Forced Off Their Land

A decades-long history of discrimination at the USDA has destroyed the livelihood of thousands of Black farmers.

KALI HOLLOWAY
Hosted by Ray Suarez

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Oakland or bust: Patina artist Aiya Jordan readies a bust of Black Panther Party cofounder Huey Newton for its unveiling on October 24 in Oakland, Calif., where the party was founded.
New York city’s Rikers Island has long been a hellhole and a national disgrace. For decades, the jail complex has been plagued by violence and chaos, but conditions have deteriorated dramatically in the past year as the Covid-19 pandemic has raged across the nation. Calls to close Rikers have continued to grow, but the timeline city officials have proposed stretches into the distant future, with mass decarceration completely off the table.

But mass decarceration is exactly what’s needed to ensure that people aren’t simply being shuttled from one inhumane situation to another.

As of October 25, Rikers incarcerated 114 people serving sentences of one year or less. Under the city’s 6-A program, Mayor Bill de Blasio could authorize them to serve their sentences at home under supervision. At the start of the pandemic, he released 312 people, but then did nothing until this past October, after word of escalating violence, chaos, and staff absences at Rikers hit the news. As of October 19, he had released seven people.

Shortly after taking office, Governor Kathy Hochul signed the Less Is More Act into law. The act, which restricts automatic incarceration for technical parole violations, resulted in the release of 239 people. However, as of October 25, 143 people remained jailed for technical parole violations.

Hochul also reached agreements with the city to move people from Rikers to state prisons. This included the transfer of 143 men serving city sentences and, more recently, a temporary transfer of all of the cisgender women and some trans people from Rikers to two women’s prisons—the Bedford Hills and Taconic correctional facilities. At least 128 women signed a petition opposing being moved farther from their families, attorneys, and communities. As one Bronx woman told Assembly member Amanda Septimo, “I’m here for a suspended license, but now I’m going to be placed in a maximum-security prison? That’s not fair or right at all.”

Meanwhile, in court each day, prosecutors continue to request and judges continue to set insurmountable bail amounts, consigning numerous people to months on the island awaiting their day in court. (Bail is supposed to ensure that people return to court. In January 2020, New York State briefly enacted bail reform, prohibiting prosecutors from requesting bail or pretrial detention except for violent felonies and select misdemeanors. The city’s jail population dropped by 40 percent. Six months later, in response to lobbying by police and prosecutors, those reforms were rolled back.)

There are 5,529 people in the city’s jails, as of October 25, the majority at Rikers. In contrast, last April the jail population was 3,832. That’s because, in an effort to stem the spread of Covid, fewer people were being sent to jail as police made fewer arrests for low-level offenses and judges chose to detain fewer people. It could have been the start of long-lasting decarceration—drastically reducing the numbers of people behind bars—and the shuttering of the island’s 10 jails.

Instead, the city—police, prosecutors, and judges—quickly resumed business as usual, locking up greater numbers of people again. The record number of staff absences means that far fewer people are brought to court, and that means they stay behind bars even longer.

As the number of people sent to jail has increased, so has the number of people who have died in the city’s jails. During the first 10 months of the year, 14 people died while waiting for a day in court that would never come. The 14th—Anthony Scott—died after attempting to take his own life after the judge (Nestor Diaz) set bail at $15,000. Five others had already died by suicide.

Given Rikers’s decades-long history of brutality, the option of keeping it open should be off the table. And so should the option of shuttling people from Rikers to state prisons, where they are likely to experience the same overcrowding, medical neglect, and threat of violence, not to mention the persistent risk of contracting Covid. Last year, bail reform—and concerted efforts to stem Covid transmission—caused the city’s jail population to drop to a low not seen since World War II. The current crisis should push us back in that direction, decreasing the numbers in the hellhole (and possibly averting more deaths) until it can be closed.

Victoria Law is a freelance journalist who focuses on the intersections of incarceration, gender, and resistance.
I'm agnostic about whether the CTC should be capped. I know parents in New York and San Francisco who make decent money but have been happy to have some breathing room—for child care, orthodontics, or unexpected crises. Parents everywhere are using it to buy baby formula, school supplies, and... just plain food.

