo Villavicencio was 18 months old, her parents left Ecuador for the United States. She joined them in New York City four years later, but the separation left its mark. Cornejo Villavicencio proved to be a gifted student but also a troubled one. By third grade, she was reading Hemingway and drinking Listerine to try to harm herself. After a wealthy benefactor paid for her tuition at a Catholic school in New York, she went to Harvard, where she was one of the first undocumented students to graduate. Now at Yale working toward her doctorate, she has become a successful reporter, writing for The New Republic, The Atlantic, and The New York Times on subjects as diverse as music, mental health, and oceanography. Her accomplishments would seem to cast her as exceptional, but Cornejo Villavicencio pointedly rejects this status. The media, she argues, has made saints and darlings of the Dreamers while allowing many other immigrants to be vilified. In counterpoint, she wants to show how she embodies contemporary stereotypes of both “good immigrant” and “bad immigrant,” “sick immigrant” (“one of the bogeymen of the right,” she asserts) and “superhuman immigrant” (expected to endure pain but still accomplish feats). For many immigrants, this has been a time of representational emergency. Cornejo Villavicencio wants to blow up these dichotomies and capture the complexities of undocumented life.
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To do so, Cornejo Villavicencio suggests that she cannot rely on traditional journalistic methods. It is not enough simply to report the unexpected facts of her subjects’ lives, as she does, for instance, with a woman who fled her country to escape not violence or poverty or persecution but her role as a wife, mother, and grandmother. For Cornejo Villavicencio, if she is to confront the propaganda of our hyperbolic times, the imperative is to go further still. In Miami, during a ritual with a Haitian priestess who asks what afflicts her, a ritual she undertakes as part of her immersive reporting, Cornejo Villavicencio shares her worries that she cannot protect the people she writes about. The priestess, supposedly possessed by the spirit of an ancestor, offers to turn her into a protective shield and promises to guide her “via dreams, déjà vu, the way the wind blows, the flutter of her heart, and hunches.” In her book, Cornejo Villavicencio embraces the magic offered by the priestess by adopting a style that relies on dream sequences and speculative scenarios.

Cornejo Villavicencio is transparent about her experiments with form and lets the reader know when they’re happening. She also discloses that, during her interviews for the book, she dispensed with using a recorder, translated her subjects’ words in the moment in a literary rather than a literal way, and took handwritten notes that she destroyed after the legal review by her publisher. As with the changed names, the annihilated notes protect her subjects, but they also allow her to take some creative license. She’s straightforward, too, about directly helping her subjects in ways that most reporters wouldn’t. She offers them cash, helps them find a lawyer, and secures a laptop for one of them. She intervenes—and, in several significant interludes, she invents more than just names. She provides imaginary accounts of the deaths of two men to rescue them from the oblivion of their unknown ends, and she offers reveries about the bond that two of her subjects share with animals in order to capture, in the way a novelist might, the pathos of each person.

When, for example, Cornejo Villavicencio writes about a group of day laborers who rebuilt hurricane-ravaged parts of Staten Island as unpaid volunteers, she gives a fictional account of the final hours of a Mexican man who drowned alone in a basement during the storm. The others knew him from undocumented circles on the island and saw him, because he was homeless and an alcoholic, as a “bad immigrant” to their “good immigrant.” Describing a tender, elaborate scene between the man and a wounded squirrel that he rescues from the storm, Cornejo Villavicencio presents a figure who confounds these stereotypes. “Did this happen?” she asks rhetorically at the story’s end. For her, it doesn’t really matter. What matters is her power to make him a hero as well as a casualty and a victim, even if it takes speculating: “What if this is how, in the face of so much sacrilege and slander, we reclaim our dead?”

