Rob Wallace warned us that industrial agriculture could cause a deadly pandemic, but no one listened. Until now.

Eamon Whalen

The Man Who Saw It Coming

PLUS:

AFTER ANDREW ZEPHYR TEACHOUT

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Displaced: A young boy was among the many Afghans who were evacuated from a makeshift camp in Kabul on August 12, ahead of the Taliban advance.

Features

14 The Man Who Saw It Coming
EAMON WHALEN
Rob Wallace warned for years that a global pandemic was inevitable.

20 Bernie Sanders’s Third Campaign
JOHN NICHOLS
The perennial outsider is suddenly in a position to act on his agenda.

24 How to Be a Charismatic Follower
MARGARET BURNHAM
The late activist Bob Moses used his quiet voice to enable others to speak.

28 Lessons From a Centrist
EIOIN HIGGINS
Senator Harry Reid’s office was an incubator for young progressives.

Editorial

4 Life on Earth?
MARK HERTSGAARD
show us how to speak up about mental health.
KALI HOLLOWAY

Comment

5 Cuomo’s Exit
Like Richard Nixon, he resigned whining.
ZEPHYR TEACHOUT

6 After the Fall
The future of Afghanistan.
RAJAN MENON

Columns

7 No Offense
Are Democrats the new party of the rich?
DAVID BROWNING

8 The Front Burner
Black women Olympians

9 The Argument
We Should Hand Out Free Heroin to Drug Users
P.E. MOSKOWITZ

12 Expiration Date
AIDA CHAVEZ

13 The Transformation of Afghanistan
CALVIN TRILLIN

B & A

32 Web of Connections
Can one tell the story of a country through one family?
DAVID A. BELL

38 Iron Cage
Adam Curtis’s modern discontents.
KEVIN LOZANO

41 In the New Year
(poeM)
NATASHA RAO

42 The Public Body
How capitalism made the world sick.
SARAH JONES

44 Drowning Creek
(poeM)
ADA LIMON

No political settlement aimed at reducing Afghanistan’s chaos and bloodshed will work if Iran, China, and Russia are excluded.

Letters

45 Letters

46 Q & A
ADAM SERWER

Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins

Cover illustration: RYAN INZANA

38

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LET’S BE CLEAR: THIS WAS AVOIDABLE,” A FURIOUS VARSHINI PRAKASH, THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR of the Sunrise Movement, said in response to the latest United Nations climate report. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s Sixth Assessment Report, released on August 9, “is apocalyptic, catastrophic, and nothing we haven’t been screaming about from the rooftops for years,” Prakash continued. “If Biden really wants to be a world leader on climate, he’ll heed this call and pass the boldest reconciliation bill possible.”

The US carries a unique responsibility as the world’s largest cumulative emitter of greenhouse gases. (China overtook the US in recent years to become the largest annual emitter, but cumulative emissions are what determine global temperatures.) Biden has talked a good game, pledging to cut climate pollution to 50 percent of 2005 levels by 2030, but his accomplishments to date fall far short of what’s needed for him to credibly pressure other countries to do more. And other countries must do more. In particular, China, India, and Russia—all large emitters—have so far refused to endorse the 1.5˚C target, a recipe for catastrophe.

The Sunrise Movement is correct that passing a reconciliation bill with ambitious climate provisions is imperative. But while activists focus their ire, and reporters their coverage, on Biden and fossil-fuel-friendly Democrats such as West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, the congressional Republicans who’ve long been the main reason for America’s climate inaction largely escape censure. Politics is about power, and nothing concentrates a politician’s mind more than the prospect of being voted out of office. In the weeks remaining until COP 26, people power could change politicians’ calculations. Now is the time for politicians of all parties to hear, loud and clear: Either you do what’s necessary to preserve life on this planet, or we the people will make sure that the next election is your last. 

Mark Hertsgaard, The Nation’s former environment correspondent, is the executive director of Covering Climate Now.
Cuomo’s Exit

The question is not which of his faults brought New York’s governor down, but why it took so long for him to fall.

For the nearly 10 years Andrew Cuomo was governor of New York, he acted like a caricature of someone drunk with power, a boy-king gifted the position because of his father’s name, greedy for acclaim and control. He grabbed everything for himself, literally and figuratively. He harassed and assaulted state employees and other women because he could—and he thought no one would dare speak up. He retaliated against the smallest slight. He used state workers to grab himself a multimillion-dollar book deal. He lied about nursing home deaths because telling the truth would have taken the shine off his glory—and cost him his book deal and his victory lap.

Cuomo took power, and collected chits, and took credit wherever he could. For what the fracking ban activists who followed him everywhere forced him into against his will. For the $15-an-hour minimum wage—after he fought tooth and nail against it. For criminal justice reforms he’d spent years blocking. For the campaign finance reform that he hobbled. Wherever there was glory to be had, he ran to the headlines and used his perch to take credit. And wherever there was shame—or should have been—he hid and pointed fingers.

The remarkably durable Cuomo narrative—only recently exploded—was that although he was a jerk, he was a competent jerk. The truth is, he couldn’t even build a bridge that was safe. He might have been competent at tearing people down, but not at building roads, running the MTA, or making sure schools were fully funded and sewer systems adequate—all things the state needs to thrive. He leaves New Yorkers with gaping holes in our social fabric and immoral levels of inequality.

The question, then, is not how Cuomo fell so quickly, but why it took so long. The superb, thorough, devastating report by Attorney General Letitia James was what finally brought him down. But why was her work needed after almost 10 years of credible reporting on his corruption scandals and his lies?

Cuomo was a disaster, but then New York hasn’t had a governor leave in dignity in years—and that is not a fluke; it is a flaw in the office. Control over appointments and the budget creates such a gross concentration of power that any governor can promise his cronies enormous rewards—and threaten terrible retribution against his enemies. When I ran against Cuomo in 2014, I met several lawmakers who secretly cheered me on but distanced themselves in public, because they were terrified he would punish them by hurting their careers or their constituents. One lawmaker said that every time he talked to me he’d get a phone call from Joe Percoco—the governor’s right-hand man, now in prison for corruption—asking what the problem was.

New York’s Constitution makes the governor feel invincible—and less responsive to the needs of the public. Recent research proves what observers of human behavior have said for thousands of years: Power takes away not only compassion but the ability to even see other people’s needs. Not to put too fine a point on it, but people who are given power in psychology experiments are more likely to touch others inappropriately.

New York’s current constitutional structure, in other words, sets up the state for abuse. So while we should celebrate the outstanding work by James and the incredible bravery of the survivors—and of the lawmakers who didn’t keep quiet when the governor asked them to—we also need to ask: How can we avoid this in the future? New York is overdue for constitutional restructuring, as a matter of both culture and law. The legislature, not the executive branch, should be leading on the budget. We need to further reform the limits on how much can be raised in campaign contributions. And we need to stop looking for strong men to lead us. Genuine democracy—in which the people have a voice and the governor can’t grab everything—is better for bridges, for competent government, and for equality.

When Macbeth finally faces the fate he thought impossible, with his wife dead and the forest he thought was rooted in place marching toward him, he famously says that life “is a tale told by an idiot…signifying nothing.” Like Macbeth, Cuomo remained a nihilist to the end. He never thought about the real needs of the people; never worried about those hurt by crumbling infrastructure; never considered what it was like to be a child in an overcrowded classroom—or how it felt to have a loved one’s death in a nursing home covered up. As his pathetic final performance made clear, it was always all about him. Like Richard Nixon, he resigned whining. What we should learn from Andrew Cuomo’s tenure is that no one should ever be given such power to play with people’s lives.

The first step is for the legislature to proceed with its impeachment. Cuomo resigned to prevent the facts from being fully and publicly laid out—and so he could run for office again. He doesn’t deserve that kindness, having shown nothing but selfishness in his tenure. More important, New Yorkers need to learn not just what Cuomo did, but how he was able to wield power to keep so many people silent and afraid for so long. That’s the only way we can avoid being back here again.
After the Fall

With the Taliban running Afghanistan, Washington must chart a new course—and it won’t be easy.

The American era in Afghanistan ended much faster than nearly any expert or pundit predicted. I have been following events in Afghanistan since 1978 and include myself among those who were taken aback by the rapidity with which the US-backed government of President Ashraf Ghani and the US-trained Afghan National Defense and Security Forces lost one provincial capital after another. The Taliban have entered Kabul, and Ghani has fled. Any hope that the Afghan government will muster a counteroffensive is based on fantasy. It’s now time for Washington to turn its attention to a post-American Afghanistan. That will require charting a new course—and it won’t be easy.

An immediate challenge involves the parlous predicament of thousands of Afghans who worked with American civilian and military agencies. Many of these individuals fear that the Taliban will round up and imprison them, or worse. The United States has an obligation to provide these workers safe haven within its own borders, and we must not shirk our responsibility by cajoling other countries, such as Qatar, to open their doors to them. We won’t be able to resettle every Afghan who worked with the US, but we should admit as many as possible.

This has been done before. Consider Operation New Life, the program that resettled some 140,000 people from Cambodia and Vietnam in the US and other countries after the Vietnam War. Although that initiative can’t simply be grafted onto the circumstances in Afghanistan, it can serve as a guide.

And Afghan professionals who were employed by American organizations won’t be the only people seeking to leave Afghanistan. Tens of thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—of others will seek safety in Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, all of which lack the resources to house, feed, and care for so many refugees.

This is not hypothetical. Afghans have been fleeing violence for decades. Over the past 40 years, Iran has absorbed some 800,000 Afghan refugees. Pakistan has taken in some 1.4 million Afghans and has said it won’t allow any more to enter, though it may have no choice. Tajikistan, in contrast, has declared its readiness to accept 100,000.

Afghanistan’s neighbors cannot reasonably be expected to care for vast numbers of new refugees without substantial help from other governments. And no country has a greater responsibility to provide assistance, both monetary and material, than the United States. As Covid-19 cases rise globally, it doesn’t take medical expertise to foresee the horrific consequences if vast numbers of Afghans are crowded together in places that lack the essentials for keeping infections at bay or caring for the ill.

Now that Washington’s nation-building experiment has failed, a foundational assumption that should steer its efforts to shape Afghanistan’s future is that the days when the US could run the show are over. By virtue of geography alone, several countries have much bigger stakes in what happens in Afghanistan. The most important among them are China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and India.

The United States has, to put it mildly, a tense relationship with Iran, China, and Russia. Yet no attempt to fashion a political settlement aimed at reducing Afghanistan’s chaos and bloodshed will work if these countries are excluded. More to the point, they can’t be shut out.

But can the Biden administration look beyond the current acrimony and work cooperatively with them in Afghanistan? It should certainly try, because there is some common ground. Like the United States, none of these countries want an Afghanistan that plunges into mayhem, and none can avert that outcome on their own. Working with China and Russia may prove feasible, but the idea of cooperating with Iran will spark outrage from many in Congress, the media, and various foreign policy and religious organizations. But it would be foolish for the administration not to engage in substantive negotiations with Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran to develop a coordinated strategy. India and Pakistan should also be brought into the fold, even though the two have a longstanding rivalry in Afghanistan and despite India’s troubled history with the Taliban, with whom Pakistan has long had close ties.

Of course, any multilateral effort will have to include the Taliban, who will be deeply suspicious of diplomatic initiatives undertaken by the United States alone. This is another reason to attempt a coordinated strategy.

There will be plenty of obstacles to a multilateral strategy for a post-American Afghanistan. Joe Biden will have to cope with a barrage of blame for “losing” Afghanistan, never mind that it was Donald Trump who laid the groundwork for a full American exit. A proposal to join hands with China, Russia, and Iran, even for a specific and mutually beneficial purpose, will provoke an outcry. Still, the collapse of Ghani’s government and the unraveling of the US-trained Afghan military have created a completely new context—one that calls for a wholly different policy.

Rajan Menon is a professor of international relations at the City College of New York.
No Offense
David Bromwich

Party of the Rich?
If you’re waiting for Democrats to talk as frankly about wealth as they do about race, don’t hold your breath.

Some recent US figures on the distribution of income by party: 65 percent of taxpayer households that earn more than $500,000 per year are now in Democratic districts; 74 percent of the households in Republican districts earn less than $100,00 per year. Add to this what we knew already, namely that the 10 richest congressional districts in the country all have Democratic representatives in Congress. The above numbers incidentally come from the Internal Revenue Service, via Bloomberg, and are likely to be more reliable than if they came from Project Veritas via theblaze.com.

We have known for some time that the dark money of Charles Koch is answered by the conspicuous money of Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey, Tim Cook, Sundar Pichai, George Soros, Bill Gates, and a swelling chorus of others, none of whom “identify Republican.” Yet it has been comforting, in a way, to continue believing that real wealth resides with the old enemy: Big Oil and Big Tobacco and the rest. They were the ultimate source of the power that distorted American society and politics.

The income of their voters aside, Democrats enjoy the active, constant, all-but-avowed support of The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, all three of the old television networks, CNN, NPR, and the online mainstream of Slate, Salon, and HuffPost. Any sentient reader can easily add a dozen more outlets. But along with the benefits of this mutual understanding comes a liability. The warm handshake with a friendly media establishment can grow so familiar that you get out of the habit of seeing what it looks like when you strut your stuff in public. And no longer seeing what it looks like, you stop asking what it might look like to people not already on your side.

For Barack Obama’s 60th birthday, a celebration in Martha’s Vineyard was planned for 500 guests and a staff of 200. “Scaled back” to minimize the “bad optics,” the numbers still looked to be in the hundreds; and this at a time when President Biden had lately advised Americans to re-mask and not assemble in large gatherings. Tom Hanks, Chrissy Teigen, Bradley Cooper, Beyoncé—all were present, making the scene, trailing clouds of glitz. The birthday message couldn’t have been plainer: “We work so hard, we are doing so much that you are not, every exception should be made for us.” The leaked pictures were of undoubtedly cool people, worthy of their very cool host.

The display, however, brought back the memory of Gavin Newsom, caught dining unmasked with some donors after he declared his mask mandate, and more recently Muriel Bowser, caught doing the same just hours before declaring hers. Another dip into the past might recall the moment when Wolf Blitzer, at the height of the budget crush last October, confronted Nancy Pelosi over her stalling tactics on an emergency package to deny Donald Trump an assist at the polls. Blitzer said that he noticed people in city streets, hungry, homeless, and in immediate need. With an air of affronted virtue, Pelosi replied that no action taken by a Democrat like herself could be questioned: “We feed them!”

Even when a dissident wing of the party succeeds in a worthy cause—as with the extension of the eviction moratorium effected by Cori Bush and her congressional allies—a suggestion of deserved status appears in an unpleasant light. A CBS reporter asked Bush about spending $70,000 on private security guards while less fortunate persons would be left to fend for themselves without the police she wants to defund. Bush pointed out that in earlier years she had been evicted three times, and yet she spoke in a voice weirdly similar to Pelosi’s: “I have too much work to do. There are too many people that need help right now…. So if I end up spending $200,000, if I spend 10, 10, 10 more dollars on [private security], you know what, I get to be here to do the work. So suck it up. And defunding the police has to happen.” A Missouri TV station carried widely different reactions to her stance, from a woman who approved and a man who was having none of it. The citizen opposed to defunding was Black, working-class, in his middle years; the defunder was young, white, professional.