Given that the 48 decent Democrats who support Biden’s bill have to get to 50, and given that the two Democrats whose votes they need aren’t quite decent, there will have to be some negotiation. (I’m still not sure what Kyrsten Sinema is holding out for.) By the time you read this, the deal may be done. But it’s worth noting that a work requirement is a dog whistle, playing to old racist stereotypes, though in reality more white families would be hurt than anyone else.

Manchin’s language—about “entitlement” and “means testing” in particular—is straight out of the 1990s. That’s when white Democrats (and even a few Black Democrats, to be honest) attacked many programs set up to help poor families by claiming that they enabled their supposedly worst habits: idleness and—I’m not sure there’s a single word here—failure to marry.

Oh, excuse me: their mothers’ worst habits. Remember when The New Republic put a Black mom smoking on its cover, titling its editorial calling for welfare reform “Day of Reckoning: Sign the Welfare Bill Now”?

Those were the days! At least for white male Democrats who were borderline racist, or maybe even truly racist—or just trying to court truly racist voters. They could even say they were trying to help poor people. President Clinton’s 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which passed with bipartisan support, allowed states to slash cash benefits and impose work requirements on welfare recipients. The result, 25 years later, is a safety net so threadbare that many families fall right through it.

Meanwhile, just a few years back, Donald Trump and then–House Speaker Paul Ryan found common cause in trying to impose work requirements on food stamp and Medicaid recipients. This time around, though, Democrats weren’t having any of that—and when they took back the House in 2018, they packed those ideas up with Speaker Ryan’s office and sent them to... I don’t even know, without Googling, where Paul Ryan is now. That’s a good feeling. But now we have Joe Manchin to do Paul Ryan’s dirty work.

Manchin has told fellow Democrats that the expanded child tax credit (CTC) must have a new work requirement and be capped at family incomes of $60,000 or so. “I’ve been very clear when it comes to who we are as a society, who we are as a nation,” he said recently. “I don’t believe that we should turn our society into an entitlement society. I think we should still be a compassionate, rewarding society.”

On the night of October 21, President Joe Biden told a CNN town hall that he opposes the work requirement. “All these people are working anyway,” he told Anderson Cooper. (And those who aren’t working are disproportionately the poorest of the poor.) So that should be that—except there’s no word as to whether President Manchin agrees.

What is Manchin really doing here?

Manchin’s push for work requirements relies on harmful stereotypes and old ideas about poverty.

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Reviving the 1990s

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In mid-October, as negotiations over the Build Back Better bill wore on, The Washington Post’s Greg Sargent called Senator Joe Manchin’s obstructionist position on the very popular child care, elder care, family leave, free community college, green jobs (and much more) reconciliation bill “arbitrary centrist.” Someone he interviewed, Samuel Hammond from the centrist Niskanen Center, called it “performative austerity.” That sent me to “dog whistle,” personally, though I’m not sure Sargent or Hammond would sign on to that. But let’s be clear: Manchin’s language—about “entitlement” and “means testing” in particular—is straight out of the 1990s. That’s when white Democrats (and even a few Black Democrats, to be honest) attacked many programs set up to help poor families by claiming that they enabled their supposedly worst habits: idleness and—I’m not sure there’s a single word here—failure to marry.

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“Narrowly targeting the credit to the lowest income families risks creating a stigmatizing poverty trap.”

Democrats have come a long way since the 1990s. There’s near-consensus that the big problem facing American families is income inequality and an inability to get ahead—not “dependency.” So Manchin’s “performative austerity” is a step backward. It’s meant to show his state’s mainly white voters he’s looking out for welfare cheats and others trying to game the system—even if it deprives those same voters of needed help.

Along with his alleged offer to leave the Democratic Party to become an independent (while still caucusing with Democrats), his dust-up with Senator Bernie Sanders (in which he reportedly said he’d prefer no bill at all to the Biden bill) shows that Manchin is clearly enjoying the spotlight. But let’s make sure we spotlight exactly how backward his priorities are. Promoting “means testing” and trashing “entitlements” harks back to a punitive and often racist approach to social policy. You don’t have to leave the Democratic Party, Senator Manchin. But you might need to recognize the party has already left you.