**The Undocumented Americans**

By Karla Cornejo Villavicencio

One World. 208 pp. $17

Cycling through verifiable episodes and visionary vignettes, The Undocumented Americans is loosely organized around the places Cornejo Villavicencio visits to tell their stories: Miami, Cleveland, Flint, New Haven, Staten Island, and Ground Zero in Manhattan. As she moves from one city to the next, she intimately reports on the lives of the undocumented. In Flint, she meets a factory worker who is alone except for two pit bulls he adores so much that he gives them part of his ration of bottled water. In New Haven, she becomes friends with a man who has taken sanctuary in a church for three months, sleeping in the pastor’s office where the clock is stuck at 12:22, a symbol of suspended time worthy of an absurdist play. (“It’s like Vegas in this room,” Cornejo Villavicencio jokes, “no windows and a single broken clock.”) Even wilder are the mechanics of sanctuary itself. To forestall charges of harboring fugitives, churches fax the headquarters of Immigration and Customs Enforcement to let the agency know that people ordered deported have taken refuge within their walls, and prison corporations issue these immigrants ankle bracelets. They are hiding out, but everyone knows where they are at all times.

This almost nonsensical detail allows Cornejo Villavicencio to dramatize one of the fundamental paradoxes of US immigration policy: The immigrants are here, but the authorities behave materially as if they’re not. The repercussions of this surreal pretense are, however, only too real. The pharmacy she calls Macondo does a brisk bootleg trade in prescription drugs because undocumented workers don’t get health insurance from employers and aren’t allowed to buy it privately, even if they could afford to. In the void, as Cornejo Villavicencio shows, “a lot of people count on other people.” A Nicaraguan mother gets migraine medication only because a neighbor with access to a doctor feigns headaches for a prescription by proxy; A US citizen gives her own blood pressure pills to an undocumented friend. Others rely on the medicinal herbs sold in botanicas or on vodou or Santería to cure everything from AIDS to pneumonia to diabetes. In one devastating case that Cornejo Villavicencio recounts, an Argentine construction worker developed brain cancer after working at a site near a chemical plant, and every hospital refused him treatment because he was uninsured. (“Medicine,” his widow concludes, “is a total mafia.”) Since he couldn’t pay out of pocket, he was treated instead by a naturalist who instructed him to chew the juices of exotic fruits (yes, the juices) for 15 minutes every night before bed. This alternative remedy, of course, did not help. But in the desperation of this last resort, one finds the kind of evocative, exigent detail that helps Cornejo Villavicencio build the case that magic suffuses the landscape the undocumented inhabit.

A key theme of Cornejo Villavicencio’s book is the cruel irony of a system that blocks access to affordable medical care for undocumented Americans while also extracting their labor in exploitative conditions that often expose them to injury or illness. Undocumented workers emerged from the Ground Zero cleanup in Manhattan afflicted with cancer, asthma, gastrointestinal problems, PTSD, and depression, among other illnesses, while the practice of subcontracting shielded their bosses from responsibility. One woman Cornejo Villavicencio meets at a support group for undocumented Latinx Ground Zero workers, who has breast cancer most likely linked to the cleanup, tells her: “Yes, we were heroes, but the dangers of the job were hidden from us so that we could work. If they had

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Cornejo Villavicencio’s questions demand answers. So too do the material problems and the crises of representation that her subjects contend with perpetually. Her search for a solution has her continually circling back to America’s exceptionalism and her own, despite her doubts about both. At times archly, at times piously, Cornejo Villavicencio keeps returning to the myth of meritocracy that defines the promise of America and that also rests on her—its arguable product and standard-bearer—as a heavy mantle. She shares that she has tattooed on her breast “Do trees die in winter?” makes her think of Holden Caulfield. Her mind races with excitement at the thought of teaching him about the world of possibility ahead of them. It’s what she believes she owes her own parents financially and to give money to a day laborer, a man she barely knows, who was cheated out of wages by his boss. The memory of her father’s relief when generously tipped leads her to tip immigrant servers as extravagantly as she can whenever she can. And her experience as a linguistic go-between for her parents, improvising as she interpreted their words, even lying in order to make unjust systems work for them, leads her to attempt much the same for the subjects of her book.