What has drawn the most attention around the eviction moratorium is Biden’s risky politics in admitting that his extension probably wouldn’t “pass constitutional muster,” but he was going to try it anyway. Just as interesting was the fact that Bush and her allies thought of landlords as the enemy. It did not occur to them to look higher up and ask for an extension of mortgage due dates to protect middle-class landlords (who depend on rent) from predatory banks.
For all the good things they do, there are some things you can rely on the Democrats not to do. They won’t push hard for a genuinely progressive income tax. They won’t raise corporate taxes in a way that would darken the brow of Bezos and Dorsey, Zuckerberg and Gates, or increase the inheritance tax in a way that might make an impression on the grandchildren of the Stanford class of 1985. They have learned to talk about racism, which is good, with intellectual labor-saving devices like “systemic,” which is not so good. Will they ever talk so frankly about—as Dickens put it in *Our Mutual Friend*—“money, money, money, and what money can make of life”? 

**Olympian—and Human**

*At this summer’s Olympic Games, Black women athletes have been outspoken about the hurdles they face.*

One day before she announced her withdrawal from multiple events at the Tokyo Olympics, Simone Biles, the greatest gymnast of our era and probably any other, wrote about the feeling of bearing “the weight of the world on my shoulders at times.” For any elite athlete, this would be regarded as an admission—a confession even—of human vulnerability, a trait that is too often treated as anathema to athletic success. It would also turn out to be a bit of foreshadowing. When Biles later decided to step back from competition at the Summer Games, she cited the stress she was under, her struggle to deal with immense expectations, and the resulting need to attend to her mental health. “I know I brush it off and make it seem like pressure doesn’t affect me,” her social media post had stated, “but damn sometimes it’s hard.”

Most of us will never be as good at anything as Biles is at gymnastics—and by “us,” I also refer to her fellow gymnasts. She is a 32-time Olympic and world medalist, the main attraction for the USA Gymnastics organization, and the namesake of no less than four moves. She is also a Black woman whose domination in a blindingly white sport has meant surpassing seemingly unattainable standards of perfection, reconfiguring them in her own image, and finding herself penalized by judges for putting too much air between her and other competitors. Biles was also contending with “the twisties,” the feeling that her body and brain weren’t syncing up, with serious injury a potential consequence; the lingering effects of the sexual abuse she suffered years earlier at the hands of former USA Gymnastics physician Larry Nassar; and a depression that had previously left her bedbound, because “sleeping was better than offing myself.” She spoke of her sense that, as the sole “remaining survivor” in the Olympics of Nassar’s abuse, she had to continue competing, for fear that USA Gymnastics “would’ve just brushed [the scandal] to the side.”

The cumulative weight of those issues would be staggering in any case, but for Black athletes, professionalism has always included never speaking about the toxic toll of racism. Black male athletes such as Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid have been effectively blackballed for silently protesting police violence; LeBron James has been repeatedly attacked for calling out racism. For Black women, the stakes can be even higher, because they earn less and often compete in less-established sports leagues. Biles has more recently discussed her own experiences with racism in a sport in which Black athletes are both tokenized and exceptionalized, noting that “every Black athlete” has “experienced it through their career, but we just have to keep going for those little ones looking up to us,” and stating the need to “represent Black and brown
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girls over the world.” Biles—who once checked herself out of a hospital emergency room with kidney stones and won a gold medal the next day—is keenly aware that audiences “think I’m superhuman,” which is less a compliment than a diminishment of personhood. Her decision to even briefly throw off the impossible burdens of representation and “Black excellence,” to send a message that she is already enough, will hopefully do as much to influence those little Black and brown girls as her performances on the beam.

If there is a sea change in the way mental health is understood in elite sports, it is being led by Biles and other Black women. Earlier this year, Naomi Osaka was fined $15,000 and threatened with suspension by Grand Slam officials for refusing to speak to the press. Osaka has acknowledged in interviews dating back to 2018 that she suffers from depression and has had to navigate anti-Blackness in the US and Japan. After pulling out of the French Open and Wimbledon, she wrote in an article that those penalties came merely because she wanted to “exercise self-care and preservation of my mental health.” “I stand by that,” she concluded. “Athletes are humans.”

For Black women athletes—whom audiences applaud when they win but quickly turn on when they speak up about the issues they face—the racism they confront may play a role in their struggles with mental health. It’s been heartening to see them start to talk about that connection. Simone Manuel, the first Black woman to win Olympic gold as an individual swimmer, was sidelined for weeks as a result of overtraining. Manuel was struggling not only with physical and performance difficulties but also depression. In July, she said that anti-Blackness added to the fatigue from the already severe regimen she maintains as an Olympic swimmer and acknowledged the difficulty of speaking about the problem when there are people who want her to “shut up and swim.” “This past year for the Black community has been brutal,” she told reporters. “[I]t’s not something that I could ignore. And it was just another factor that can influence you mentally in a draining way.”

Raven Saunders, a queer Black woman and star shot-putter who took home silver in Tokyo, has been forthcoming about the depression. She says her goal is “to show younger people that no matter how many boxes they try to fit you in, you can be you and you can accept it.” Anna Cockrell, an Olympic sprinter, has been frank about what competitors like her face. “I think that sometimes we forget that Black women who are Olympians are still Black women moving in the world, and are dealing with the same pressures and mistreatment and microaggressions as other Black women,” she said in July, ahead of the Games. “And I think if we want to make a commitment to the mental health of Black women Olympians, we have to make a commitment to the mental health of all Black women, regardless of if they are professional athletes or teachers, stay-at-home moms, [or] house cleaners. Because for Black women who are Olympians—the spotlight is on us right now. But when it fades, most of the time I’m moving in a space, I’m recognized as a Black woman, not an Olympian. And maybe that will change. Maybe it won’t. But the reality is I’ll always be a Black woman. And that’s how it is for all of us.”

Acknowledging both their struggles to be on top of their game and their fight to maintain mental well-being is the kind of sports leadership that’s long been undervalued and unrecognized. It’s the kind of excellence—involving the entirety of the self—that we should all be rooting for.
We Should Hand Out Free Heroin to Drug Users

P. E. MOSKOWITZ

Let’s give out heroin, for free, to anyone who wants it. This is not a provocation meant to make you gasp or to elicit angry clicks—rather, it’s a proven strategy for reducing the harm of opioids that’s already in use in several countries across the globe. We face two drug-related crises in the United States. The first we can all agree on: Drugs are killing people at unprecedented rates. Over 90,000 people die each year from overdoses in the US, an amount that has quintupled since 1999. The second crisis is disputed, but no less deadly: Our drug policy leaves people to fend for themselves, while we waste time and resources.

The carceral solutions don’t work, and yet we continue to spend billions of dollars a year on the War on Drugs, attempting to arrest our way out of a public health crisis. But even as some politicians try to shift funding away from policing and prisons, the non-carceral solutions that take their place—sending people to rehab and detox—are neither scientific nor effective. In fact, these abstinence-based programs don’t just fail to stop the worst outcomes; they greatly increase the risk that opioid users will die. Statistically, it’s safer to keep using opioids than to go to rehab.

If we want to save hundreds of thousands of lives, we cannot assume that forcing people to stop consuming drugs is the only way forward for everyone. The idea that abstinence works is more about our fear of drugs than it is about science: Rehab programs have an abysmal success rate.

Instead, we must look at the facts. People use opioids like heroin because they are in pain, whether emotional or physical, and until that source of pain is addressed, drug use will continue. It’s easy to blame Purdue Pharma for the current crisis, and needless to say, it played a part. But Purdue did not shut down factories in the Rust Belt, render millions of American workers jobless, cause our wages to stagnate for 50 years, or start wars that left tens of thousands of returning veterans injured, traumatized, and alone.

Until we remedy the trauma of living in our current moment, we must acknowledge that people will seek out drugs to quell their pain. And once we acknowledge this, we must follow the best available science to ensure that drug use is as safe as possible.

For people who want to get off heroin and other opioids, opioid-assisted therapies have proved to be the most effective solution. Giving drug users buprenorphine, a partial opioid agonist (meaning it saturates the opioid receptors in your brain but doesn’t get you really high), reduces the risk of overdosing by 80 percent. That’s a miraculous result, and yet finding a buprenorphine program is extremely difficult in much of the US.

Decriminalization is also a crucial step forward: It destigmatizes drugs and keeps users out of a cycle of abuse and imprisonment. But decriminalization doesn’t address the main cause of opioid deaths: Illegal drugs are unregulated and thus untested, and as a result their strength varies tremendously. Worse, they’re often contaminated with much more dangerous opioids like fentanyl, which now accounts for most opioid overdoses.

Programs in which nonprofits, researchers, or governments simply give people drugs have been piloted in at least six countries, and they’ve been successful. A study of a 15-year heroin-assisted treatment program in Swiss prisons, for example, found no deleterious effects; its participants lived and worked just like the rest of the prison population.

In Vancouver, Canada, activists are so convinced that handing out reliable drugs is the only solution to the overdose crisis that they’re doing it themselves, illegally. Eris Nyx, a member of the Drug User Liberation Front, told me that she’d seen other interventions fail. So she and other members of the DULF began to buy heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine in bulk, worked with labs to test the supply, and then distributed it for free to people already using the drugs.

“The whole crux of this issue is the regime of prohibition,” Nyx said. “The death is from the volatility in the drug supply, so the fix is to give people drugs with a predictable content.”

But the DULFs operation is not ideal. The government is against it, criminal organizations don’t like that it’s giving away drugs, and the group is small—it can’t really make a dent in the overdose crisis.

The only solution, Nyx said, is to safely supply drugs and allow them to be distributed in stores. That might seem like a pie-in-the-sky proposal, but we already do it for a drug that kills almost 100,000 Americans a year: alcohol. “We’re just a few people, and this is a global, UN-level issue,” Nyx told me. “I’m just some person that has watched other people die and wants that to stop.”

P.E. Moskowitz is an author, a cofounder of the media collective Study Hall, and runs Mental Hellth, a newsletter about capitalism and psychology.
Expiration Date

As the end of the eviction moratorium neared, the White House floundered and progressives took action.

The Biden administration and congressional Democrats had months to figure out what to do about the eviction moratorium. The federal ban on evictions, enacted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last September, has prevented millions of people who are unable to pay rent from losing their homes during the pandemic. But it lapsed on July 31, after the administration refused to renew it and a last-minute attempt by the House Democrats fizzled out.

Just two days before the moratorium’s end, the administration confirmed that it would let the measure expire, claiming that its hands were tied by a Supreme Court ruling. President Biden insisted he didn’t have the authority to extend it himself and punt the issue to Congress, where an extension was doomed from the start. Predictably, congressional Democrats failed to get their moderates on board and, despite the looming crisis, went off on a seven-week paid vacation. (There also wasn’t enough support in the Senate, where Democrats needed 60 votes to pull it off.)

If it hadn’t been for the progressive pressure campaign led by Representative Cori Bush—who before the start of her political career had been evicted three times and had lived out of her car with her children—it’s highly unlikely that Biden would have taken action. Democratic leaders were prepared to let millions of people face the possibility of being tossed out of their homes amid a surge of the Covid-19 Delta variant—until Bush’s protest forced the White House to reverse course.

The Missouri congresswoman slept on the steps of the US Capitol for several days, visited by activists and progressive lawmakers like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman; even Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer showed up. There’s a law that forbids lying down on the Capitol steps, so Bush camped out in a lawn chair and sleeping bag through the rain, heat, and cold, windy mornings. “I know what it’s like…when an eviction is possible in your life, and then what happens when you are actually evicted—and what that does to you emotionally, physically, mentally, what it does to your family,” Bush said about her decision to protest.

Biden’s team didn’t just blame Congress and the Supreme Court; it attempted to shift the responsibility to mayors and governors and continued to assert its powerlessness. “The president has not only kicked the tires; he has double-, triple-, quadruple-checked,” said senior advis-
er Gene Sperling, who oversees the administration’s pandemic relief efforts, insisting that Biden had done his due diligence. Yet on August 3, after days of denying it had the authority, the administration announced that the CDC would issue a new, narrower moratorium, which would protect renters in 90 percent of the country through October 3.

“When people look back to this moment, it’s going to be Cori Bush who saved the day,” said Paul Williams, a housing expert and fellow at the nonprofit Jain Family Institute. “It was an incredible way for one out of 435 votes in the House to exercise real political power, in a way beyond just her vote. She couldn’t get it done with her vote, and she found another way to get it done. That’s not something that typically happens with a first-term representative.”

Much of the crisis could have been avoided if the tens of billions of dollars that Washington allotted to help struggling tenants pay their rent had actually reached them. Only a small fraction of the $46.5 billion made available by Congress has gotten into people’s hands in the past five months, according to the Treasury Department. Moratoriums only postpone evictions; meanwhile unpaid rent piles up. Emergency rental assistance programs were set up for this reason. But in states and cities across the US, these programs have been a massive failure, and the country’s obsession with means testing is largely to blame.

Tenants, housing advocates, and local news outlets have been sounding the alarm on the slow rollout of rent relief for months. Complicated eligibility requirements have kept the households most in need from getting help or have discouraged people from applying altogether. Others simply don’t know that it’s a resource available to them, and in some cities landlords have refused to participate.

The disastrous implementation of these rent relief programs, Williams said, also highlights “how little administrative capacity our local governments have to deal with these issues.” The new targeted moratorium has a different legal basis than the old one, he noted, and is “going to withstand the Supreme Court’s potential wrath much longer…so it buys more time to extinguish the debts entirely.”

“We’re all learning every day,” Representative Pramila Jayapal, leader of the Progressive Caucus, recently told reporters. “What we’re learning is that the more barriers you put up to access aid, guess what—it’s harder to access the aid! I hope that this is something people take from this as we design the next round of assistance.”
A woman performs a purification ritual on a person dressed as an Aztec warrior during the commemoration of the fall of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán. On August 13, Mexico marked the 500th anniversary of the conquest of the Aztec empire by the Spanish. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has asked Spain and the Catholic Church to apologize for the atrocities committed during the invasion.

**By the Numbers**

| **Number of state lawmakers who were accused of sexual misconduct from 2017 to 2019** | 90 |
| **Number of US congressmen accused** | 7 |
| **Amount Congress paid in sexual harassment and sexual discrimination settlements from 2003 to 2018** | $300K |
| **Number of congressmen reprimanded in 1983 for having sex with 17-year-old congressional pages** | 2 |
| **Number of senators who voted to confirm Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas in 1991 after Anita Hill accused him of sexual harassment** | 11 |
| **Number of women that New York Governor Andrew Cuomo harassed, according to the state attorney general’s investigation** | 11 |
| **Number of women who have accused Donald Trump of sexual misconduct** | 26 |

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**SNAPSHOT/Jair Cabrera**

**500 Years Since the Fall**

**DeadlinePoet**

**The Transformation of Afghanistan**

Fanatics terrorized the Afghan people.

For twenty years we fought there in a war.

So what’s it going to be like when we’ve finished?

Well, pretty much just like it was before.

—Gloria Oladipo
Rob Wallace warned us that industrial agriculture could cause a deadly pandemic, but no one listened. Until now.

Eamon Whalen
IN EARLY MARCH 2020, ROB WALLACE, AN EVOLUTIONARY biologist who had been adrift after an unceremonious exit from the University of Minnesota, flew to New Orleans and then got on a bus to Jackson, Miss., where he was scheduled to speak at an event on health and racial injustice. Wallace, who turned 50 this summer, has been studying and writing about infectious diseases and their origins for half his life. For almost as long, he’s been warning that the practices of industrial agriculture would lead to a deadly pandemic on the scale of Covid-19—or worse. “A pandemic may now be all but inevitable,” he wrote of the H5N1 avian influenza virus in 2007. “In what would be a catastrophic failure on the part of governments and health ministries worldwide, millions may die.”