**IN MEMORIAM / KAI BIRD**

**Martin J. Sherwin (1937—2021)**

I first met Martin J. Sherwin—who died last month at the age of 84—back in the early 1980s, when I was an associate editor of *The Nation*. Victor Navasky got him to write a long essay that appeared as a cover story: “Hiroshima and Modern Memory” (October 10, 1981). It was quite simply brilliant—and read today, it remains brilliant.

Marty had begun his career as the preeminent historian of the nuclear age with his classic 1975 work, *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and Its Legacies*. Sometime in 1980 his Knopf editor, Angus Cameron, signed him up to do a biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer.

Marty and I became good friends in the mid-’90s during the controversy over the censorship of the Smithsonian Institution’s planned exhibit on the *Enola Gay* and the end of World War II. He was appalled when the American Legion, the Air Force Association, and most of the politicians on Capitol Hill compelled the Smithsonian to cancel a highly nuanced and complicated 10,000-square-foot historical display. He wrote an article for *The Nation* on the episode: “The Assault on History” (May 15, 1995).

History mattered to Marty—but he never lost his sense of humor. Five years later, I found myself sitting across from him in a Boston restaurant. He was still working on the Oppenheimer biography, and it was on this occasion that he invited me to join him on the project. To seal the deal, we raised our martini glasses and Marty gave Oppie’s favored toast: “To the confusion of our enemies!”

It took us another five years to complete the book. Marty was a consummate biographer, amassing more than 50,000 pages of archival material, including 8,000 pages of FBI records. There were more than 100 neatly transcribed interviews. He loved to rewrite and edit, and unlike many academics, he had an ear for the rhythm of good narrative storytelling.

Ours was a rare collaboration—we were still friends when we finished the book.

Marty was genuinely astonished when it won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 2006. He had a sardonic, skeptical view of the world. On a personal level, he was always fun to be around, with an infectious laugh and ready wit. But he was also profoundly pessimistic about the human race’s ability to survive the nuclear era. He went on to spend a dozen years writing a book with the dark title *Gambling With Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette From Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis* (2020). We had survived the Cuban missile crisis, he argued, through just dumb luck.

Marty’s three books are but a small part of his legacy. He died knowing that our Oppenheimer biography was being turned into a story on the big screen. He was surprised by that, too. For him, what mattered was the storytelling from the archives. The day he died, he was working on what he hoped would become a book or film about a B-29 crew shot down over the Sea of Japan—10 American aviators who survived at sea for a week, only to be rescued and then forced by a Japanese Army officer to give witness to the carnage of Hiroshima. It is a story heavy with irony—and Marty Sherwin loved the irony in history.

Kai Bird is the director of the Leon Levy Center for Biography and a member of *The Nation*’s editorial board. He shared a Pulitzer Prize with Martin J. Sherwin in 2006. His most recent book is *The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter*. 
Qualified immunity is a legal concept that sounds wonky but is not difficult to grasp. Put simply: Government workers, including members of law enforcement, cannot be sued in their capacity as private individuals for actions they take as part of their official responsibilities.

The doctrine was invented by courts to limit the liability of people who execute the law in good faith, even if it's a law some people don't like. While some form of qualified immunity is probably necessary to have a functioning society—we can't have employees at the IRS sued for theft every time they garnish someone's wages—applying it to law enforcement officers creates a different problem: The police are able to operate with apparent lawful authority even when their actions are flatly illegal.

Over the past two decades, weakening qualified immunity protections has become popular among progressives. Advocates seeking justice for Muslim Americans whose constitutional rights were trampled in the aftermath of 9/11 brought various lawsuits attempting to “pierce the veil” of qualified immunity and hold officials accountable for their constitutional transgressions. The calls to end qualified immunity have only grown louder as police officers have continued to be caught on video brutalizing or murdering Black people. Recent polls indicate that 59 percent of Americans favor ending qualified immunity and hold officials accountable for their constitutional transgressions. The calls to end qualified immunity have only grown louder as police officers have continued to be caught on video brutalizing or murdering Black people. Recent polls indicate that 59 percent of Americans favor ending qualified immunity and hold officials accountable for their constitutional transgressions.