Cornejo Villavicencio didn’t need to be artful about Lilliana, a Flint grandmother diagnosed with breast cancer. She was still alive, and Cornejo Villavicencio was able to interview her. Yet, the author is artful. Lilliana loves birds, so when she begins chemotherapy, Cornejo Villavicencio texts her photos of macaws to cheer her up. But she doesn’t hear back. In the silence, Cornejo Villavicencio dreams that predatory raptors flock to Lilliana’s backyard. In this detour into magical realism, Lilliana has the distinctive impression that strings connect her limbs to the hawks’ wings and that she is a puppeteer controlling their movements. This fantastical passage has a purpose: It allows Cornejo Villavicencio to represent the woman’s resistance against her hunted place in the world with a symbolist flair that leaves a lasting impression.

In the end, the duty that Cornejo Villavicencio feels to “solve shit” also finds expression in the book itself. The Undocumented Americans is her effort to right the injustice of bad representation. Her narrative becomes another way for her to try to translate the struggles and humanity of the undocumented. For Cornejo Villavicencio, this work is driven by filial piety: It’s what she believes she owes her parents and, more broadly, their
Final Poem for the “Field of Poetry”

In the grip of a nor’easter, you come bearing grief, have in pieces not come in peace. You arrive bladed with certainty. You slam shut the car door and smolder before the locked cabin, rough trip up the Hudson as you distracted yourself with a list of flowers awaiting deft penmanship to groom them tight and blow them clean. News of your brother's death intercepted your drive to this residency, fellowship among the crude Madonnas of empty mailboxes draped in robes of days-old ice. You have not written about the passing of family before, their antagonistic absences. Intrusive their teething tombstones in the brain. Pill after pill to sleep, to create, to erase, you swallow and scratch into a notepad what the frozen earth refuses: bougainvillea, lilac, burning bush. Another close kin added to the Bible’s kept obituaries. You hated your brother's left eye, unruly wanderer settling away from you and observing a world you could not sense. Glossy ivy in all its tenure, the tender fingers of buckeye. The white page frozen before you like rime. You dig and discover what you already knew: decaying kin, meandering roots catching his beautiful ankles. You were looking for a way out through beauty but beauty only goes where needed. On the pad you write: enough—what you've had, how much more of you there is, how much of you will be left when you're gone.

PHILLIP WILLIAMS

generation of undocumented Americans. But Cornejo Villavicencio also does it for the children she meets and for those who will be, unless lawmakers change US immigration policy, the inevitable next generation of undocumented Americans.

condo, whether a pharmacy in Miami or not, is a real place on the map. A refugee settlement on the outskirts of Vienna that was set up to house Hungarians fleeing Soviet repression in 1956, it was given its name by a group of Chilean asylees who arrived there in the 1970s. Among the world’s oldest refugee camps, it still houses some of its original inhabitants. Their children have been born and lived their entire lives there, alongside elders and newer waves of refugees from the Middle East and Africa.

Cornejo Villavicencio does not refer to the Austrian settlement in her book, but the undocumented America that she depicts faces a similar quandary. The undocumented have been in the United States for so many decades that they are aging without access to Social Security (despite, of course, paying into the benefit pool). Cornejo Villavicencio captures the folly of this when she writes about her own father's precarious existence as a dishwasher and a delivery "boy" in his 50s. Her work exposes the unsustainable fiction built into the economic and political systems that invite the labor of the undocumented into the country but fail to protect them once here. The pandemic has only sharpened this structural fabulism. Nearly a quarter million health care workers are undocumented, yet the undocumented can’t get Covid-19 relief checks.