Before his trip to Jackson, Wallace had been closely monitoring the outbreak of a novel virus in Wuhan. Though he’d been spooked by a news report that showed a delivery driver in China practicing extreme social distancing, he went ahead with the trip. As an underpaid academic, he needed the money, and as an American, he didn’t expect anything to happen to him. “I too had been infused with a peculiarly American moment, wherein financial desperation meets imperial exceptionalism,” he wrote.

When Wallace returned from his trip, he threw himself back into writing and research with such fervor that he managed to ignore a pounding headache. When the shortness of breath started, his teenage son yelled at him through the computer screen to see a doctor. After he filled out an online questionnaire, Wallace was diagnosed with Covid-19 over the phone.

He’d been infected with something he’d been warning about for years, and like so many around the world, all he could do was to hope to keep breathing. “No test. No antiviral. No masks and no gloves provided. No community health practitioner stopping by to check on me,” Wallace wrote.

“You can intellectually understand something but still not assimilate the oncoming damage,” he told me later, as he recalled the “sour vindication” of having his worst fears come true. “So there’s an aspect of rage, and an arrival at an understanding.”

I met Wallace for coffee on an afternoon in late June. We sat on benches under the shade on the campus of a liberal arts college near his home in St. Paul, Minn. He was dressed in a pale-red short-sleeve shirt, dark jeans, and sneakers. He wore rectangular black-rimmed glasses and a Minnesota Twins baseball hat and had a five o’clock shadow.

Wallace looks more like a dad on the way to his kid’s Little League game than a lab-coat-wearing scientist who used to consult with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the United Nations. Though he’d been infected with a virus, he would be back working and writing within weeks. “I had been living my entire life in the swirl of raising this child, thinking I was going to be able to start my career,” he said. “It was a way of laying claim to a life I had been waiting for.”

Wallace was diagnosed with Covid-19 on March 20, 2020, and by March 24, he had written a 10,000-word essay about it. “The book was written while I was afflicted with Covid—Wallace mercilessly attacks the complacency and recklessness with which establishment scientists and politicians responded to the virus; he also surveys the damage that the pandemic has wrought on the bottom rungs of society. The book is poignantly dedicated to three meatpacking workers who died from Covid—19, and Wallace describes their barbarous working conditions in detail. But the book’s chief concern is the origin of the SARS-CoV2 virus, and Wallace works backward here, from the outbreak to the bat cave.”

“As an epidemiologist, you’re supposed to want to put yourself out of business.”
—Rob Wallace

Wallace wrote that an epidemiologist is like a “stable boy with a shovel following around elephants at the circus.” “As an epidemiologist, you’re supposed to want to put yourself out of business,” Wallace said. “Everyone has bills to pay; I understand that. But the extent to which your corruption might lead to a pathogen that could kill a billion people—that’s where my line is.”

Eamon Whalen is a freelance journalist from Minneapolis.
The trope best suited for organizing our thinking here isn’t necessarily a murder mystery. It may be better conceived as an alien invasion.”

—Rob Wallace

The warning sign: Wallace’s writings in the early 21st century, collected in the 2016 book Big Farms Make Big Flu, anticipated the crises of our age.

The cities themselves have also become increasingly vulnerable, without investment in public space and health care. “You’ve stripped out everything from environmental sanitation, especially in the Global South, and you’ve made public health an individual intervention,” he added.

But few have made the connection between the past year and a half and the processes that Wallace highlights. “Other than reprobates like me, most Americans think of Covid-19 as a thing that emerged out of China, and doesn’t it have to do with bats or labs or something?” Wallace continued. “So a natural act, or the fault of the Chinese, or both?” That obfuscation makes sense, given what Wallace repeatedly identifies as the essential strategy of agribusiness corporations: They leave their biggest costs off their own balance sheets and let them fall instead on the environment, animals, farmers, workers, consumers, and public health agencies the world over. “Governments are prepared to subsidize agribusiness billions upon billions for damage control in the form of animal and human vaccines, tamiflu, culling operations, and body bags,” he wrote concerning the swine flu in 2009.

Unlike your average MSNBC viewer, Wallace never dismissed the “lab leak” theory of Covid’s origin as outside the realm of possibility or beyond legitimate scientific inquiry. In 2013, he warned that the proliferation over the past 20 years of biosafety labs—which handle and run experiments on some of the world’s deadliest viruses—was making an accident almost inevitable. Though he’s still a proponent of the “field” hypothesis, which holds that the virus crossed over in nature rather than in a laboratory facility, Wallace believes that the origin debate, at least as it’s being hashed out in the public sphere, largely misses the point. “Both represent efforts at avoiding addressing the economic model driving the emergence of virulent pathogens to begin with,” he argued last August on his Patreon page, where his articles often appear first. “The trope best suited for organizing our thinking here isn’t necessarily a murder mystery. It may be better conceived as an alien invasion of our own making.”

I t may come as a surprise that Wallace, a scholar of agriculture, was born and raised on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. He was an only child and a self-described “pink diaper baby”—his parents to the left of the Democratic Party, but not quite Reds. Rodrick and Deborah Wallace, a physicist and an ecologist, met on a picket line protesting a weapons research lab where they were graduate students at Columbia and Barnard. Rodrick was organizing with a group called Scientists and Engineers for Social and Political Action, an early formation of Science for the People, which would count radical scientists like Richard Levins, Stephen Jay Gould, and Richard Lewontin as members. When Columbia hosted an Earth Day celebration sponsored by Ford Motors, which Deborah called “the first attempt at greenwashing,” the couple helped organize the inaugural People’s Earth Day event, with speakers from the United Farm Workers and the Black Panther Party, as well as the labor leader Tony Mazzocchi.

Shortly after Robert was born, his parents became epidemiologists in their own right. Their study of the destruction of housing in the Bronx in the early 1970s and its public health fallout became the book A Plague on Your Houses: How New York Was Burned Down and National Health Crumbled. The Wallaces showed that the fires that engulfed the Bronx between 1969 and 1976 were the result of the city’s decision to reduce fire services in poor neighborhoods, based on faulty data from the Rand Corporation.

“We were running a disaster site operation out of our house. We didn’t have the time or energy to indoctrinate the child,” Rodrick said during a Zoom call with the couple from their home in the Bronx. “He could tell what was going on through the conversations he heard
"The social sciences are utterly critical to understand how things evolve at the molecular level."

— Rob Wallace

or through seeing the hundreds of autopsy reports laid out on our terrace from the mass, fatal toxic fires." Today the Wallace family works collaboratively; Rodrick and Deborah are the coauthors of several chapters in *Dead Epidemiologists*.

While pursuing a PhD in biology at the City University of New York, where he also contributed articles and illustrations to the student newspaper *The Messenger*, Wallace studied the HIV crisis in the city in the 1980s and '90s. He found that AIDS death rates by zip code corresponded to the unequal distribution of the life-saving cocktails of antiretroviral medications, which in turn corresponded to previously existing inequality. "Rob's dissertation was essentially an extension of the family business," Deborah said. It marked the beginning of Wallace's fascination with the social dimensions of infectious disease and served as morbid preparation for the way Covid-19 has laid bare the United States' and the rest of the globe's most deeply entrenched injustices.

After graduate school, Wallace went to the University of California, Irvine, to do postdoctoral research with Dr. Walter Fitch, the father of molecular phylogeny, a method of tracing the evolutionary history of and relationships among organisms. In 2007 Wallace was the lead author of the first study that pinpointed the southern Chinese province of Guangdong as the source of the H5N1 avian influenza virus in the mid-1990s. Yet there was something the genetic sequencing he was looking at couldn't tell him: Why did it emerge there during that time? "I made the mistake of becoming curious about something," Wallace said. "That's not a good career move in science."

He began to read beyond his discipline, investigating history, sociology, and political economy. "In the course of getting these literatures to speak to each other, all of a sudden my vision of what causality is completely changed," Wallace said. He found that as China's post-Mao economy opened up to direct foreign investment, it shifted from subsistence agriculture to vertically integrated poultry and hog farming for commodity export. Between 1985 and 2000, skyrocketing chicken and duck production combined with a globally unprecedented migration of people from China's rural areas to the cities to create the perfect epidemiological storm. "The social sciences are utterly critical to understand how things evolve at the molecular level," he said.

Following the money changed Wallace's concept of what a disease hot spot is. If we paid as much attention to the entities that fund deforestation and highly pathogenic farming methods as we do to the outbreak zone, we would have to see the international centers of finance like London, Hong Kong, and New York City as viral epicenters too. "Hong Kong had been painted as a victim in this moralistic story, but it was also the source by
Wallace’s discovery that macroeconomics could shape microbiology was both a breakthrough and the beginning of the end of his academic career. He had applied for a tenure-track position in the geography department at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, but was hired in 2008 on a contractual basis instead. He suspected this was due to a factional dispute within the department, and he felt marginalized by his colleagues when he arrived. He had also started a blog, Farming Pathogens, and when the swine flu emerged in 2009, Wallace wrote about who was to blame. “When you start speaking out at Minnesota, which is an agricultural shop, and you blame agribusiness for the emergence of a pandemic, you’re not going to get support,” Wallace said. His one-year contract was not renewed, and he was given a token visiting scholar position. “They dumped my body at the Institute for Global Studies. I had no money and no office, basically just access to the library. So I got the message.”

Wallace spent the next few years bitter and angry. He was also broke, living off food stamps and unemployment insurance. He and his wife had gotten divorced. The weeks when his son stayed with him, he’d eat OK; when he was solo, not so much. Eventually he got a job making sandwiches at a deli in St. Paul. Wallace had also written enough blog posts that he could shop around a book of essays, which became Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Influenza, Agribusiness, and the Nature of Science, published in 2016 by Monthly Review Press.

“His depth of ecological understanding was just astounding, and he managed to bring it together with epidemiology and social science in amazing ways,” said John Bellamy Foster, the editor of Monthly Review, a professor of sociology at the University of Oregon, and the author of Marx’s Ecology. “One of the problems on the left, like everywhere else, was that issues of nature and science were separate from social science and history. Biology was an issue for biologists, not for social scientists. Rob’s work teaches us to put these together and make sense of what’s going on.”

While Wallace’s harrowing predictions in Big Farms Make Big Flu might have seemed alarmist in 2016, today, in the midst of a pandemic, they look prophetic.
in 2016, today, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, they look prophetic. As Wallace’s star has risen over the past year and a half, the book has been reprinted in Spanish and Italian, and he’s been interviewed by media outlets in India, Brazil, and Germany. “His work is irresistible,” Foster said, “because we are facing these growing epidemiological and economic crises, and Rob’s analysis is really the only realistic lens to understand the problem. His critique is now a common ground for critical intellectuals around the world. And it’s happened very fast.”

Wallace’s move from studying the genetic sequencing of viruses to analyzing their origins is a matter not just of conviction but of necessity. Once a deadly virus emerges, “the horse has left the barn,” he is fond of saying. This is where the infamous Wuhan “wet market” enters the picture, which Wallace emphasizes must be understood as part of a web of economic, political, and ecological relations. When China’s farms industrialized, many small farmers sought to become purveyors of wild food. As big farms took up more and more land, the small farmers were forced to raise or hunt animals closer to or within the forests where the most exotic pathogens might reside. Say, in a bat cave.

Wallace’s personal theory is that Covid-19 “emerged along the increasingly industrialized wild animal commodity chain from hinterlands and border towns as far south and west as Yunnan. On the last leg of its domestic tour, the virus made its way to Wuhan by truck or plane and then the world,” he wrote in May. And while southern China has been ground zero for several outbreaks, because of the country’s unique path to development in the late 20th century, and the Chinese government is not without blame, Wallace notes that the same thing could—and often does—happen elsewhere. Pandemics are just one symptom of a broader ecological sickness: a “rift” in the planet’s social metabolism that occurs when economic abstractions are treated as more real than ecological limits, to borrow the Marxist framework pioneered by ecosocialist theorists like Foster and expanded by Wallace.

This rift between ecology and the economy runs parallel with the growing political divide between urban and rural, Wallace said. Early in the pandemic, his organization, the Agroecology and Rural Economics Research Corps, launched an international collective called Pandemic Re-

We’re getting right back on track to what brought us here, except next time it could be a pathogen that emerges to kill a billion people.”

—Rob Wallace

search for the People, focusing on “the needs of everyday people most immediately affected” by Covid-19. Many of America’s farmers, for example, have been in decades-long exploitative contractural relationships with agribusiness corporations. In Minnesota, they’re in such dire straits that it has led to an epidemic of suicides.

“We’re trying to bridge gaps and signal that their plight matters,” Wallace said. “It requires a respect for people who don’t have degrees at the end of their names but have a profound understanding of the systems you’re looking at.” It’s difficult to argue with the notion that any movement or coalition capable of loosening the grip of agribusiness corporations would have to address this fracture between the city and the hinterland. Such a movement, he continued, would seek to deliver on the slogan from Charles Booker’s 2020 Democratic primary campaign for the Kentucky Senate: “From the hood to the holler.” Or, to widen the scope, “From the South Side of Chicago to South America,” as Wallace wrote in a recent Patreon dispatch, once again reminding us that the pandemic is “over” only for a tiny minority of people on the planet.

The alternative is agroecology, which is simultaneously a science, an agricultural practice, and a radical anti-capitalist movement with roots in Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement and the international peasant alliance La Via Campesina. Wallace defines an agroecological system as one that is “tied to the state of the surrounding landscape from which resources are continually drawn (and returned).” The way out, then, is not so much to create a new world, or to escape into space like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk seem to be planning, but “more along the lines of coming back to earth.”

Wallace is now at work on a book of essays called Revolution Space: Adventures Outside Capitalist Science, which will extend beyond the natural and social sciences to incorporate the humanities, most notably ancient mythology. Toward the end of our conversation, he took off his glasses and leaned over the table to show me the inscription—“Epimethean Vision”—printed in white letters on the inside of his lens. It’s become something of a life mantra for Wallace: You have to look back to see what’s coming. “Foresight is important, but you need hindsight—not to go back to some prelapsarian fantasy, but to draw the lessons that happened previously so you don’t do it again,” he explained. “We’re getting right back on track to what brought us here, except next time it could be a pathogen that emerges to kill a billion people.”

While he acknowledges that cynicism is an “occupational hazard,” Wallace’s work on Covid-19 has brought him more acolytes than detractors. “I’ve found when systems are in crisis, there is room for weirdos like me,” he said. Like the archetypal outsider scientist at the beginning of a disaster movie, Wallace has struggled to be heard. But by the third act, what once seemed like doomsday prophecy could become the basis for recovery. “If I’ve arisen in this historical moment, it’s because I was thrown aside in such a way that I landed in a realm that forced me to become a different scientist,” Wallace said. “I went through the hellfire of ostracization and marginalization. It’s true, I don’t want to go there ever again. But I also understand that one can say what’s necessary to say and still survive another day.”
BERNIE SANDERS DOES NOT WANT TO BE MISSED FOR AN OPTIMIST. “I’m a glass-half-empty kind of guy,” he grumbles, as he works his way through the stacks of budget documents that are strewn across the desk in his spartan office on the third floor of a 123-year-old red-brick building on the north end of downtown Burlington. That’s the image he’s fashioned for himself across five decades of political campaigning, and he’s comfortable with it. But the thing is, for all his genuine cynicism about the political and governing mechanisms he has long decried as corrupt, Sanders keeps erring on the side of what the writer Rebecca Solnit refers to as “hope in the dark.” He’s willing to take chances in order to push the boundaries of the possible: to run for and secure a seat in the US Senate as an independent, to bid for the presidency as a democratic socialist, to propose a political revolution. So it shouldn’t come as a surprise that—from his recently acquired position of prominence and power as chair of the Senate Budget Committee—Sanders has launched a new campaign to achieve “the most progressive moment since the New Deal.”