Unfortunately, attempts to weaken qualified immunity have met with total failure in the courts, especially the Supreme Court. In mid-October, the justices overturned two decisions in which lower courts had allowed lawsuits to be brought against police officers by citizens (or their estates) alleging an excessive use of force. In one case, a police officer knelt on a suspect’s back (albeit for eight seconds instead of eight minutes) because the officer saw a knife. In another, officers shot and killed a man who was allegedly brandishing a hammer after they cornered him in a garage. In both cases, the Supreme Court ruled that even if a jury could find that the officers’ conduct constituted excessive use of force, they could not be sued because they had qualified immunity.

But the court didn’t stop there. Far from merely applying existing principles of qualified immunity to these cases, the court used them to strengthen the doctrine, making it harder for other litigants to pierce that immunity in the future. As it is, qualified immunity can be defeated only if you prove that cops violated a clear and well-known constitutional standard. For instance, the right to remain silent is a clear and well-known constitutional protection, and a cop who beats a suspect until they start talking might lose qualified immunity. I’d argue that it’s also clear and well-known that cops are not allowed to beat a suspect’s child in order to force the suspect to talk, but the Supreme Court’s rulings in these cases make it harder for litigants to prove that an iterative protection such as “no beating of family members” is clear, and harder still to prove that the police should know about it.

Many people will be familiar with the phrase “Ignorance of the law is no excuse.” But here the Supreme Court has effectively given police departments an incentive not to teach officers about the law, because a police force that’s ignorant of the Constitution has an easier time claiming qualified immunity.

Both decisions were per curiam, meaning they were unsigned and we don’t know how each justice voted. But it is notable that the decisions were released without any written dissents. Which means neither Sonia Sotomayor nor Clarence Thomas, the two justices who have been the most critical of qualified immunity don’t seem to appreciate: We have gotten nowhere in terms of overcoming the problem through the courts.

What this means is that ending qualified immunity will have to be done through the legislative process, if it is to be done at all. We have to regard the Supreme Court—both the conservative and liberal justices—as enemies of this project, and any new law must be carefully written to preclude reinterpretation by the court. Congress will have to end qualified immunity for law enforcement outright or come up with a set of specific circumstances in which litigants will be allowed to pierce its veil and sue offending officers.

Does that sound like a job this Congress is up for? Yeah, that’s the problem.
The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which would eliminate qualified immunity for law enforcement, has collapsed in Congress. The Republican counterproposal, which would not, has also collapsed. And a bill sponsored by Representative Ayanna Pressley and Senator Ed Markey, which would end qualified immunity for police as a stand-alone proposal, has gone nowhere in this Democrat-controlled Congress either. That leaves President Biden, who is said to be mulling his options for using executive orders to implement police reforms—but even he can't order the court to interpret standards like qualified immunity differently.

It would seem that Congress is too broken to pass a law that would invalidate a court-invented doctrine that almost 60 percent of the country is against. This Supreme Court has all but announced that it will continue handing “Get Out of Jail Free” cards to the police unless Congress intervenes, and Congress still refuses to do so.

There are many problems the Supreme Court creates for our society that Congress cannot easily fix. In theory, this is not one of them. Congress could simply end qualified immunity for law enforcement. At the very least, it should explain why it won’t.

Don’t Give Up Now!

With the fight for Build Back Better raging, this is no time to shrink from the political fray.

Democrats are tired. I get that; I’m tired too. Lefties made fun of the woman—yes, blond and white—carrying a sign at the 2017 Women’s March that read “If Hillary was president we’d be at brunch.” How bourgeois can you get! Imagine wanting to have pancakes and mimosas out with your friends instead of demonstrating, going to meetings, door-knocking, leafleting, fundraising, and all the fun things so many of us spent so much time doing in the Trump years. In fact, women like that sign-holder geared up for action and became the much-mocked “Resistance,” which did so much to deliver the House, the Senate, and the White House to Democrats. For some, activism became a way of life. But it’s not surprising that a lot of people would like to step back now. Oscar Wilde is credited with quipping that the trouble with socialism is it takes too many evenings. As Michael Walzer pointed out, that’s true of participatory democracy, too.