With real life as surreal as that, Cornejo Villavicencio's practice of magical journalism is a fitting response. Her flights of fancy are an attempt to fulfill her promise to her immigrant subjects “to write about them in a way they'd never been written about before.” Could she have accomplished this with a more orthodox approach? Perhaps. But since this is her story as well as those of her subjects, she’s in a position to tell it as few can, and that involves bringing her full subjectivity, with all its wit and sensitivity, all its allusive instincts and imaginative impulses, memorably to bear. The Undocumented Americans might not save anyone or solve anything, but it does passionately and provocatively direct us to see those Americans, whose status this country denies, in all their idiosyncrasy and magic.
IN 1971, SUN RA TOOK HIS ARKESTRA TO CAIRO FOR A series of concerts, broadcasts, and recording sessions. It was a necessary pilgrimage for the experimental pianist and his equally eccentric band. Born Herman Poole Blount in Birmingham, Ala., he had been fascinated with Egypt for decades, and the trip was a chance to commune with hallowed ground. A pioneering Afrofuturist, he wore garments that mixed Egyptian finery with intergalactic touches and composed progressive blends of jazz that imagined space travel as a means of Black liberation. As he saw it, Black people would never find freedom on Earth; true emancipation resided on Saturn. He had become infatuated with the planet in college after an out-of-body experience that, he said, beamed him into the cosmos. “My whole body was changed into something else,” the artist reported, according to John Szwed’s biography, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*. “I could see through myself.” He said aliens spoke to him: “They would teach me some things that when it looked like the world was going into complete chaos, when there was no hope for nothing, then I could speak, but not until then. I would speak, and the world would listen.”

The music performed in Egypt was especially vibrant; connecting with his spiritual center, Sun Ra refined a sound he had been developing for many years. He started playing professionally in 1940s Chicago, as a pianist for singer Wynonie Harris and bandleader Fletcher Henderson. By 1952, he was leading the Space Trio with saxophonist Pat Patrick and drummer Thomas “Bugs” Hunter, who became cornerstone members of his ever-evolving Arkestra. Sun Ra was writing more psychedelic songs around this time, beginning his trek into avant-garde jazz. The recently released *Egypt 1971* captures a significant moment in Sun Ra’s journey. Across more than three hours of music on five LPs—largely recorded by Hunter—listeners can hear Sun Ra play in the streets of Giza, near the Mena House Hotel in Cairo, in the Heliopolis home of German musician Hartmut Geerken, on a show for a Cairo TV channel, and in the capital’s Balloon Theatre. The Egypt jaunt was impromptu. While on tour in Europe, Sun Ra had found some cheap plane tickets to Cairo and set up a few extra gigs in Denmark to pay for them. He landed in Cairo on Dec. 7, 1971, with his 21 bandmates—a fleet of singers, instrumentalists, and dancers called the Astro-Intergalactic-Infinity 41
Arkestra. Despite his cultlike following in America’s underground jazz scene, Sun Ra was virtually unknown in the African nation. That is, until he left his room at the Mena, a boutique hotel near the Giza pyramids where he and the band stayed. “He was sitting on a chair in the entrance hall, wearing a silver helmet and a floor-length, striped, synthetic robe and a tunic covered with hieroglyphics,” Geerken and his coauthor, Chris Trent, wrote in the 1994 book *Omniverse Sun Ra.* “Musicians in bright robes and exotic turbans scattered all over the hotel hall, alone or in groups. The hotel guests were in awe. They tried not to stare but they stared anyway…. A theatre group about to rehearse a play? A magician? Someone shooting a historical film? Sun Ra wanted to demonstrate that he was different from the other hotel guests…. He kept aloof—in his clothing, in his gestures and when he talked.” His music was a different story: As a bandleader, Sun Ra’s style was wildly expressive, and he pushed his jazz to astonishing depths, charting new territory that few have approached since.