For Sanders, this is an urgent mission that is about much more than the proposals outlined in the budget plan he joined Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer in outlining on August 9. It is a necessary struggle to address the simmering frustration with politics as usual that Donald Trump and his Republican allies have exploited to advance an antidemocratic and increasingly authoritarian agenda.

“What we are trying to do is bring forth transformative legislation to deal with the structural crises that have impacted the lives of working people for a long, long time,” Sanders says. “Whether it is child care, whether it’s paid family and medical leave, whether it’s higher education, whether it is housing, whether it’s home health care—we’re an aging pop-

ulation; people would prefer to get their care at home—whether it is expanding Medicare to take care of dental and eye-glasses and hearing aids, what we are trying to do is show people that government is prepared to respond to their needs.”

That’s an echo of the big-government-can-do-big-good message that Sanders has carried for the past five decades through all of his campaigns. Yet now, for the outsider who has become a somewhat uncomfortable insider, the message has found its moment. He is heading to the White House to consult with President Joe Biden about strategy. He is taking on what Politico describes as “a central role in the Democratic caucus” of a chamber where critics once dismissed him as a left-wing scold. He is appearing with Schumer to declare, not from the sidelines anymore but from the eye of the media maelstrom, that “the wealthy and large corporations are going to start paying their fair share of taxes, so that we can protect the working families of this country.”

Bernie Sanders hasn’t changed—amid the budget documents arrayed across his desk in the old Masonic Tem-
Bernie Sanders hasn’t changed; Washington has. Suddenly, his “radical” ideas are being taken seriously by mainstream Democrats.

When I spent time with Sanders in Burlington in July, as he was busy building support for a budget plan, the senator was making calls and receiving them at a daunting rate. From Cabinet members and progressive allies in the movements he has always aligned with. From White House aides and moderate senators who needed just a bit more cajoling. He was surrounded by spreadsheets, priority lists, and policy proposals, yet he did not seem harried. To the extent that this hyperactive 79-year-old can be calm, he was. Or, at the least, focused.

Sanders recognizes that he can define only so much of the process. He was angling for a $6 trillion budget plan, and what he ended up with is a $3.5 trillion package. But that’s still, as the senator says, “a big deal.” The plan anticipates funding to expand Medicare, federal paid family and medical leave protections, and major investments in child care, including an extension of the groundbreaking child tax credit that was included in the American Rescue Plan; to reduce the cost of higher education and make community college free; to develop initiatives to reduce reliance on fossil fuels; and to return to old-school progressive taxation that really does “tax the rich.” Sanders ally Ro Khanna, the Democratic representative from Silicon Valley, says that if anything akin to this budget is adopted, “it will be a historic shift in how we view the role of government.”

That’s what Sanders is counting on—not just for the purposes of budgeting but for the future of American democracy.

“Why it is imperative that we address these issues today is not only because of the issues themselves—because families should not have to spend a huge proportion of their income on child care or sending their kid to college—but because we have got to address the reality that a very significant and growing number of Americans no longer have faith that their government is concerned about their needs,” says the senator. “This takes us to the whole threat of Trumpism and the attacks on democracy. If you are a worker who is working for lower wages today than you did 20 years ago, if you can’t afford to send your kid to college, etc., and if you see the very, very richest people in this country becoming phenomenally rich, you are asking yourself, ‘Who controls the government, and does the government care about my suffering and the problems of my family?’”

Sanders argues that restoring faith in government as a force for good is the most effective way to counter threats to democracy. The senator, who has opened up more and more in recent years about his own family’s history as Jews who fled Europe but lost most of their relatives in the Holocaust, reads a lot these days about the rise of fascism in pre–World War II Europe, and he is highly engaged with conversations about contemporary threats to democracy. This is not just a reaction to what happened on January 6, when Trump incited an insurrection by supporters of his effort to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. It is a concern Sanders has been speaking to with increasing urgency over the past several years.

Sanders devoted much of his speech at the 2020 Democratic National Convention to the topic. “At its most basic, this election is about preserving our democracy,” he said. “I and my family, and many of yours, know the insidious way authoritarianism destroys democracy, decency, and humanity. As long as I am here, I will work with progressives, with moderates, and, yes, with conservatives to preserve this nation from a threat that so many of our heroes fought and died to defeat.”

Almost a year later, on a summer afternoon in Burlington, I ask Sanders about a reference he made in that speech to Trump refusing to leave office and about even blunter expressions of concern he had made in conversations we had in the fall of 2020.

“If you recall, I came pretty close to predicting exactly what Trump would do in terms of his response to the election,” he says. “I asked people to think about whether he was going to accept defeat and say, ‘Oh, gee whiz, good campaign. Congratulations, Joe. How can I help you?’ That wasn’t going to happen.” And, of course, it didn’t.

Since January 6, Trump has doubled down on his false narratives about the election, and his allies in legislatures across the country have
made an ongoing assault on democracy central to their political project. “I take this threat of authoritarianism and violence very, very seriously,” Sanders says. “I don’t think that January 6th is a one-time situation. We’re seeing the growth of militias, and...even in rhetoric, the talking about violence from Trump on down.”

Sanders voted to convict Trump of high crimes and misdemeanors—twice—and has evolved into an ardent supporter of efforts to overturn the filibuster in order to pass the democracy-defending For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. Those reforms are necessary, he says, to preserve democracy. But so, too, he argues, is the proposition that government can solve seemingly intractable problems and make the lives of working-class people dramatically better.

“If we do not restore faith on the part of the American people in their government, that we see their pain and we respond to that pain, that we have the courage to take on powerful special interests—if we do not do that, more and more people are going to drift toward conspiracy theories, authoritarianism, and even violence,” Sanders explains. “So I think that this is a pivotal moment in American history.”

Put that way, the responsibility is a daunting one. But Sanders got comfortable with daunting tasks a long time ago.

The Brooklyn expatriate mounted his first campaign for elected office—an audacious bid on the ballot line of a radical third party for the Senate seat he would eventually win in 2006—50 years ago next January. And he has never stopped campaigning. A willingness to take defeats as well as victories, along with a refusal to abandon his democratic socialist faith in the transformative power of a government that is harnessed in the service of humanity, has led election rivals and media commentators to portray Sanders as a gadfly. Yet the thing that political partisans and pundits often miss is the extent to which he has proven himself as a politician and a legislator.

As an independent member of the House from 1991 to 2007, and as a senator since then, Sanders earned a reputation for forging left-right coalitions and for masterfully amending pieces of legislation. He has shown a skill for leveraging committee chairmanships to achieve major goals. He did so during Barack Obama’s presidency when, as chair of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, he led a successful bipartisan effort to strengthen the VA health care system by authorizing 27 new medical facilities and providing $5 billion to hire more doctors and nurses to care for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And he has continued to do so since he took over as chair of the Senate Budget Committee in January.

When I interviewed Schumer recently, he praised Sanders for his role in passing the $1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan using the Senate’s arcane reconciliation process, which allows spending measures to advance without being blocked by a filibuster. Schumer, who relied on Sanders in the relief act fight and who will again rely on him if and when reconciliation is used to approve the budget, recognizes the Vermonter as an essential ally. “I have always believed that government is the answer, and that I share with...Bernie,” he says, echoing Sanders on the vital importance of making government work in this turbulent time. “I believe that democracy is at risk, and we cannot fail.”

“This democracy is at risk,” Schumer adds. “But if we show people that the American dream is still alive—and the Biden plan does that in many very significant ways—we can restore and improve it.”

It sounds like Schumer gets it. Does Biden?

When I ask Sanders that question in Burlington, he doesn’t hesitate. “Yes! Interestingly enough, I think he does,” Sanders replies. “When he talks about the competition between democracy and authoritarianism all over the world, I think he is talking about that. I do believe he understands this.” The challenge, of course, is to move from understanding to action. “It’s not enough to talk about it. You’ve got to act.”

That’s where Sanders comes in. He is already campaigning for the president’s new budget in ways that Biden and Schumer cannot. In his bids for president, Sanders did not just build a name for himself, as most candidates do; he built a movement that pushed progressive ideas about governing to the forefront. To a far greater extent than any campaigns since Ronald Reagan’s in 1976 and 1980, Sanders’s campaigns transformed the way people think about government. While Reagan convinced a great many Americans that “government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem,” Sanders convinced a great many Americans—especially younger ones—that Reagan was wrong. “There’s been a real change in how people think about government,” says the law professor and author Jennifer Taub, “and Bernie was a part of that.”

(continued on page 27)
How to Be a Charismatic Follower


BY MARGARET BURNHAM
AFTER THE 1963 MARCH ON WASHINGTON IN AUGUST AND THE CHURCH BOMBING IN BIRMINGHAM IN SEPTEMBER, I KNEW THAT AT THAT PARTICULAR MOMENT WHAT I, THEN A COLLEGE STUDENT, NEEDED TO LEARN WOULD NOT COME IN A COLLEGE COURSE. LATER THAT FALL, I ATTENDED A MEETING IN HARLEM WHERE THREE YOUNG MEN, IVANHOE DONALDSON, CHARLES COBB, AND BOB MOSES, WERE DESCRIBING THEIR PROGRAMS IN MISSISSIPPI AND THEIR PLAN TO INVITE COLLEGE STUDENTS TO JOIN THEM IN THE SUMMER OF 1964. THEY WERE STAFFERS WITH THE STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE (SNCC). AS THEY CONCLUDED THE TALK, I MADE MY WAY TO THE FRONT OF THE ROOM AND ASKED BOB WHETHER I COULD HELP. HE “HIRED” ME ON THE SPOT, AND A FEW WEEKS LATER, AFTER A LONG BUS RIDE, I WAS GLUED TO A TYPewriter AT THE FREEDOM SUMMER OFFICE IN JACKSON, MISS.

IN TELLING THIS PERSONAL ANECDOTE, I VIOLATE WHAT BOB TAUGHT US—NOT DIDACTICALLY BUT BY HIS EXAMPLE: THE FIRST-PERSON SINGULAR PRONOUN, A DANGEROUS THING, SHOULD BE USED SPARINGLY BY THOSE WHO SEEK TO BREAK THE DEAFENING SILENCE OF THE SUBORDINATED.

THE LIFE OF ROBERT PARRIS MOSES IS THE STUFF OF MYTH, TOLD IN SCORES OF BOOKS, FILMS, AND ARCHIVES AND CROWNED WITH A MACARTHUR “GENIUS” AWARD. PERHAPS LESS WELL-REHEARSED IS WHAT BOB IMPARTED TO THOSE OF US WHO WORKED WITH HIM ABOUT HOW TO MOVE AROUND IN COMMUNITIES THAT WERE NOT OURS BUT WERE OF US, HOW TO LEARN FROM THE UNSchooled, HOW TO BE A CHARISMATiC FOLLOWER RATHER THAN AN ACCLAIMED LEADER. INDUCTED INTO THE MOVEMENT WHEN HE ATTENDED SNCC’S FOUNDING MEETING AT SHAW UNIVERSITY IN APRIL 1960, BOB WAS SENT TO MISSISSIPPI THE FOLLOWING AUGUST BY FORMER NAACP FIELD SECRETARY ELLA BAKER TO SCOUT OUT PROSPECTS FOR MOVEMENT-BUILDING IN THE DEEP SOUTH. AT THAT POINT THE SIT-INS HAD HIT THE UPPER SOUTH; BOB AND OTHER SNCC FIELD REPRESENTATIVES WERE SENT DOWN TO TEST THE WATERS IN THE CONFEDERATE STRONGHOLDS.

Baker’s longtime NAACP contacts in Mississippi—Amzie Moore in Cleveland and C.C. Bryant in McComb—welcomed Bob into their state. Moore told Bob that integrated hamburger stands were one thing, but what was really on their minds was voter registration. In July 1961, Bryant’s place in McComb became, in effect, the first SNCC headquarters in the state. Terrorism and federal neglect ensued, toughening but not breaking Bob, and convincing him and his partners that only an influx of outside agitators could push Mississippi’s obscene story beyond its borders. SNCC joined forces with the Mississippi NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to launch the 1964 Freedom Summer Project, bringing students from all over the country into the state to set up schools, take people to the polls, and report on the near-servitude prevailing in the state’s colored quarters and cotton rows. While 17,000 people attempted to sign up, Mississippi registered just 1,600 Black voters that summer. But the word was out; Freedom Summer opened up the state, emboldening local leaders who brought fresh organizing practices that favored mass meetings over the Robert’s Rules of Order-style NAACP branch meetings, and found in freedom songs a message as compelling as the de rigueur Sunday sermon.

At the tail end of that summer, bus-loads of Mississippians, members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, headed to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, intent on confronting their state’s all-white delegation and the nation with the “other” Mississippi—the nonvoting 42 percent of the state descended from slavery. To the Democratic Party leadership’s offer of two at-large seats, the MFDP, which sought to replace the state’s all-white delegation, retorted, “No, thanks.” They got back on the bus for the long ride back to Jackson.

Bob was not obviously destined to become one of our country’s most Creative civil rights leaders. At that time, the aesthetic of Black political leadership required voice, and Bob’s was small and quiet. Preferred was an announced religiosity; Bob’s was small and quiet. Sizable egos were rewarded, and again,
Bob’s was small and quiet. It was leadership as performance, meant to convey authenticity, and Bob eschewed performance.

Many brilliant men matched their personas to these familiar scripts. One can see them in the front rows of marches and parades, dating as far back as W.E.B. Du Bois, walking in hand at the Negro Silent Protest Parade of 1917, and coming around the second half of the century with the Selma-to-Montgomery march. The contributions of these gifted men are unassailable, but Bob took a different road. He stayed steady in his own quiet skin, and rather than lead the march, he chose to heed the leaders he met in the back roads of Mississippi. By leading from a place of quiet, Bob paved the way for hundreds to find the leader within themselves—especially women.

Bob was charismatic, all right. His intense eyes held those of his audience, whether of one or a hundred, and he spoke in a plain, straightforward way that illuminated his unsettling insights and made the listener feel privileged to be in that moment. It wasn’t an eloquent voice in the traditional sense, but it was probing and dialogical. Harlem could be detected, always, when Bob spoke. Although many of us from elsewhere brought some of the Southern song into our speech, Bob did not. New York never left him. And his thoughts were measured, clear, and direct. He instructed without appearing to do so, struggling always to find consensus, disdaining the postures and presumptions of a teacher, and redefining how radicals who were from elsewhere engaged with the communities where they worked and lived. Rejecting the Black spokesman model, Bob believed that what was important was not what you, the organizer, said, but rather how you helped the people you were working with say what they needed to say.

Bob wasn’t under any illusion that local people possessed unique virtues or discernment on account of their status. He did perceive, however, that political empowerment would come only by subverting the old stratifiers and creating new sources of authority. A few messianic leaders could never remake the world; nor could we even properly interrogate the world and locate the space to imagine a new one unless we made a clean break from first-person singular forms of leadership. We needed to build from below, to center history’s outsiders—the subaltern—and, in the process, we needed to disassemble the masculinist formulas that had for so long dominated Black politics.