After four years of obsessing nonstop about the latest outrage of Donald Trump, his administration, and his horrible family—not-counting-Barron, I’m relieved not to have them living in my head anymore. I also find myself wanting rather desperately to give Biden and the Democrats the benefit of every doubt. Do I just want to go to brunch? Biden's infrastructure bill is a good thing, and Build Back Better, his $3.5 trillion climate change and social spending bill, is groundbreaking. Paid family leave, funding for child care and universal pre-K, and extending the expanded child tax credits would transform life for women and families. But the pressure is on to slash the size of the bill; Senator Joe Manchin wants lots more cuts, and Senator Kyrsten Sinema won’t even say what she would need in order to support the bill. Given how high our hopes were, it’s easy to feel discouraged or exhausted.

If Manchin and Sinema are doing their best to undermine Build Back Better, blame the founding fathers. It’s their fault that two senators representing less than 3 percent of the population are the most powerful people in the country. If life were a political thriller, the president would call them into his office and blackmail them with secret files on their sex lives, discreetly placed on his desk by his creepy henchman. If I were president, I would definitely try that.

But I digress. My point is, Biden and “the Democrats” are being blamed for the behavior of just two senators. So, as is often the case in this fallen world, it’s half a loaf or no bread—a scaled-down bill or none at all. And also because it’s a fallen world, Biden’s popularity is underwater. After all, he’s been in the White House for a whole nine months and he hasn’t made good
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on every single one of his campaign promises—so it must be because he’s weak, indecisive, clueless, old, and conservative. A lot of people seem to think the president is like a king, who can make things happen by waving his magic scepter, when the Constitution intentionally made that impossible. Divided government and all that. Drat those founding fathers.

It doesn’t help that the media never misses a chance to portray the Democrats as being in disarray. But it would be a terrible mistake to withdraw from the fray. Right now, worrying news is coming out of Virginia. This recently-turned-blue Southern state could revert to Republican hands on November 2, when all state offices go up for grabs. Cynics who claim that the Dems have done nothing for the people are wrong. On a wide range of issues, they’ve delivered, from expanding Medicaid, making it easier to vote, and restoring voting rights for more than 200,000 felons to increased funding for child care and repealing Republican-instituted restrictions on abortion. In her recent report for The Nation, Joan Walsh cites both complacency and weariness for the absence of volunteer and voter enthusiasm. Covid doesn’t help.

But turnout will be crucial, especially among Black and women voters. Polling maven Sean McElwee tells me Virginia will stay blue, but last week I was so anxious I signed up with Vote Forward to write letters to registered Virginia Democrats who don’t always vote. Some of my political friends call this make-work for people too lazy to phone-bank or door-knock, but Vote Forward says its studies show its letters raised turnout by an average of 0.8 percent in 2020 campaigns and more in some specific contests. In a close election, that could make the difference.

Could Texas’s abortion ban bring a surge of women voters to the polls? (And why not a surge of men as well?) Six other states—Florida, North Dakota, South Dakota, Arkansas, Indiana, and Mississippi—have expressed interest in passing a similar ban, and in December the Supreme Court is scheduled to hear arguments in a Mississippi case that could overturn Roe v. Wade and let each state go its own way. Stephen Holmes, a noted New York University law professor, tells me overturning Roe would be a good thing. After all, most Americans want abortion to be legal. “Republicans have benefited enormously from favoring the overturning of Roe but not being able to do something so overwhelmingly unpopular,” he wrote to me in an e-mail. “If it happens before the 2022 midterms, the backlash could save the Democratic majority in the House. Then Congress could make Roe the law of the land. A politically accountable Republican Congress would be much less likely to reverse that than an unaccountable Court.”

It’s great to hear from someone optimistic for a change, but it sounds a bit too clever to me. Even if the fall of Roe were to get a few more Democratic senators elected, would they be true-blue pro-choicers or “bipartisan” compromisers? As we see with Build Back Better, a few discordant senators can wield a lot of power. Also, what happens to those new abortion protections when the Republicans take power again? Roe may not be perfect, but it’s the umbrella beneath which reproductive rights has the best chance to survive and expand.