H
Was aided by Salah Ragab, an Egyptian jazz drummer and chief of military music in Heliopolis, who in 1968 formed the country’s first big jazz band and became something of a legend himself. He and Geerken had been devoted fans for years, and during Sun Ra’s two-week stay in Egypt, Ragab lent him instruments (Sun Ra’s hadn’t made it through customs) and booked his gig at the Balloon Theatre, which, according to Geerken, didn’t go well at all. “Only the first four rows of the huge, round and ice-cold tent were occupied,” he writes in Egypt 1971’s liner notes. “Shortly thereafter, the Balloon Theatre went up in flames and burned down to the ground.” Still, the music Sun Ra played there was some of the best from the tour. “Have You Heard the Latest News From Neptune,” with its rhythmic drums and muted horns, might be the most accessible track on the album. Another performance from the Balloon gig, “Angels and Demons at Play,” delves into frenetic free jazz, the subgenre Sun Ra seemed most comfortable with.

*Egypt 1971* hits its stride on the second LP, where, on the tracks “Space Loneliness No. 2,” “Discipline No. 11,” and “Discipline No. 15,” Sun Ra is more of a soloist, using deep chords on the organ to play meditative drones. In these moments, when the racket is stripped away, we’re reminded that he wasn’t just a jazz ensemble leader; he was an innovator, pulling strident noise and novel sounds from his instrument that were not only captivating but also revolutionary. To that end, *Egypt 1971* sounds best when things are seemingly out of whack, as on the songs “Shadow World,” “Third Planet,” “Space Is the Place,” and “Horizon.” Sun Ra opens the 13-minute “Shadow World” with a harsh seven-minute organ solo, which evokes the feeling of needles on skin or being probed on an alien spacecraft. Indeed, Sun Ra’s cacophonous music is an acquired taste, but devotees and curious listeners alike will appreciate the din, even if it doesn’t lend itself to repeated listening. The arrangements Sun Ra crafted in many of these songs are as aggressive as a speeding locomotive—the entire band plays at a pummeling pace, driving forward in unison. “Horizon,” on the other hand, isn’t music as we normally imagine it. Continuing the themes of “Nidhantu” and “Solar Ship Voyage” from earlier in the box set, Sun Ra manipulates the Moog synthesizer, producing static and clatter to convey an eight-minute cosmic voyage. When played in succession, these performances represent the best of Sun Ra: Defying a staid, more traditional vision of jazz, he invented a genre all his own.

T
He back half of *Egypt 1971* offers a more intimate look at Sun Ra and his Arkestra. At a December 12 show they played at Geerken’s home—a small affair with about 25 guests who paid $75 per ticket (many of whom had never seen a Sun Ra show)—the bandleader didn’t scale back for the smaller venue. Instead, he ramped it up, making full use of the house, giving newcomers the full Sun Ra experience. The band members, Geerken wrote, would seek eye contact with different people and leaned way down to the guests, repeating the word “intergalactic,” and there wasn’t a single person present who could resist the magic of the moment. The wind section grouped around the people sitting on the floor and charged them with screaming overtones. The staircase leading to the upper part of the house became part of the action; shreds of shrill
saxophone tones emerged from various rooms of the house. A group of six transverse flute players marched out into the garden and around the house while other acoustic elements evolved inside the house. But everything seemed to have a connection.