But for Bob’s leadership practice, the nation would never have heard Fannie Lou Hamer’s extraordinary speech at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, known as “I Question America.” There were Black professionals in the MFDP delegation, but it was Bob’s voice, in the moment and over the years, that insisted on Hamer’s. It would be the first time a sharecropper addressed her country. Her speech was prophetic and transgressively non-feminine. Hamer was neither pretty nor polite, neither the girlfriend nor the mother—but rather a commanding figure of her own making. She spoke in a vernacular that was familiar to every Southerner in the country: for white people it was “the help,” delivering a major policy message; and for Black folk, their neighbor was there for them. That speech was on time and about time: for Black women, and for sharecroppers. It ushered in alternative conceptions of gender, race, and political power that would, eventually, unsettle the old norms.

Bob was 31 when in 1966, at the height of the Vietnam War, he was drafted. With his wife, Janet, he departed for Tanzania. Many of us thought they would make their lives there, for it was a heady time on the continent and in Tanzania particularly, in the wake—we thought—of decolonization, at the epicenter of Ujamaa socialism, and at the heart of a Pan-Africanism that for Black Americans was culturally exhilarating and politically promising. Although in Africa they absorbed different ways of knowing that would sustain them through their lives, the family eventually came home when Jimmy Carter pardoned the 100,000 men who fled the US or hid within it. What drew Bob and Janet back here, to rejoin the legacy of their antecedents and reshape the destiny of their progeny, was not glory or the comforts of their native country but rather the oppressive burden of its unfinished business.

They settled in Cambridge, and Bob resumed his graduate...
studies in analytic philosophy at Harvard. Deeply influenced by Willard Van Orman Quine, with whom he had studied in the 1950s, Bob pursued the language and logic of mathematics. Classrooms intrigued Bob—yes, the rarefied seminar rooms at Harvard, but equally so those of the Cambridge neighborhood schools where his children were enrolled. He became a frequent visitor, checking in on the math education of his kids and their classmates. And because he sensed the stench of what he would come to call “sharecropper education” behind the racial chasm in math education in the People’s Republic of Cambridge, just as he had in Mississippi, Bob set out to interweave this local crisis and national politics.

Launched by Bob in 1982, the Algebra Project sought to foreground math students in the bottom quartile, working with them and their parents to demand equal, quality education.

That same year he received a MacArthur Foundation grant. He could have invested his prize in himself and returned to his formal studies. Undoubtedly, he would have become an influential and prominent theorist, with access to all the privileges and financial security of academic success. But once again, he took the road back home, planting his genius not in a university lecture hall but rather in that public school classroom.

As Bob built the Algebra Project, he perceived that its mission could not be fully realized without genuine youth engagement and leadership. Most organizations tuck their young people somewhere in the substrata, showcasing them on special occasions, and called it a day. But Bob, again bucking advice to the contrary, took a different road. He believed the project needed an equally effective and dynamic organization led by youth, and hence inspired current and former Algebra Project students to launch the Young People’s Project.

This humble man with the quiet voice led without seeming to in McComb, in the Delta, and in Atlantic City; sat at President Julius Nyerere’s table and then came back home; was destined to become a brilliant scholar but instead launched a movement to end sharecropper education and open our classroom doors—and then asked young people to step into them and create a new country. His, indeed, was the road well taken.

Now, just as he did on the campaign trail, Sanders must get people nodding their heads and saying, “Yeah, we can do that,” this time about a budget that proposes to meet human needs by taxing billionaires and multinational corporations. He won’t have to work alone; he’s got a growing cadre of allies in the House, and he’s earned the respect of influential centrists, such as Virginia Senator Mark Warner. The reconciliation project will still be challenging, as skeptical comments about the budget plan from Democratic senators like Arizona’s Kyrsten Sinema offer a reminder of how difficult it will be to maintain the unity that is required. But this is work for which Sanders remains uniquely well prepared. When he campaigned for the Democratic presidential nod in 2020, a Quinnipiac poll suggested that voters saw him as the most honest and forthright candidate. He retains a level of trust and personal popularity among people who don’t put a lot of faith in politicians.

One afternoon in Burlington, we took a walk through the city. Or, to be more precise, a series of stops. Sanders is a fast walker, but he was constantly stopped by locals and by visitors from Idaho and Colorado and Texas and other states across the country. They all knew who the senator was. They all felt they could approach him. They all wanted to express their gratitude.

“Thank you for taking on the corporations.”

“Thank you for talking about taxing the rich.”

“Thank you for telling the truth.”

“Thank you for being there for us.”

Block after block, until we got to the edge of downtown, Sanders stopped and talked for a moment, smiled for the selfies, and moved on. Sometimes he would say, “I’m going to need you. We’ve got some big fights ahead of us.” Invariably, the response was: “Tell us what we’ve got to do.”

The fierce loyalty of his supporters, and the openness to his message from Americans who might not have supported his presidential bids but whose respect he’s won, makes Sanders a powerful player in Washington. He is in a better position than anyone else in the Senate Democratic Caucus to argue the populist case for big budgets and bold governance. Democrats, including the president, know they need Sanders. That gives him leverage that he has never had before. But with that leverage comes responsibility. I covered Sanders as a presidential candidate, and I saw how hard he worked with activists across the country to build movements for economic and social and racial and climate justice. Now he’s campaigning to turn that movement politics into a governing agenda. It’s a different kind of pressure, a different level of stress, and for Sanders, who has always preferred grassroots campaigning to roaming the corridors of power, it’s not as fun. But this glass-half-empty guy is not about to miss the chance to pursue a new New Deal moment and, in so doing, to renew the promise of American democracy. “If you’re asking me was I born to be an inside-the-Beltway player, I was not. I would much prefer to speak to a rally of 25,000 people than get on the phone and talk to some of my colleagues. That’s true,” he says, as he leans into the next campaign. “But this is my job. This is where all my energy is at the moment. I’ve got to do it, and I will do it.”

Passing the torch: Moses saw equal access to learning—especially in mathematics—as crucial to ending what he called “sharecropper education.”

Sanders retains a level of trust and popularity among people who don’t put a lot of faith in politicians.
Lessons From a Centrist

What so many leading progressives learned from Senator Harry Reid.

BY EGIN HIGGINS
Lessons From a Journalist from New England.

Eoin Higgins is a journalist from New England.

Bloggers were having conference calls and access with the Senate leader.” —Ari Rabin-Havt

Ex work was the main industry in Searchlight, Nev., when Harry Mason Reid was born there in 1939. Only a few hundred people lived in the town, and with no nearby churches, Reid told me recently, the closest his family got to one was the pillowcase nailed to a wall in their home reading: “We can, we will, we must reelect Franklin Delano Roosevelt.”

“That was my religion until I left,” Reid said.

There was also no high school in Searchlight, so as a teen Reid moved to nearby Henderson—a relative metropolis with a few thousand residents. He went on to attend Southern Utah University, where he converted to Mormonism, and George Washington University Law School. Then he returned to Nevada and worked his way up the ranks of state politics, from Henderson city attorney to lieutenant governor to gaming chairman, before winning a seat in Congress in 1982. By 1986, Reid had won his first election to the Senate, where he would serve until his retirement in 2017.

Reid’s approach to politics was to be “more of an insider, behind-the-scenes player, which is what made him effective as leader,” said Rabin-Havt. The blunt but soft-spoken senator was no leftist: He backed the death penalty, wanted to overturn Roe v. Wade, and voted for the invasion of Iraq. But he balanced those positions with liberal stances on domestic social programs, especially Social Security, which he fiercely defended throughout his career.

Reid eventually climbed to the top of his caucus, taking over from Tom Daschle in the wake of the devastating 2004 election, when George W. Bush was reelected and the Republicans won both chambers of Congress.

In December 2004, just as he was assuming the leadership of the Senate Democrats, Reid decided to hire Rabin-Havt as his online communications director—not in spite of the young man’s leftist politics but because of them. On the surface, Reid seemed an unlikely person to reach out to Rabin-Havt. But at a time when many other Democrats and Washington experts thought the progressive movement a fringe oddity, Reid understood the potential power of the party’s left wing.
The importance of hiring an online strategist wasn’t obvious 17 years ago. There was no Twitter or YouTube, and Facebook was in its infancy. But Reid wanted to harness the growing left movement within the Democratic Party. Sick of the Iraq War and of losing to the GOP, progressive Democrats were becoming increasingly angry about their party’s centrism. Reid wanted to direct that energy against the Republicans, but to do so he had to reach the left where they were: the blogosphere.

Including Rabin-Havt in the Senate Democratic Policy and Communications Center, known as the “war room,” helped Reid mobilize the party’s progressive base to his advantage. Less than two years later, Reid attended the inaugural YearlyKos conference—later renamed Netroots Nation—sponsored by the liberal blog Daily Kos. It was a savvy move that sent a message to the party establishment that the online left needed to be taken seriously as part of the Democratic coalition. Rabin-Havt told me that nobody “in the caucus was willing to open up to the online left before.”

But not everyone was on board with Reid’s plan to attend the conference and embrace progressive bloggers. According to Rabin-Havt, some Reid staffers urged the senator to use the opportunity to stage a “Sister Souljah” moment and decry the party’s left. (At a Rainbow Coalition convention during the 1992 Democratic primaries, Bill Clinton denounced the presence of the rapper Sister Souljah, accusing her of inciting violence against white people.) Rabin-Havt said he was apoplectic: “I was like, ‘Guys, these are the people funding your fucking campaigns. Are you really going to tell them to fuck off? That’s crazy. You don’t go to somebody’s house to insult them.’”

Reid agreed with Rabin-Havt and gave a speech broadly aligning himself—and, by extension, the Senate Democratic Caucus—with the online left. The speech became a turning point, Rabin-Havt said. From then on, Reid was able to count on the support of influential lefty bloggers.

Two years later, when the Democrats took both houses of Congress, it was clear that the online strategy had worked—for both the Democrats and grassroots organizations like MoveOn, a political action committee that began as a series of e-mail petitions. As Rabin-Havt recounted, “In the 2006 election, MoveOn raised like $30 million. Tom Massie, who was at MoveOn at that point, became a major regular figure on Capitol Hill with access to members. It was like a total change in nature. Bloggers were having conference calls and access with the Senate leader.”

Reid’s approach to politics and personal relationships helped him win over the nascent online left, but it also earned him the trust of his staff. The former senator told me he knew that he could hire for experience, education, and intelligence—but not loyalty. Katz said Reid won her over when she was filling in for his Nevada press secretary. The senator was giving interviews, calling reporters, and having Katz read their phone numbers to him. She kept stumbling over the digits, and Reid turned to her and asked if she had a learning disability. Katz, who is dyslexic, replied that she did, and she recalled that she felt ashamed at that moment. But then Reid looked her in the eye and said, “You must have worked twice as hard as everyone else to get where you are.”

That endeared him to her forever, she told me, and showed the values he prioritized in his staff. “He didn’t want people who had everything given to them,” Katz said. “He wanted people who went through and fought hard like he did.”

Mari Urbina told me that Reid’s retail approach to politics taught her the power of organizing. She entered Reid’s office as a student fellow in the summer of 2008 and left seven years later as senior adviser on Latino and Asian affairs. “My job,” she said, “was to make sure we were understanding the push and pull of how, legislatively, we were showing up in the communities. That could be part of someone’s job, but that was my entire job.”

Today, Urbina uses those skills as managing director at Indivisible, one of the largest progressive grassroots organizations. Chief among the lessons she learned was the idea of the “outside fight” and the “inside fight”—the difference in tactics when it comes to working with community groups versus working within political institutions. Reid respected “the different needs and interests people had,” Urbina said, “whether it was a Democratic caucus or it was having respect for the folks on the outside who were fighting.”

During Urbina’s time with Reid, Nevada’s Hispanic population was a growing electoral force. The senator “always made time to meet with Latino groups in the state and nationally and developed a strong press operation to reach out to the Hispanic community,” former senior adviser Jose Parra wrote me in an e-mail. The commitment to immigration issues and Latino concerns was a change for Reid, who in 1993 said on the Senate floor that “no sane country” would offer birth-right citizenship to the children of undocumented immigrants. But as the demographics shifted in Nevada and the country, Reid committed himself to expanding the Democratic Party.
In 2010, Urbina watched Reid reach out to Hispanic groups and communities in his general election fight against Republican Sharron Angle. When Angle tried to use his support for immigrants against him, Reid embraced the attack, saying it showed, in his words, that he supported all Nevadans. By not waiving on his support for immigration reform during an election, he earned the trust of the state’s voters. Reid was reelected in a narrow 50.3 to 44.5 percent victory—proving the importance of working both within and outside political institutions to gain and hold power.

Even during that tough reelection fight, Reid wanted to mobilize the party’s left. In 2010, he hired Jentleson, an up-and-coming political operative, to help strengthen his relationship with the party’s grass roots. Jentleson told me that he expected the assignment would be a brief résumé-building experience. “I figured it was a great way to gain some experience, short-term gain, that he would lose, and I would probably go find some other job on the Hill,” Jentleson recalled. “But things turned out a little differently.”

Jentleson said he learned from Reid that politics can require taking hits in the short term in exchange for gains over the long haul. It was a strategy that Reid had perfected over his career. “That’s my philosophy about life,” Reid told me. “You can’t be afraid to lose.”

During the government shutdown in 2012, Republicans in the House, egged on by conservative senators like Ted Cruz, refused to compromise with the Democrats on a budget funding bill. It was an act of brinkmanship that led them straight into Reid, the Senate majority leader, who would not budge on demands from his constituents in Nevada and the Democratic Caucus. Reid wasn’t interested in hiring sycophants for his senior staff. Instead, he encouraged disagreement and wanted to hear from the different political groups vying for his attention—another example of how he welcomed a political strategy that embraced both the “inside fight” and the “outside fight.”

“Neither fight was a caricature,” said Urbina. “There was real relationship analysis, real power analysis; there was a real respect in understanding the different needs and interests people had.”

Shakir described the senator’s approach as “an old-school Democratic philosophy” based in the party’s New Deal era, when fighting for and being from the working class were seen as badges of honor. By hearing from members of his staff representing varied interest groups, Reid was able to consider the tactical advantages and disadvantages to his decisions both for his constituents in Nevada and the Democratic Caucus.

“Harry Reid essentially allowed us to kind of grow in our own directions,” Shakir said. “He wanted that. He was kind of like, ‘I like having people who can have ideological convictions and also have some differences of opinion between them.”

In 2015, as the primary fight between Sanders and Hillary Clinton began, Reid asked Shakir what he thought of the Vermont senator. Shakir replied that he thought Sanders would be “formidable” and could give Clinton a run for her money. “I remember [Reid] saying, ‘I agree with you,’” Shakir recalled. “He’s going to be a strong candidate.” A few months later, Sanders and his team reached out to recruit Shakir. Reid gave his blessing and promised to hold his job for him. “I’m on Harry Reid’s staff, essentially helping Bernie Sanders through the end of ’16 and ’17 with his knowledge and awareness,” Shakir said. “It gives you a sense of how Harry thought about this. He had a respect for Bernie Sanders.”

Reid and Sanders were already friendly, having worked together for years. Reid told me that Sanders was “as responsible for my success in the Senate as any other senator.”

“He helped me do some very terrific things for the country,” Reid said, referring to the inclusion of funding for community health centers in the Affordable Care Act—an addition that was done at Sanders’s behest.

Sanders would lose the primary to Clinton, who then lost to Donald Trump. Shakir went on to work for the ACLU in 2017 after Reid’s retirement, but he kept in touch with Sanders, introducing him to Rabin-Havt. Three years later, the trio reunited on the 2020 Sanders campaign; Jentleson joined Warren, who had already hired former Reid aide Kristen Orthman as her communications director.

With Democrats controlling Congress and the White House, Reid’s former staffers have attained influential political positions on the party’s left, and they’ve been able to use and pass on the lessons they learned in the senator’s office, both from Reid and from one another.