In other words, the stakes are as high as ever. So, voters and volunteers of every race, ethnicity, income level, age, sex, and gender, don’t go all wobbly on us now. Enjoy your brunch, and then get back to work.
I'm writing this while on the road with the Caravan of Mothers of Missing Migrants, a collective whose children were disappeared on the migrant trail by cartels, government agents, or traffickers. For these women, the world has already ended. It ends every time they wake up and confront life without their children.

The mothers credit religion as the reason they survive the end of their worlds. As they travel, they carry laminated images of their kids around their necks—forming an iconography of forced migration. When they gather in schools, churches, and public squares, they engage in a devotional ritual of sorts, placing these photos in tidy rows, inviting passersby to stare into the eyes of the disappeared and invoke their presence. They share testimonios, which are part prayer, part manifesto, and part incantation. Every morning, they pray to God for resilience. They say He gives them the strength to participate in this caravan and denounce US empire. Notably, the mothers on this pilgrimage are not looking for pity. They are mobilizing to demand the decriminalization of migration.

In the United States, there is a misconception that religion is synonymous with white Christian nationalism or that it hinders movements for liberation—that it encourages docility and conformity with the status quo. This is certainly not the case with the Caravan of Mothers, who draw on religion to defy gendered and racialized expectations, or with the sanctuary movement, which I have studied extensively. In the 1980s, ministers, priests, and laypeople across Mesoamerica created an underground railroad to harbor and shelter Central Americans fleeing US-fueled civil wars. They established networks of care and defied the Reagan administration's proxy armies, citing faith as their justification for breaking the law.

The US prosecuted sanctuary workers at the Sonora-Arizona border for offering safe passage to refugees. After the FBI and INS infiltrated their movement, 11 workers were indicted on alien smuggling charges. In a letter I found in the University of Arizona archives, the Rev. John Fife—one of the movement's more prominent figures—notes that “the church in the US is coming under attack. What the Reagan administration calls conspiracy is simply the ministry to the persecuted that is fundamental to the church's actually being the church.”

The United States insists on making a distinction between faith and politics, and yet the world has already ended. It ends every time we wake up and confront life without our children.
Those who insist that religion poses a problem for liberation are not paying attention.

Barbara Sostaita is a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University. She is editing a manuscript titled Sanctuary Everywhere: Fugitive Care on the Migrant Trail.

Phil Zuckerman is professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College and the author of What It Means to Be Moral.

church and state—imagining faith as a private, “deeply held” matter. Some even argue that secularism leads to more democratic societies. This is a Western and Protestant understanding of religion, one that fails to grasp how—in the context of the Americas—separating the sacred from the secular is a product of colonialism. Secularism refuses to recognize the religiosity of the modern nation-state: the sovereign, the ritualistic jingoism, the devotional labor. My citizenship ceremony in the summer of 2019 resembled a religious ceremony. President Donald Trump spoke to the crowd about this country’s “sacred laws” and the “holy responsibilities” of new citizens. We sang the national anthem and waved our red, white, and blue American flags. There was ritual and repetition, there was worship, and there was a recounting of this country’s mythological origin story. Religion is not going away, nor is it distinct from everyday life.

Religion offers my collaborators the language and practices to envision a more just and free world. When I write that we need religion, I am not referring to creeds and churches, sermons and Sunday school. Religion opens up possibilities for ritual, transgression, intimacy, material culture, pilgrimage, and sacrifice. For the Caravan of Mothers of Missing Migrants, religion offers a theory of salvation that is rooted in the present—a set of practices for enduring and sustaining one another in the face of overwhelming loss and violence.

Those who insist that religion poses a problem for liberation are not paying attention to racialized people across the Americas. In the wake of Breonna Taylor’s murder, Black Lives Matter activists built an altar for neighbors to grieve and create a “space of healing.” Alejandra Molina reported on Apache efforts to protect Oak Flat—a “blessed” place and ceremonial site. Theirs is a struggle that tribal leaders insist can “only be won through spirituality.” The Mothers of Missing Migrants tell me that only their religion gives them the strength to confront government agents and denounce the conditions that cause displacement.