The music elicits a sacred atmosphere: “We’ll Wait for You” begins with the kind of ominous drones you’d hear in a black-and-white monster movie before building to a gospel-centered plateau of chiming bells, chants, and torrential drums. If the subsequent songs—“Discipline 27” and “They’ll Come Back”—were meant to relax the crowd, the rousing “Imagination” is a jolt back to church: “If we came from nowhere here,” Sun Ra exclaims, doubling down on his mantra of cosmic Black liberation, “why can’t we go somewhere there?” The question induces yelps of affirmation from the Arkestra; raucous horn blasts and cascading percussion join the arrangement, as if this were the closing benediction. The years following the Egypt tour were very fruitful for Sun Ra; he’d been creatively invigorated by the experience. In 1973, he released his most widely recognized album, Space Is the Place, which served as the soundtrack to his science fiction film of the same name, released a year later. He also released several live and studio recordings through Impulse! Records and his own label, El Saturn, as well as a poetry book and reissues of his older work. Sun Ra went back to Cairo in 1983 and ’84 and reconnected with Ragab. The ’83 meeting produced The Sun Ra Arkestra Meets Salah Ragab Plus the Cairo Jazz Band, in Egypt, a straightforward combination of jazz and traditional Egyptian music. A year later, during Sun Ra’s final trip to Egypt, Ragab played drums in the Arkestra at the Il Capo Jazz Club in Cairo. Though they created impressive work, it doesn’t match the sheer force of the previous decade’s performances. Egypt 1971 represents a watershed moment for Sun Ra, the moment when his cosmic jazz finally made contact with the source of its creation. In Egypt, Sun Ra found a creative home. Forty-three years later, Belgian artist Tom Bogaert opened an exhibition in Cairo’s Medrar for Contemporary Art to commemorate the trip. That his journey still resonates is a testament to its importance. Egypt 1971 finds Sun Ra at the height of his power, invigorated by this spiritual homecoming and its exultant beauty.
he universe of reality TV is vast, and while it involves the cross-national exchange of ideas—American Idol’s origins are English; The Masked Singer itself is based on a South Korean show—the franchises that become popular in the United States tend to appeal to a distinctly American brand of meritocracy. Whether they explicitly cite hard work as the key to advancement (The Apprentice, Shark Tank) or glorify it through a creative field (America’s Next Top Model, The Voice, Chopped), these shows present an update on the myth of bootstrapping. The only thing standing between a hardworking individual and success is the wrong audience; get in front of the judges and show them you’re a star, and you’ll be rewarded.

Reality-TV victory seldom translates into real-life success, but that fails to dim these shows’ popularity. We don’t watch because we genuinely believe that the winner will become America’s next top model or the next Food Network star. The winner’s life after the show is an epilogue: nice to know about, but inessential. The pleasure of watching relies on the sense that the show happens not in the real world but in a universe adjacent to it, one that’s both simpler and more heightened. The rules are clearer, and the rewards are larger. The scaffolding of challenges won or lost and advantages gained, arbitrated by judges with unquestioned power, support the fantasy that the person who plays the game best will rise to the top—an elusive outcome in the mess and unfairness of the real world.

This is an old formula, and it works well. But the joy of The Masked Singer is that the show jettisons it. No one is struggling to make it; they’re all celebrities and have already achieved some measure of success. There is no prize money at stake, just two gold-en trophies, one of which is shaped like a mask and the other shaped like an ear. You don’t know who the contestants are until they get voted out and leave. Some aren’t even good singers! But none of this matters: Crowning the best vocalist is the point of The Masked Singer like returning to Ithaca is the point of The Odyssey.

This means that to watch The Masked Singer is to be deprive of one’s moorings for processing the emotional drama of reality TV. There are no underdogs or villains or tearful confessions; there is barely a narrative. When the contestants aren’t singing, they speak through voice modulators, narrating “clue packages” of in-scrutable hints and imagery: chess pieces, bagels, George Washington statuettes, ballet shoes, and pickles, all whizzing by at a rapid clip. There is nothing in the show that resembles what we call life. It is nearly impossible to see yourself anywhere in it, to relate to any of its characters. One reason is that they’re wearing masks and performing pop songs in high-glam mascot costumes; another is that the show’s surreality makes its stakes feel incredibly, therapeutically low.

In discarding the familiar reality-TV meritocracy arc, The Masked Singer is the rare show to bank its appeal on pure aesthetics: a palette of body glitter, pyrotechnics, bright colors, and exaggerated proportions. There is an absence of critical affect, even in the judging—off-key performances are usually described as energetic or fun—and moments of self-mockery are rare. Judges remain straight-faced while the performers are using the pseudonyms of the performers, as if they were state officials. “I want to tell you, Popcorn,” McCarthy solemnly says to one contestant dressed in a crystal-embellished popcorn costume, who turns out to be ‘80s pop star Taylor Dayne, “how blessed we are to have you on this show.”