“I do still have a closeness with my colleagues from day one, because they helped train me and they helped make me,” Urbina said. “And I feel a lot of grateful for their insights and for their support and for the organizer that I am today.”
Web of Connections

Can one tell the story of a country through one family?

BY DAVID A. BELL

A popular song lyric from 1927 ran: “I’ve danced with a man, who’s danced with a girl, who’s danced with the Prince of Wales.” The poet Allen Ginsberg liked to boast that a line of three intermediate lovers connected him back to his idol, Walt Whitman. Well before the development of social media, the 1993 film Six Degrees of Separation made many of us aware of just how few steps it takes to connect you, or me, to millions of others around the globe.

Webs of human connection are an important subject for historians. Tracing out who people in the past interacted with—and how, and where, and when—can provide rich insights into the dynamics of their
societies. How rigid were the social structures? To what extent was preindustrial life really “undignified, stagnant, and vegetative,” to quote Karl Marx about India before the arrival of the British? Just as medical scientists can learn how the body functions by following radioactive isotopes as they move through the blood or tissues, so too can historians learn about societies by exploring the contacts and connections of ordinary individuals as they pass through life.

The study of human connections has been central to the rich current of scholarship called microhistory, especially as practiced by Italian historians such as Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni. In a key essay from 1979, they made the case for a “science of the lived” (scienza del tessuto) in which biographies written from below would yield “a history that is full of individuals and stories and is not of necessity a history of the great and the celebrated.” This approach is at the heart of Harvard historian Emma Rothschild’s captivating new book, An Infinite History.

As a starting point for this study of modern France, Rothschild chose, essentially at random, a woman who led a seemingly unremarkable life in a seemingly unremarkable town in the west-central part of the country in the 18th century: Marie Aymard, the illiterate daughter of a shopkeeper, who was born in Angoulême in 1713 and died there 77 years later. She married a furniture maker named Louis Ferrand in 1735 and had eight children, two of whom did not survive infancy. Louis left to work in the French West Indies in 1753 and died in Martinique several years later. In 1764, the couple’s surviving daughter, Françoise, married a tailor’s son named Etienne Allemand. Eighty-three people, mostly from the worlds of the trades and minor officialdom in Angoulême, signed the marriage contract.

Beginning with Marie Aymard and this marriage contract, Rothschild traces out webs of connection in both space and time. She first provides what amounts to a social MRI of Angoulême in 1764, concentrating on the economic strata of the contract’s signatories and illustrating their connections to the wider world, including especially France’s Caribbean colonies, which then formed the most important (and profitable) part of the country’s overseas empire. Rothschild then follows the family and their connections forward in time, through the French Revolution, the political and economic transformations of the 1800s, and into the early 20th century. One of Marie’s descendants was a woman who ran a wine shop and drinking establishment in Paris that counted Baudelaire, Manet, Courbet, and Nadar among its customers. There was also a banking heiress who married into the family of Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, the man who rebuilt Paris under Napoleon III. The best-known member of the clan was Charles Martial Allemand Lavigerie (1825–92): a Roman Catholic cardinal, primate of Africa, prolific author, antislavery campaigner, founder of the missionary order of the White Fathers, and fierce enemy of what he called, prefiguring the hostile modern usage, “Islamism.”

At times, Rothschild’s method seems almost impressionistic. As she writes: “The perspective of this micro-medium macro history has been to start with the most obvious and accessible evidence about individual lives, and to follow these lives wherever they lead.” Although she has historical arguments to advance—about France’s overseas expansion, the French Revolution, and the French economy—they have a secondary place in the book. What matters most is the voyage itself, as one piece of evidence leads serendipitously to another. In this lyrical Michelin Guide to a now-vanished Angoulême and its people, everything “is worth a detour.” Some critics might see this preference for the idiosyncrasies of her subject matter at the expense of an overall thesis as a shortcoming of An Infinite History, and perhaps of the micro-historical approach in general. It is better, perhaps, to see it as a welcome challenge to a profession that has long been infatuated with different varieties of social and cultural theory. It can sometimes be a good idea to let past individuals, as much as possible, speak for themselves, rather than force their messy, irregularly shaped lives into grids borrowed from the theoretical literature.

To what extent are the voices that Rothschild has searched for still audible? The evidence she draws on is often frustratingly fragmentary and sparse. She has accomplished prodigies of archival research, but while Cardinal Lavigerie generated masses of written material, most of his extended family left only occasional written traces. In just a handful of instances did Rothschild uncover personal correspondence or physical descriptions of the people she tracked. She might have found much more had she continued her explorations past World War I, but she had to stop somewhere. While not literally constituting an “infinite history,” the webs of connections in her book quickly expand far beyond the capacity of any single historian to map out.

The traces that Rothschild did find exist only because of the insistently intrusive bureaucracy of the early modern and modern French state. Even humble tradespeople crossed into its sights at many moments in their lives: not just at birth and death but when they married, paid taxes, sued one another, petitioned the government for relief, bought and sold property, enrolled in the army, or gained a position in the bureaucracy itself. An astonishing number of records of this sort have survived. Marie Aymard never wrote a letter in her own hand, but we still know from a legal document that in 1760 she owned two old wooden beds, decorated with worn green serge; two wardrobes; 12 plates; a square table with 10 chairs in bad condition; six tin spoons; six iron forks; and six sheets. In 1764, taking her debts into account, her total wealth amounted to negative 160 French pounds. It was not for nothing that Balzac memorably called the French state, in its Napoleonic incarnation, “the nosiest, most meticulous, most scribbling, red-tape mongering, list-making, controlling, verifying, cautious, and finally just the most cleaning-lady of administrations—past, present or future.” Although

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it was not Rothschild’s principal purpose to show just how true this statement was, the book does so nonetheless.

Rothschild also benefited, it should be noted, from a steadily expanding universe of French genealogical websites and from the efforts of French archives to put much of their genealogical content online (as historians of the country know, amateur genealogists constitute by far the heaviest users of many French archival collections). She only briefly mentions these sites, and her research methods, in the book, and she could have said much more about them and about the way the Internet has opened up new frontiers for microhistorical research.

Partly this might be because Rothschild, despite an engagingly informal prose style, appears to want to leave herself out of her book as much as possible. “The history of Marie Aymard and her family,” she notes, “is also my own journey,” but she never really elaborates on that statement. She attributes her choice of approach to an early encounter with Ginzburg and Poni’s writings on microhistory, but it would have been interesting to add something about why she chose to center her own approach so closely on families. An Infinite History, it’s worth noting, is actually the second of her family stories. Her previous book, The Inner Life of Empires, focused on a Scottish clan whose members spread across the globe in the 18th century as they served the British Empire. It seems at least somewhat pertinent that Rothschild herself belongs to one of the most fascinating and important families in European history: She is the great-great-great-granddaughter of Mayer Rothschild, founder of the banking dynasty.

Yet even if Rothschild does not wish to draw personal connections, those familiar with her long career will find many echoes of it in An Infinite History. Trained as an economic historian, she has written about the transformations in the American auto industry and about economic thought in the Enlightenment. Drawing on this background, she has studded An Infinite History with short, fascinating meditations on the nature of economic change in the 19th and 20th centuries. After noting that Marie Aymard’s most upwardly mobile descendants achieved their success without involving themselves in industrial capitalism, for example, she invokes “this unexplored continent of the semipublic, semiprivate, ever-expanding ‘service economy’: the economy in which most of us are now employed, and the large majority of individuals in the richest countries.” She also marvels at the astonishing shift in communication technologies that occurred between Aymard’s time, when news traveled on paper at the speed of horses and the wind, and that of Marie’s great-great-grandson the cardinal. He made brilliant use of the telegraph and illustrated newspapers to promote his humanitarian causes and did so, moreover, in what Rothschild terms “a new and even more modern way of being: a continuous self-expression, a relationship to hundreds of thousands of people; a universal network of humanitarian enterprise.” Rothschild does not put these insights together into a grand thesis statement about economic modernity, and clearly sees no need to do so.

Briton who has taught for many years at Harvard University, Rothschild is also something of a wanderer. In her acknowledgments, she relates that “this book was written in Palo Alto, Cambridge (England), Angoulême, Santeenetan, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Sabaudia and Rome.” (Obviously a pre-pandemic production!) And a fascination with overseas connections, above all in France’s colonial empire, permeates An Infinite History. Angoulême long had a reputation in France as the ultimate provincial town—the French Peoria, so to speak. Balzac satirically coined the verb se désangoulême to signify shaking off the somnolent shroud of dull provincial life. But even in the 18th century, Rothschild has found, a surprising number of the strands in Angoulême’s web of connections stretched all the way across the Atlantic Ocean.

The first of these strands in the book was woven by Marie Aymard’s husband, Louis Ferrand, who traveled to the island of Grenada, then a French colony, and reportedly acquired a sum of cash, several mules, and “a certain quantity of negroes” there. Marie tried to recover this wealth after Louis’s death but never succeeded. Several years later, her son Jean-Baptiste emigrated to the larger French colony of Saint-Domingue—present-day Haiti—where he set up a shop in the town of Le Cap that included a small waxworks museum with figures of George Washington and Britain’s King George III. The shop was destroyed when the town burned in 1793, during the Haitian Revolution. By 1795, Jean-Baptiste and his family were back in Angoulême, penniless refugees who would vainly petition the French government for compensation.

Other family members with ties to overseas colonies had slightly better luck. In 1832, after France extorted a massive reparations payment from the Haitian government in exchange for diplomatic recognition (the Haitians would keep paying it until 1947), four members of the family received token indemnities of 1,710 francs each. In the 19th century, another of Marie’s descendants spent several years in Tahiti as a pharmacist in the employ of the French Navy.

Some of the travelers Rothschild has discovered had impressively colorful stories. Louis Félix, born into slavery in Saint-Domingue in 1765 and freed soon afterward by his white owner and likely father, came to Angoulême by his adolescence and apprenticed to a goldsmith. During the French Revolution, he became a prominent municipal official, carrying out searches for insubordinate priests and pushing for the strict observation of revolutionary festivals and the new revolutionary calendar. In his official capacity, he also registered the birth of Marie’s youngest grandchild, the son of the Saint-Domingue refugees. Louis Félix married twice, the second time to a cousin of one of Marie’s sons-in-law, and died in Angoulême in 1851.

Strangest of all was Jean-Alexandre
Cazaud, the aspiring planter who hired Louis Ferrand to work for him in Grenada at a salary of 500 livres a year. Born in Guadeloupe in 1727, Cazaud came to Angoulême with his parents as a child, spent time as a dragoon officer in Bohemia, and in the 1750s began traveling between France and the West Indies. By 1761, he owned a plantation in Grenada, an island eventually seized by the British during the Seven Years War of 1756-63. Back in Europe, he gained a reputation as a writer, publishing works on sugar cane cultivation and winning an election to the Royal Society in London. The French revolutionary Mirabeau described one of his pamphlets as "the work of genius that has produced the revolution." In Paris in 1779, an enslaved man named Jean-Alexandre James won a suit for freedom against Cazaud on the grounds that France was free soil. In doing so, he confirmed an important legal precedent; Cazaud then tried and failed to have the man kidnapped. He had better success in having his own wife imprisoned during a matrimonial dispute. In 1782, he absconded to Rome with his daughter to avoid paying a large dowry to her estranged and allegedly violent husband. Cazaud spent his final years in England, styling himself the "Marquis de Casaux," and died there in 1796.

The extension of these webs overseas did not just have implications for the individuals who actually traveled abroad. The French overseas empire could not compare in extent and economic importance to the British, Spanish, and Portuguese ones, especially after the country's defeat in the Seven Years War, but it nonetheless generated extraordinary wealth that flowed back to France. The future revolutionary Pierre-Victor Malouet wrote of Saint-Domingue in 1785 (with some exaggeration): "Oh prodigy of industry! A space of earth equal to that enclosed in the park at Versailles produces more riches than half the Russian empire!" The fact that this "prodigy of industry" depended on the most brutal system of slave labor ever seen on the planet does not seem to have disturbed most of the French people who set out to make their fortunes in the Caribbean. It would take several more generations, and a moral revolution of sorts, for anti-slavery sentiment of the kind expressed by Cardinal Lavigerie to resonate deeply with the French population.

The wealth generated by overseas trade had made its effects felt in Angoulême much earlier. In 1775, the shop of a woman connected to the signatories of Françoise Ferrand's 1764 marriage contract included, in its inventory, wood from Brazil, alum from Smyrna, rice from Carolina, and chocolate, tea, and coffee from the French Caribbean—most of these things would have been virtually unknown in the town a century earlier. The wealth generated volatility, with abrupt shifts in prices and interest rates, financial scandals, and the opening up of new opportunities, such as the one that tempted Louis Ferrand to sail to Grenada. Rothschild notes how often the men and women of Angoulême were using the word "revolution," decades before 1789, to describe these episodes of sudden, sharp change. The century's economic volatility and its accompanying insecurity may not have caused the French Revolution, but she argues persuasively that it opened up mental and political horizons, making it easier to embrace a series of events that overturned much of the prevailing order.

Likewise, when the revolution did come, nearly all the men and women that Rothschild has tracked accepted it, and many profited from it, gaining new positions (as the former slave Louis Félix did) or purchasing lands confiscated from the church. One of Marie's grandsons left the priesthood during the revolution, married a woman from the former nobility, and soon afterward purchased a large estate. By the mid-19th century, many of the descendants of Marie and Louis, two poor artisans, belonged to the comfortable middle classes, and some had made it into the upper bourgeoisie.

As already noted, however, the rise of the Aymard-Ferrand family was not necessarily a story of the rise of capitalism, at least in its industrial variety. The family's members made their way up the social scale as civil servants, soldiers, lawyers, and bankers. And the most important source of their wealth in the 19th century was also the most traditional: landed property.

Marie's daughter Françoise, the bride of 1764, had 13 children, but thanks to the turmoil of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, in which so many young French men died fighting in far-off corners of Europe, five of the girls never
married. In the 1810s, these five daughters, using money diligently saved and invested by the family and taking out large mortgages, purchased a 10,000-square-foot property on the ramparts of Angoulême and transformed it into a boarding school. The school flourished for decades, and the property became the center of gravity for the large extended family (the future cardinal visited often). It eventually generated enough capital for another of Marie Aymard’s descendants to help fund the creation of an ambitious bank. That bank would eventually fail quite spectacularly in the late 19th century through mismanagement, but the owners remained wealthy and respected members of the haute bourgeoisie, with a grand Parisian residence and a villa in Arcachon.

In short—and this is the book’s most important historiographical contribution—the story of the Aymard-Ferrand family shows how even in the nonindustrial sectors and regions of a country notoriously slow to industrialize, an impressive degree of wealth creation and social mobility took place in the late 18th and 19th centuries. France was, in this lengthy period, a socially and economically dynamic country, and it should be no surprise that so many of its inhabitants embraced political movements—including revolutionary ones—that promised to remove many further barriers to advancement.

For all the insights it provides and the vivid sense it gives of successive generations, Rothschild’s impressionistic method does have some costs. The last third of her book lacks the satisfying heft of the first two-thirds—not surprisingly, since those cover a mere 30 years or so, and the remainder more than a century. Clearly, once Rothschild moved into the 1800s, the web of connections spinning out from Marie Aymard’s 23 grandchildren and scores of great-grandchildren simply became too extended and complex to follow comprehensively. As a result, unlike her treatment of the Revolution of 1789, many of the most important events of the 19th century, such as the Revolution of 1848 and France’s shattering defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, flit by almost unnoticed. So does the single event that probably did more to facilitate contacts between Angoulême and the wider world than any number of 18th-century sea voyages undertaken by the town’s residents: the coming of the railroad in 1852. A trip to Paris that would have taken days before the revolution now took just hours (today, by the TGV high-speed train, around two).