In the US, too, religion shapes every aspect of our political and cultural life: from Lil Nas X riding a stripper pole to Hell to a conservative Catholic supermajority deliberating on the Supreme Court to humanitarian workers in Arizona placing water in the desert for migrants. The mothers I am traveling with for the next week embrace religion to organize for justice, even as governments, cartels, and traffickers (many times these are one and the same) make their struggle nearly impossible. For them, religion is a way of nurturing community and helps them imagine a world in which their children are home and safe and smiling.

Barbara Sostaita is a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University. She is editing a manuscript titled Sanctuary Everywhere: Fugitive Care on the Migrant Trail.

When reason is wedded to humanist values, the results are far better than what religion can muster alone.

reason for actually addressing what needs to be solved, faith by itself is impotent. Praying, as the entertainer Gypsy Rose Lee is said to have quipped, is like sitting in a rocking chair: It keeps you busy but gets you nowhere. Promises of heaven and threats of hell are distractions; appeasing the spirits of ancestors is futile; ingesting the flesh and blood of a deity’s son is useless. Rather, we need to rely on the human capacity with the best record of success: reason.

Consider, for example, those democratic nations doing the most to combat climate change, such as Denmark and Finland; or successfully keeping violent crime rates down, such as Japan and South Korea; or ensuring women’s reproductive rights, such as Uruguay and Canada; or championing human rights, such as Australia and New Zealand—all of these nations are among the most secular societies on Earth, with the lowest rates of church attendance, prayer, and faith in God.

Similar correlations hold true within our own country. Those states that have done the best job of fighting Covid-19, such as Vermont and Washington; have among the lowest violent crime rates, such as New Hampshire and Minnesota; ensure women’s bodily autonomy, such as California and Massachusetts; take climate change at least somewhat seriously, such as New York and Colorado, are also those with the lowest overall rates of religious faith and practice. Their residents—and legislators—are more likely to rely on education, scientific findings, medical expertise, and humane ethics than prayer, genuflections, or Bible study.

At the individual level, secular men and women are much more likely than their religious peers to get vaccinated, understand climate change and want to fight it, support abortion rights, favor gun control, champion LGBTQ rights, back affordable health care for all, want to help refugees, and oppose the death penalty. These nonreligious men and women do not rely on faith to make the world a better, fairer, healthier place. Rather, they are guided by reason and infused with humanist ethics. Such an orientation is where we should—must—seek our solace and direction.
Protesters carry a cardboard coffin during a demonstration against Covid-19 vaccine patents on October 12 in London. In 2020, South Africa and India proposed that the World Trade Organization suspend the patents’ enforcement. The United Kingdom and other wealthy European nations blocked the waiver; the United States under President Biden has supported the proposal.

**By the Numbers**

- **533M**
  - Number of Facebook users who had their personal information leaked, as reported in April

- **$14M**
  - Amount paid by Facebook to settle claims that it discriminated against US workers

- **8**
  - Minimum number of whistleblower complaints filed by former Facebook employee Frances Haugen

- **3.2M**
  - Number of hours spent searching, labeling, and removing problematic content on Facebook in 2020

- **17%**
  - Percentage of teenage girls who say Instagram makes eating disorders worse

- **13%**
  - Percentage of those hours spent on content posted outside the US

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**Steve Bannon**

Defiant still is Stephen Bannon,
Who could be nut-right’s loosest cannon.
Contempt, which Congress now has cited,
May very well get Steve indicted.
If Steve’s convicted, fair and square,
No pardon’s coming: Trump’s not there.
So Steve can say he’s made his point,
Although he’s speaking from the joint.
Born in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem, Mohammed El-Kurd has witnessed the brutality of Israeli occupation his entire life, including the invasion of his family home by settlers when he was a boy of 11. As a poet his voice is powerful, penetrating—and impossible to ignore. And that makes him a dangerous man. His debut poetry collection, Ritqa, just published, is named for his grandmother, who as it happens shares the name of my grandmother—only hers was in Yiddish.

Nearly 20 years ago, one of the first pieces I wrote for The Nation from London looked forward to “the day when the Palestinians themselves can be heard, and when the lives of Palestinian children count as much as those of Israeli children, or Americans.” The Nation’s decision to tap El-Kurd as our Palestine correspondent reflects that aspiration and that commitment.