On the rare occasions when The Masked Singer addresses politics, this bubble remains intact. In a recent episode, McCarthy guessed that the performer inside a snail costume might be Senator Ted Cruz (who, as it happened, had fled his disaster-stricken home state of Texas for Cancun a few weeks before the episode aired). In the third season, the inhabitant of a pastel bear costume who had rapped a gender-swapped version of Sir Mix-a-Lot’s “Baby Got Back” turned out to be Sarah Palin. These events lack the traction with reality outside the show necessary to interpret them. The familiar critiques of a TV show hosting a controversial politician don’t work here: The show didn’t really provide Palin with a platform to air her right-wing views, since her speaking time was limited to lines like “I, Bear, exercise my right to a killer performance.” Nor could the episode be described as “normalizing” Palin, since there was nothing remotely normal about it.

There was a small dust-up in 2020 over The Masked Singer’s use of editing tricks to fake a live audience, even as Covid cases and deaths were on the rise. Andy Denhart, who writes the blog Reality Blurred, argued that the choice to broadcast footage of an unmasked audience laughing and hollering signaled to viewers, erroneously and dangerously, that large indoor gatherings were safe. When Denhart raised the issue with the judges and creators of the show at a press conference this past March, showrunner James Breen disagreed. “I think people are pretty sophisticated, and I think everyone knows what’s going on in the world right now,” he said. “I don’t worry that people think [the live audience is] real.”

My inclination with cultural products like The Masked Singer—things with a glitzy surface and nothing underneath—is to read them as late Roman Empire decadence, signs of the growing gap between what the powerful and the powerless find beautiful, interesting, and worthwhile. That sensibility is certainly present in The Masked Singer, but it is perhaps too easy to dismiss it on these terms alone. To borrow Breen’s phrasing, I think everyone knows what’s going on in the world right now, and we can find escape in a show so over-the-top that it belongs to everyone and no one. “We want to give people something that takes them away from reality,” Thicke said in response to Denhart’s question. “We want to give them something to celebrate, great music and great times, and remind us that those times are coming soon again.”
Letters

You Don’t Say

Re “Yes We Cant” [May 3/10]: Thanks to David Bromwich for his sly critique of words and phrases that he calls “shiny, slippery word-fruit that we pluck, eat, and send into the world without second thought.” I’ve been collecting my own stash, perhaps less highbrow but equally, I believe, frustrating. When college administrations claim “budget transparency,” I ache for the old days when honesty was valued. Those “robust conversations,” which pairs one of my verbal irritations with a Bromwich selection, propel me down the hall screaming and craving a complete and deeper consideration of the subject. I guess “authentic” folks are those people Holden Caulfield, who railed against “phonies,” would have praised. Or not. Then there’s that strategy which counsels us to “pivot” from the thornier path to one which will send us sliding into an easier and less objectionable struggle. And politicians with “no appetite” for a cause that might help the underdog in a situation might consider reflecting on their stingingness.

LESLEY SIMON
Interdisciplinary Studies, City College of San Francisco San Francisco

Facts and Fairness

Re “Going Viral,” by Zoë Carpenter [May 3/10]: The Fairness Doctrine of the Federal Communications Commission appears to have helped rein in media misinformation. When a Democratic Congress tried to make it law in 1987, Ronald Reagan successfully vetoed the effort.

I recognize its passage might not have affected cable news organizations, as it only applied to broadcast licenses, but the Fairness Doctrine could be reestablished today in such a manner as to apply to all sources of public information.

FLOYD HOWSDEN

World Citizens

Re “We Should Shame Frequent Fliers,” by Rafa Zakaria [May 3/10]: Individual sacrifice is not the solution. If only more Americans traveled outside the country, I think we would have a better understanding of the world. Sadly, our society makes it difficult to rely on public transportation to travel extensively.