Readers of An Infinite History will also get little sense that Angoulême actually amounted to a small quasi-urban island in a vast sea of peasants. At least 80 percent of the French population still lived on the land back then (even as late as the 1930s, nearly half still did—France really was slow to industrialize). Towns like Angoulême depended on the rural population for rent paid to resident landowners (also, before the revolution, feudal dues). Peasants came to the town to buy goods, to use legal and administrative services, and to keep the town fed. The sights and sounds of Angoulême life, few of which made their way into the official sources that Rothschild draws on, would have included, on most days, peasants with carts trundling produce and livestock through the streets. Even the slow trains of the 1850s would have left Angoulême behind and emerged into farm fields within a few minutes of departure—as their faster successors do even today.

Of course, no history book can recreate the totality of past experience. Mid-20th-century European scholars did try to write so-called total histories, mostly of early modern European societies. But these attempts foundered on the shoals of source material that, like Rothschild’s, was both impossibly vast and frustratingly fragmentary. Paradoxically, it was this failure that led a subsequent generation of historians to experiment with microhistory, drastically reducing the scale of their observations so as to draw the fullest possible portraits of a single small town, a single family, a single life—as William Blake put it, “to see a World in a Grain of Sand.” It was this work that so impressed the young Emma Rothschild. Although there are things, inevitably, that An Infinite History has missed, the book still represents one of the most successful attempts to put Ginzburg and Poni’s “science of the lived” into action, connecting life to life to life, and by doing so illuminating what the Italian scholars called the “invisible structures in which living experience is articulated.” It is not the totality. But it is an illumination.
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Like the slapstick routines of Laurel and Hardy or the Three Stooges, Adam Curtis’s films revolve around a shtick. His métier is one of uncanny juxtapositions in sight and sound, united by droll narration and associative leaps—from topics as disparate as prescription drug abuse by America’s suburban housewives to the machinations of Saudi oil barons—to illustrate how they are all part of a larger scheme in the way the world is run. Curtis has developed this style not only because of the way it casts a spell over the viewer (the sound of his posh English accent, punctuated by images of street protest and ambient music, is a strange pleasure all its own) but because it allows him to tackle an issue that might otherwise seem invisible: how power works in society. Each of Curtis’s inquiries into power—whether he’s exploring the connected histories of public relations and psychiatry, the shared influences of neoconservatism and radical Islam, or the neo-Darwinist and libertarian roots of Silicon Valley—is framed as a journalistic endeavor, but his films are also essays that go where conventional documentary journalism cannot. His approach is crafted to engage with an idea that journalistic exposés could only dimly illuminate: the ways that modernity has created a populace of “little monsters” living lives of false freedom.

Curtis, of course, includes himself and his viewers in this braying horde, and the question that haunts his work is whether, in our age of atomization and rampant individualism, we’ve entered “strange days” in which freedom is just a more invidious kind of bondage. The ordinary human subject in his work is instead guided by “managers of perception,” leaders in public and private perches who help shape, at an almost molecular level, the bureaucracy of daily life. The complexity of modern society, he argues, has led to an era of illusory individualism in which those in power have created bulwarks against revolutionary energies that might subvert the status quo.

Curtis’s latest, Can’t Get You Out of My Head: An Emotional History of the Modern World, is perhaps his most ambitious, a six-part, eight-hour film that is vast and globe-trotting. Connecting stories as diverse as the travails of the Black Panther
Can’t Get You Out of My Head approaches the subject with a new lens. In the first episode, he explains that he wants to provide “an emotional history of what happened in the heads of all kinds of people” in the 20th century, to understand how “what you felt” became the driving force of our age. “To understand the present…you have to go back and see [how] hopes, dreams, and uncertainties inside people’s minds met the much older forces of power…that was decaying and desperate to keep its ascendancy.”

The mental makeup and conflicting desires of those possessed by power give him a road map through the 20th century.

Two figures bookend Curtis’s film—Jiang Qing and Tupac Shakur—and in their own ways they each help him return to some of his favorite bogeymen: the poisonous legacy of “radical individualism,” the subordination of radical politics into cultural expression and spectacle, the failure of mass revolution, and the rise and brutal victory of the managerial and surveillance state. In between this unlikely pair, we also meet Afeni Shakur, Tupac’s mother, whose story of momentary triumph against authority offers a glimmer of hope.

By choosing characters both well-known and marginal, Curtis offers us a history that is expansive but personal. His study of Jiang—the legacy of both her actions and her feelings—is a model for this approach. Born in 1914, Jiang was an actress and a revolutionary, and her ambition to succeed in both roles led her to believe, Curtis tells us, in “the power of her will to shape reality.” Through Jiang, Curtis turns to a set of historical avatars to chart the formation of what we now know as the status quo—which is to say, how the violence and failures of the 20th century led to a pacified and managed society. But he does so by looking past conventional Western examples to show us how the West’s experience of modernity was not all that different from China’s. The importance of a figure like Jiang in Curtis’s retelling of the 20th century is to highlight the interconnected nature of societal transformations, and to make clear that the burdens of stagnation and paralysis in the 21st century are shared globally.

Curtis charts Jiang’s rise from failed movie actress to engineer of the Cultural Revolution in the first three episodes. The ruthless ambition and bitter rivalries Jiang developed during her years in the Shanghai studio system defined her path in life, and she carried them to Yan’an when she joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a young revolutionary. These longstanding resentments had a tangible effect, Curtis argues, and it was her anger that helped ignite not just the violence of the Cultural Revolution but a shift in the country’s consciousness—one informed by a paranoia and repression that continues to this day. Curtis also fixates on the idea that Jiang was haunted, her mind clouded by a past rife with violence—one she was foreordained to reproduce because she could not imagine a world that did not center on the individual. We are introduced to her as she is released from a sanatorium in Moscow, where she’d been exiled for some time, and is called back to Beijing to support Mao in a moment of weakness. She aided her husband by reinventing the country’s film industry, turning old Chinese operas into propaganda. Curtis claims that her goal was to give the country a “giant melodrama” that would “work millions of people up into an intense frenzy” in order to smash the old “ideas that were still lodged in people’s heads and break through to a new kind of society.” Through these films, and with the help of the growing student movement in the Red Guard, Jiang agitated and mobilized an entire generation against her and Mao’s enemies, who were portrayed as the elites ruining the country. Yet she “had lost control” Curtis says, and the brutality of the ensuing Cultural Revolution traumatized the nation and informed the reactions of the Chinese government for nearly half a century.

After Mao’s death, Jiang failed to consolidate power and was deposed by Deng Xiaoping, who moved quickly to erase the past and chart a new path for the country, one in which “money would replace the old revolutionary dreams” and unleash “a kind of mass consumerism never seen before in the world.” Supported by Western banks that lent millions to both China and its rivals, Deng’s regime turned the country into a manufacturing hub for cheap consumer goods sold to Western nations. But despite his campaign to reorient the country
toward capital, the specter of revolution lived on, and Chinese leaders continue to stabilize the system through repression, creating the most oppressive surveillance apparatus in the world, through which the behavior of the citizenry is tracked and corrected with precision.

While Curtis's idea of China in the 20th century might map onto some commonly held beliefs, its overdetermined framing and reliance on the actions of a few obscures some of the more complicated questions about economy and ideology, instead conforming to a certain Western liberal consensus on the country. There is no discussion of the various political disputes in the CCP or the morphing policies and material conditions that animated the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. As is common in Curtis's histories, revolutionaries are a formless mass, not beset by contradictions and countervailing desires.

By sacrificing some of the details, though, Curtis is able to show how people all over the world have come to believe in the alienation due to the gravitational energies of influential individuals. His arguments can be dizzying, like the one he unspools in the third part of the series, “Money Changes Everything,” which looks at how the rise of fossil fuels and the petro-kingsdoms of the Middle East changed power relations around the world, leading not only to climate change but also to the weakening of organized labor in America’s coal country and the emergence of the opioid crisis. In turn, the manufacturing boom in post-Mao China produced cheap consumer goods at a scale never before seen in history, allowing the country to “take control” of the global economy and to facilitate another addiction in the West: debt, which Western societies like the US have accrued at a ferocious rate in their engagement with Chinese manufacturing. Through these two indulgences—debt and pharmaceuticals—Curtis suggests the American masses have entered a dream world that insulates them from the anxieties of the present. This impulse to sketch out the fantastical (but also often credible) interconnectedness of tragedies around the world is nothing new for Curtis, but with Jiang he applies a familiar narrative strategy on the largest possible scale. Yet its generalized application has the secondary effect of revealing how much his system, and the world as a whole, strains to remain coherent when we look at it from such a wide angle. Just as Jiang’s machinations influenced an entire country’s behavior, so too, in Curtis’s view, did the actions of Edward Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud and the subject of Curtis’s The Century of the Self, who used his uncle’s theories to invent the field of public relations in order to help rewire American public life toward rank consumerism. Likewise, in The Power of Nightmares, Curtis argues that neoconservatives in the US government—a group of elites inspired in part by the political philosopher Leo Strauss—helped unite the country against the supposed common enemy of radical Islam, supplying it with a bogeyman that would distract the people through fear, assuring that power would remain in the hands of these elites.

What Jiang, Bernays, and the neocons share, Curtis implies, is a noxious blend of ambition, disdain for the public, and an almost demonic possession by the lust for power, which allowed them to direct the currents of history and perhaps forestall radical change. Mapping this idea onto a planetary canvas with his new film, Curtis offers a chilling and sometimes convincing account of power’s ripples and afterlives, but like a computer image stretched to the point of pixelization, his larger portrait obscures more than it clarifies.

But something else gets lost in Curtis’s zealous focus on the callow elites who manipulate the masses. His sweeping claims about the “managers of perception” who run our world give off not only the stink of conspiracy but also that of condescension. The needs of ordinary citizens—whose deprivations, material and spiritual, form the basis of any political struggle—are absent. The problem with Curtis’s grand narratives is that we find so little resistance in them, so few moments when the masses feel like people. Every now and then, he does look at so-called regular people, but to be characters in his story, they must be extraordinary, even for a second, awakened from the false consciousness of our times—which is how he introduces us to the Shakur family.

Before we meet Tupac in the film, we meet his mother, Afeni Shakur. She was born in 1947 and grew up in North Carolina before moving to New York City as a teenager with her mother and sister to escape her abusive father. At a speech by Bobby Seale announcing the creation of a Black Panther chapter in New York, Afeni was inspired by his talk of “bringing change and order...to heal the wounds of slavery and Jim Crow.” Curtis begins her story after she has joined the Harlem chapter, changed her name, and become a committed Panther. He highlights her later explanation of what the Panthers meant: “There was now something I could do with all this aggression and all this fear... The Panther Party, for me at that time, clarified my situation. They took my rage and channeled it against ‘them’ instead of ‘us.’ They educated my mind and gave me direction.” Here again, feeling is the catalyst, and Curtis uses Afeni to demonstrate how the emotion of conviction can produce extraordinary moments. In Afeni’s case, it was her heroic battle against the police spies who attempted to destroy the Harlem chapter from within.

In April of 1969, Afeni and 20 other Panthers were arrested and charged with conspiracy to bomb police stations and other public places throughout the city. The charges could have resulted in a 300-year prison sentence, and Curtis presents the trial through archival clips and passages from Afeni’s memoir. Then pregnant with Tupac, she begins to take center stage in these episodes. During the trial, Afeni chose to represent herself, and it was her valiant self-defense that led not only to her acquittal but to that of the other Panthers as well.

The turning point came when Afeni cross-examined Ralph White, a police mole in the Panthers. In her questioning, Afeni got him to admit that he and two
other undercover agents had been behind many of the violent and illegal provocations that the Panthers were accused of. More than that, she got him to admit that he found the work of the Panthers “powerful,” “inspiring,” and “beautiful” and that he felt he’d betrayed the community by his actions. This confession devastated the state’s case against Afeni and her peers, and the jury soon declared them not guilty.

Curtis presents the trial of the Panther 21 and Afeni’s role in it with sympathy. Ordinary people, it turns out, can resist and even fight back against the state. He also finally gives us a more textured account of how those who are the subjects of the state’s manipulation can end up seeing through it and breaking free. But when Afeni leaves the stage, so too does Curtis’s sympathy, and we are stuck instead with hours of his frustration with her son Tupac, whose story represents the bastardization of the same revolutionary energies that inspired his mother.

Tupac, in Curtis’s presentation, is not all that different from a figure like Jiang. While he was, “on the surface, part of the age of the individual...he was one of the few in the 1980s who still believed in the power of grand stories to move people and to inspire them to change the world.” Like his mother, Tupac Shakur was inspired by the Panthers, and he sought to revive the fervor they’d engendered through political music that cast him as a revolutionary figure. Yet in doing this, Tupac made a mistake that so many of the revolutionaries in Curtis’s films make: “By moving radical politics into the world of culture, Tupac had also become part of the fairy-tale world because he helped keep the anger and the dissent sealed off from the real world of politics and power.”

Tupac’s failures and celebrity narcissism led to something more cataclysmic. With his death, Curtis finds that something else also expired around the same period: In place of Afeni’s era of Black solidarity came a divided community with “gangs that then turned on each other.” Again, we see a story in which Curtis frames an incisive critique about the loss of Black radicalism’s spirit in Tupac’s music, but with a view of Black American life that is told primarily through the actions of one person (and that rehearse some pretty racist tropes along the way).

Characters like Tupac are emblematic of another of Curtis’s fixations: In his reading of modern history, radicals are almost always ineffectual. They occasionally succeed, as Afeni did, but more often they pour their energies into culture rather than effecting change in the realm of hard power. Curtis also made this argument in 2016’s HyperNormalisation, in which he asserts that Patti Smith was among the “left-wingers who...dreamt of changing America through revolution [but] did nothing” and so “retreated” into the “abandoned buildings of [1970s] Manhattan” to make art and channel their dissent into emotional experience rather than collective action. For Curtis, it is not just the elites who have stifled collective politics, but also those faceless members of the left who got lazy and opted to go the route of mass culture to package their messages of change.

One can point to some of the many lapses in Curtis’s version of the left (at least in America): how it ignores a century of agitation, be it from the multiracial coalitions of the Popular Front (which did use culture as way to popularize a larger vision of social democracy), to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, to Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, to the Democratic Socialists of America and Black Lives Matter. In ignoring this history of ordinary people not only resisting but sometimes also changing their times, Curtis allows himself to boil down a more complex set of ideas and people into the simple theory that rules much of his work: The reason the world hasn’t changed in a century is that we have run out of good stories to tell.

Curtis has twice appeared on the podcast Chapo Trap House, and both times he circled around a question that he likes to pose to liberals and the left: Do you really want change, or “do you just want things to change a little bit? Do you just want the banks to be a little bit nicer, say, for people to be a little more respectful of each other’s identities?” He wonders if many well-intentioned people really just want to “carry on living in [their] nice world,” whose unjust conditions they will only “tinker with,” not change. He goes on to say:

There are millions of people out there who do want change. And the key thing is, they feel they’ve got nothing to lose. You might have lots to lose, but they feel they’ve got absolutely nothing to lose. But at the moment, they’re being led by the right. So things won’t remain the same, but society may go off in ways that you really don’t want.