ROBERT BORNEMAN

The Revolutionary Spirit

In his review and analysis of Judas and the Black Messiah (“A Collective Experience,” April 5/12), Stephen Kearse astutely observes that the members of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party are “often filmed surrounding [Fred] Hampton rather than interacting with him, as though they were his vassals, not his comrades.” I would add that members of the audience would not want to identify with the Hampton they see on-screen. A more accurate portrayal would have included the qualities of warmth, openness, humor, and charm that a good community organizer must possess to bring his neighbors into the struggle for justice.

DAVE CLENNON
Santa Monica, Calif.

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Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer is not naive. The New York Democrat knows that, with the Senate split 50-50, he must unite his caucus to enact legislation to prevent Republican assaults on democracy, including efforts to suppress the vote in 2022. In an extended interview with The Nation, Schumer spoke about the threat that former president Donald Trump and his allies pose and what must be done to avert it. Here’s a portion of our conversation that dealt with S.1, the democracy reforms known as the For the People Act. —John Nichols

JN: Unlike with spending proposals, where you might be able to use budget reconciliation, with S.1 you’re going to have to deal with the filibuster issue.

CS: Right. So, look, there’s a number of people in my caucus—not just one, it’s more than that—who truly believe devoutly in bipartisanship, and a lot of them come from more Republican areas or Republican states.... To this group, bipartisanship is really, really important. Now let me say, I’d love to have bipartisanship, and it’s preferable to any other way of getting things done—provided we don’t make the mistakes of 2009 and ’10 [the early years of Barack Obama’s first term] and dilute things so (a) they’re not consequential, and (b) they take so long that you can’t get a lot done.... I’ve told my Democratic colleagues, “Go talk to Republicans. See if they want to join us, see if they have constructive changes—not just things that weaken it or make it milquetoast—and we’ll see.” But I’ve also said, particularly on S.1, that if the Republican colleagues don’t join us or just try to drag things out, we’re going to have to put our heads together and figure out the best way to go. As I said, everything is on the table, and failure’s not an option.

One of the things I think that we have to realize—“we” as in [the Democratic] caucus—is that there’s a huge dichotomy between the Republican voter and the Republican senators. [Fifty-six] percent of Republican voters were for the American Rescue Plan. Not one [Republican] senator voted for it.

JN: Why do you think that is?

CS: I’ll give you a two-word explanation: Donald Trump. Donald Trump controls the Republican primaries. He controls the media—if he tells [Fox News host] Sean Hannity to say something, he will. He controls the money. And he controls the voters, because only about a third of the Republicans who vote in the general election vote in the primary, and they tend to be the hard-right Trump devotees.

So they’re all afraid to buck him. Some of them want to be with him, but a lot of them don’t like him but are afraid to buck him. That’s something that I hope will become apparent to the American people and to everyone in my caucus.

JN: Is that the point at which you might be able to move some rules changes?

CS: Again, the way I put it is, everything is on the table.

JN: S.1 addresses the functioning of democracy. It would seem to be vital for the Senate to act.

CS: There are many pieces to it, and I support the whole thing. But by August, the voting rights piece [will become urgent]. In other words, some of the states will begin to set up their primaries—if they have early primaries—[during legislative sessions] in the fall of 2021. So we have to give the Justice Department the ability to go in ahead of that. We’ve got to pass it by August.

JN: Time is short. You’re looking at 2022.

CS: I think if the Republican legislatures are allowed to do these changes, it could make it harder for us to keep the majority [in the Senate] and harder for the House to keep the majority too.

JN: So that’s how much is at stake—

CS: That’s it. Yes. Yes.

JN: Do you think an awareness of what’s at stake may allow you to unite the caucus and act?

CS: I think my caucus understands the consequences of this—substantively and politically.

For the rest of The Nation’s interview with Schumer, visit thenation.com/schumerinterview.
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