Curtis delivered this monologue after the release of HyperNormalisation, and it certainly has some truth to it. There is a hunger for real, structural change around the Western world in the face of what mostly feels like minor polite reform. But it also captures precisely what is so frustrating about Curtis’s idea of change. It is unclear who he thinks the agents of a good kind of change are. The riddle of his politics looms over his work and his thesis that what changes the world is a good story. An interview he gave to Film Comment in 2012 is often used as a smoking gun, the evidence that all Curtis skeptics need to understand who he really is. In it, he rebuffs the notion that he is of the left and says that in The Century of the Self, he argues “something very close to a neo-conservative position,” because he thinks “with the rise of individualism, you tend to get the corrosion of the other idea of social bonds and communal networks, because everyone is on their own.”

To cast Curtis as a conservative might seem like a convenient skeleton key. It can be easy to see his railing against the rise of radical individualism as a desire to go back to the bonds of family, work, and community. But his politics have always had a contradictory and contrarian air. In the interviews he’s given for Can’t Get You Out of My Head, he’s praised Black Lives Matter and the presidential candidate Marianne Williamson for speaking in “big, historical dimensions” about the rotten structures that the United States is built on. He also makes clear that he is suspicious of tech overlords, capitalism, and rampant inequality.

Yet even if Curtis identifies the obvious enemies of progress, he never clarifies what would satisfy the needs of the working people he says he casts his lot with—health care, enfranchisement, and the other boring things he never examines. Instead, the mystifications of a big story are what
No one should pay for a coronavirus test. This is not a moral judgment but a statement of fact; the US government has decreed it so. Insurers are supposed to cover the tests, at no cost to the consumer. But hospitals recognized an opportunity for profit. The prestigious Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan billed one patient $3,358 for a test in March, The New York Times reported. Northwell Health, the nonprofit that operates the hospital, justified the bill as a necessity: Its emergency room care is simply that good, it claimed. The hospital billed another family $39,314 for 12 tests.

The Lenox Hill bills are shocking not just because they are so high but because they should not exist. They violate a principle that has come to the fore during the pandemic: that the public’s health transcends all other concerns, including the profit margins of hospitals and insurers. The tests should be and are free. The same for the Covid vaccines; in many cases, they are administered by local, state, or federal agencies at sites set up for this purpose for the sole benefit of the public. For now, at least, a world of health care that’s very different from the one we’re used to is not only possible but exists.

What the pandemic reminds us is that
this alternative world has long been possible. Yet we are still mired in a system that extracts profits from people’s health and puts thousands of families and individuals into crippling debt. In their new book, Inflamed, Rupa Marya and Raj Patel chart the human costs of this for-profit health system and look beyond it to what they call “colonial capitalism,” the root system of our moribund world. They also argue for an alternative: a society informed by “deep medicine,” which can heal what’s gone so terribly wrong. Comprehensive in scope, Inflamed moves from environmental pollution to debt to misogyny to settler colonialism and empire, arguing that this vast array of maladies are all consequences of capitalism.

When something upsets our ecosystems, whether it’s pollution or a pandemic, the consequences show up in our bodies, the authors write. “So: salmon are to rivers as hearts are to blood vessels. They both function as nutrient pumps in systems of circulation.”

Our inflamed condition is ultimately, Marya and Patel argue, a political one. Politics has failed us by not creating a society that seeks to increase the health—physical, emotional, financial—of all its members. As Renee Hsia, a professor of emergency medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, told the Times, Lenox Hill’s billing practices are what to “expect from a market-oriented approach to health care. It’s the behavior our laws have incentivized.” If the public is a kind of body, it needs a cure: a politics that can confront and replace our current market-based approach.

To tell their story, Marya and Patel reject the standard military analogies for the immune system. Inflammation, they argue, is a sign that the body is trying to heal itself—not so much that it is under attack but that it is ailing from within. While they indulge in this metaphor perhaps a bit too much, they aren’t comparing contemporary life to, say, cancer. Rather, they’re asserting that capitalism forces people to live in a way that causes higher rates of illnesses like cancer—and that alternatives have always existed.

Debt, the authors note, is a tool of the colonizer. It is the means by which European governments accumulated the funds to build their imperial armies and to trap the Indigenous into body-destroying labor and a way to continue to suppress them. In Peru, colonizers adopted the Incas’ mita system and stamped their own image on it, using it to pay silver miners low wages that kept them indebted. “Mita was debt,” Marya and Patel write, “and debt was death.” Debt provided an early rationale for policing and a way to keep the Indigenous population in servitude. It is unnatural, especially in the context of health care, where it inflicts great stress on those who must go into debt in order to survive. With trade as the global circulatory system, debt becomes “a choke point,” a source of stress and thus the cause of biochemical reactions.

When someone receives a surprise hospital bill, the anticipation of future debt causes a physical as well as a psychological response. The body knows something harmful has occurred. “Stress is a state of real or perceived threat to homeostasis,” the authors write. Without relief, the body remains in that state of stress, activating chemicals and initiating “a cycle of alarm” that “feeds back on itself.” The consequences can be severe: “When chronic stress is the background noise of life, it impacts our cells, our DNA, and our children.”

The planet, Marya and Patel argue, is undergoing a similar process of depletion and destruction. For example, the disappearance of salmon in the Pacific Northwest can upset the region’s ecological balance for good. What’s bad for the salmon, and for the Indigenous people who have long relied on them, will eventually be bad for everyone else, creating a chronic background of stress and inflammation in the environment, in the same way that the stress and inflammation of debt hovers in the background of individuals and their families. The salmon are an early warning sign, and so are the human beings who are closest to them.

The extractive nature of colonial capitalism reserves its heaviest burdens for a class that Marya and Patel call the “immunes,” borrowing a term from the ancient Romans. Because of “a legal quirk of the Roman Empire,” they tell us, the “immunes” lived in “nonmunicipal” cities under Roman control, exempt from some of the responsibilities of the typical citizen but also deprived of some basic rights under Roman law. The immunes were never quite Roman—they were imperial subjects without the privileges of citizenship. Modern immunes, Marya and Patel write, occupy a similar position. Those who live in a society without the full benefits of its rights and protections—such as Black Americans and Indigenous people—may find that they have shorter lifespans, a greater likelihood of contracting and dying from Covid, and more illness in general.

“Immunes know that the time is nigh for fire,” they write, “and it’s time to get to work.”

Puerto Rico provides Marya and Patel with particularly rich material for consideration, because the material damage of colonial capitalism can be found everywhere: “While Puerto Rico’s money matters to its colonists,” they write, “the bodies of the island’s inhabitants don’t.” Puerto Ricans “live like immunes in their own homeland,” with the United States wielding “tight fiscal control over the [its] debt repayment regimes, through a Financial Oversight and Management Board.” As a direct result of colonial rule, Puerto Ricans lack reliable medical care, infrastructure, and, often, access to fresh food. In Puerto Rico—indeed, wherever the immunes dwell—trauma leaves a physical mark as
well as an emotional one, a phenomenon that Marya and Patel examine at some length. “Discrimination, PTSD and adverse childhood events,” they observe midway through the book, “all set adults up for chronic inflammation, mediated through pathways of stress.” Yet these experiences can be the basis for something new: Out of the immunes’ “current state of emergency,” a “radically different future” might emerge. “The immune is oppressed,” the authors argue, but also the potential source of change.

Deep medicine, they add, “requires new cosmologies.” Capitalism doesn’t just take; it severs, breaking the bonds between people and between people and the land. A deep medicine approach can begin to suture these wounds and restore the sufferers to a state of wholeness.

One example they offer: declaring a debt jubilee for poor countries. “Reparations for the historical harms caused by colonial debt are a moral requirement,” they write, “as is the need to make public goods of energy, shelter, education, and health care.” Toward the end of the book, they advocate a “global Green New Deal,” observing: “Part of colonialism’s sleight of hand is its normalization of the capitalist political, economic, and ecological framework in which care is practiced. The economic system that allocates care as a good, on the basis of ability to pay, turns something inherently relational into something to be consumed like a hamburger.”

A new model is clearly in order. But when it comes to discussing how to create one, Inflamed is short on specifics. No book can be all things, and this one is ultimately a work of diagnosis more than one of prescription. At once empathetic and skeptical of power, it is bold and searching in its examination of the ways in which the human body has exhibited the consequences of a specific economic and political system. Yet Marya and Patel might have reserved more space to consider the kinds of political solutions that will be needed to abolish such a system. The immunes must drive whatever change occurs, but how is another question altogether. Change implies a process, and its shape remains blurry at the end of the book. Perhaps that’s a problem no author can solve: Outside fiction, a person must write about what exists. A world without colonialism, without capitalism, belongs to the past—and the past is replete with its own horrors. Even so, Marya and Patel argue, the cultures and traditions of those oppressed by colonial capitalism offer us “the way forward,” even if the path isn’t always clear. “Settler ideologies have circumscribed the imagination,” they write. The future is creative work.

As the world plots a course past Covid, we will need new institutions as well as new medical practices and a new way of imaging our place in the world. To get there, we will also need power. A nearly $40,000 hospital bill is a horror at any time, but Covid unveils its true inhumanity to the world. The time for healing is here.

Drowning Creek

Past the strip malls and the power plants, out of the holler, past Gun Bottom Road and Brassfield and before Red Lick Creek, there’s a stream called Drowning Creek where I saw the prettiest bird I’d seen all year, the Belted Kingfisher, crested in its Aegean blue plumage perched not on a high nag but on a transmission wire, eyeing the creek for crayfish, tadpoles, and minnows. We were driving fast back home and already our minds were pulled taut like a high black wire latched to a utility pole. I wanted to stop, stop the car to take a closer look at the solitary stocky water bird with its blue crown and its blue chest and its uncommonness. But already we were a blur and miles beyond the flying fisher by the time I had realized what I’d witnessed. People were nothing to that bird, hovering over the creek. I was nothing to that bird that wasn’t concerned with history’s bloody battles or why this creek was called Drowning Creek, a name I love though it gives me shivers, because it sounds like an order, a place where one goes to drown. The bird doesn’t call the creek that name. The bird doesn’t call it anything. I’m almost certain, though I am certain of nothing. There is a solitude in this world I cannot pierce. I would die for it.

ADA LIMÓN
Letters

The Good Place


Michael Marien Lafayette, N.Y.

One may come away from Jeet Heer’s essay “Utopia Allows Us to Dream Together” with the impression that feminist utopian thinking began in the 1960s and ’70s, and that women did not contribute to the great period of utopianism at the turn of the 20th century. On the contrary, writers such as the South African—born Olive Schreiner (in Dreams, 1890), the Bengali Muslim Rokeya Hossain (in Sultana’s Dream, 1905), and the American Charlotte Perkins Gilman (in Herland, 1915) created influential, inspiring visions of gender-equal societies, and to overlook their importance now is simply wrong.

Margaret D. Stetz Professor of Women’s Studies, University of Delaware Newark, Del.

I found it remarkable that the discussion of several of the great utopian writings overlooked the one that was published in Philadelphia in 1787. This one was significantly different from the others in that it contained a description of the process by which its shortcomings could be corrected. Unlike all other utopian ideas, the US Constitution acknowledged its awareness of its own necessity for change, if not in the fundamentals of its theory, then at least in its necessary adaptation to unanticipated threats. Those fundamentals included the crazy idea that people are free to wish as they please, act on their wishes, and alter their course when necessary.


Overconsumed

Re “A Small World,” by Katha Pollitt [July 12/19]: In the struggle for a clean and sustainable environment, people who want to have more children are not the enemy. Overpopulation is not the issue.

The problem is how people in industrialized societies treat the environment—consumption of fossil fuels, horrific agricultural practices, plastic wrapped around everything. To be clear: Wealthy people, corporations, and a weak-kneed regulatory structure deserve the most blame for the perceived lack of resources. More important, concerns about so-called overpopulation nearly always end with forcing contraceptives on women of color. In this way, overpopulation arguments not only fail to address the root causes of environmental despair and the inequitable distribution of resources, they support eugenics. Let’s not make these arguments as progressives.

Erin Matson Executive Director, Reproaction Washington, D.C.

Correction

“Crippling Utopia to Save It,” by s.e. smith [July 26/Aug. 2], misquoted Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. as writing in his Buck v. Bell decision that “three generations of idiots are enough.” He actually wrote that “three generations of imbeciles are enough.”

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At the heart of Adam Serwer’s The Cruelty Is the Point: The Past, Present, and Future of Trump’s America is a sustained attempt to pinpoint the currents that brought Donald Trump to the White House. Serwer sees Trumpism as a cruel backlash to the election of Barack Obama, the possibility that Hillary Clinton might be his successor, the acceptance of gay marriage, the growing diversity of cities, and the fear of increased immigration. His adage “The cruelty is the point” captures the resentful delight that Trump and his supporters exude in their attempt to crush their opponents and “re-establish” their white supremacist vision of America. Serwer argues that the forces that led to Trump’s election are not aberrations brought on by economic inequality but essential elements in political conflicts going back to Reconstruction.

—Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins

DSJ: Why do you think the essence of Trumpism is cruelty?

AS: I describe it that way, but Donald Trump also thinks the essence of Trumpism is cruelty. Whether it’s encouraging police to brutalize suspects, pardoning war crimes against Muslims, or carrying out a policy of child separation, Trump’s answer to any dilemma is the ruthless application of state force and the humiliation of its targets. We just disagree over whether the things he’s doing are good.

DSJ: Why was Obama so easily able to beat two white Republican presidential opponents in 2008 and 2012? Were Americans less cruel?

AS: Part of what I try to do in this book is draw a line tracing the long history of cruelty in American politics to the present, so that the Trump era is more understandable and less mystifying. America exists because of the displacement and slaughter of the continent’s original inhabitants and was built in large part on forced labor. That is going to pose some clear contradictions for a country that aspires to the notion that all men are created equal, and necessitate justifications for why that idea does not apply to vast categories of human beings.

That said, you can see the evolution of the Republican Party. In 2008, John McCain tried to tamp down the slander of birtherism when confronted with it. By 2016, the party had selected the nation’s most prominent birther as their standard-bearer, precisely because the hard lines he drew around American citizenship attacked the legitimacy of the first Black president. Trump won the Republican nomination not only because he was cruel but because he was the most sincere in his expression of that cruelty.

DSJ: You state that Trump was elected to destroy Obama’s legacy. Obama has recently stated that Joe Biden is “finishing the job” his administration started. Do you agree with Obama’s assessment?

AS: One of the more promising signs about the Biden administration is that it seems to have internalized many of the left-wing economic critiques of the Obama administration, something we saw with the speed and ambition of the coronavirus relief bill. But there’s also been a great deal of hype about a supposedly FDR-sized presidency, even though Biden has yet to pass a permanent expansion of the welfare state on the order of the Affordable Care Act. I would be happy if the Biden administration’s record on progressive legislation eclipsed Obama’s record. But that hasn’t happened yet.

DSJ: Can cruelty be overcome?

AS: Cruelty is part of human nature. What is not inevitable is a system that incentivizes the politics of cruelty, in which a party of white identity is constantly trying to destroy the constituencies of the more multiracial party to maintain power. The Republican Party has chosen Trumpism because of the way the American system is structured; they can hold on to power with a minoritarian base that is ideally geographically distributed to win the Senate and the Electoral College, and to win the House through favorably drawn districts. It is logical, if immoral, under this system for the Republican Party to continue to try to win elections by persuading their voters that trans children or Taliban-style Islamic law or migrant invasions are on the verge of destroying their way of life and all they hold dear. The only thing that can change the present dynamic is a system in which the Republican Party is forced to reach outside its hard-core base to hold power.

“Donald Trump also thinks the essence of Trumpism is cruelty.”
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– Janet F.