Since adding El-Kurd to our masthead, Nation editors have received a torrent of abuse—much of it too foul to publish. We’ve also been sent hundreds of identical letters accusing us of giving a platform to terror and anti-Semitism. We will not be intimidated by people who think slander is the way to win an argument.

Thankfully, we’ve also received many letters in support of our decision to let Palestinians speak for themselves—a policy The Nation pioneered long ago with Edward Said, and one we hope others in the US media will follow. Some Americans may find what El-Kurd says challenging, but given our entanglement in the Middle East, it is absolutely imperative that we are given the chance to listen.

—D.D. Guttenplan

Mohammed El-Kurd is determined to spread hatred for the Jewish people and nation and to create even further division between Israelis and Palestinians. At a time when unity is so desperately needed, El-Kurd is the last person The Nation should be showcasing as their Palestinian voice.

El-Kurd had the audacity to relieve Hamas from any wrongdoing during the May 2021 escalation, despite the fact that the terror group fired over 4,500 missiles on Israeli civilian populations. Moreover, El-Kurd blamed Israel for daring to defend her citizens and referred to teenage Hamas soldiers as innocent children. “The myth of Israeli self-defense relies inherently on public ignorance...” he tweeted.

El-Kurd has glorified and whitewashed terrorists, spread hatred of the Jewish nation, and expressed horrific vitriol on social media. In 2020, he posted a photo of terrorist Leila Khaled with a knife and a submachine gun, referring to her as a “freedom fighter.” Khaled is a convicted PLFP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) terrorist who was imprisoned for hijacking two airplanes with Jewish passengers, which resulted in a flight attendant getting shot.

Caren Leven
Executive Director
Baltimore Zionist District
Baltimore

I suppose, given your magazine’s long history of anti-Semitism—er, sorry, your profoundly progressive anti-Israel bias—I should not be surprised that you’ve hired the notorious liar, fake news writer, terrorist supporter, and racist bigot Mohammed El-Kurd as your “Palestine correspondent.” Way to go! Goebbels would be proud. The Nation: one of America’s best sources of fake news and Islamist propaganda! You’re turning it into Pravda. You should be ashamed.

Harry Koza

Mohammed El-Kurd is a preeminent voice of a new generation of Palestinians continuing decades-long resistance to Israeli colonialism and military and settler violence. This spring, El-Kurd provided the world a window into settler attempts—backed by Israeli police—to evict and cleanse Palestinians, including the El-Kurd family, from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of Jerusalem. Because of Mohammed and his sister Muna’s prolific social media feeds, people around the world were able to see Israeli state violence firsthand, as well as the brazenness of settlers like Yakob, a New Yorker who candidly named his intention to steal and settle a Palestinian home.

Minimal and biased media coverage meant that El-Kurd was a crucial source of news for hundreds of thousands around the world. As #SaveSheikhJarrah trended on social media, El-Kurd and other Palestinians broadcasting Israel’s violence faced mass censorship on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok.

Now right-wing Zionist organizations are smearing El-Kurd with false accusations and pressuring The Nation to fire its only Palestine correspondent for unapologetically exposing the racist brutality of Israel’s colonial project.

My organization, Palestine Legal, stands firmly with Mohammed El-Kurd and The Nation as they elevate the experiences of those most affected by Israeli colonial violence—something largely missing from media coverage of the issue. Having responded to nearly 2,000 incidents of suppression of Palestine advocacy since 2014, we see the efforts to discredit El-Kurd and deny him a platform for what they are: desperate attempts to silence the truth.

Some of the same organizations currently targeting El-Kurd have also targeted the Palestinian student body vice president at CUNY Law School, Nerdeen Kiswani; IfNotNow cofounder Simone Zimmerman; and Representative Betty McCollum (D-Minn.), who was absurdly named an “Anti-Semite of the Week” for introducing legislation that would prohibit US taxpayer funding for the military detention of children by any country, including Israel.

We saw an uptick in the backlash against Palestine advocates during this spring’s solidarity protests, but we are also seeing a wave of people mobilized to speak out for Palestinian freedom. The courageous work of El-Kurd and

A more complete archive of these letters can be found on The Nation’s website, TheNation.com.
I don’t know Mohammed El-Kurd personally, but I have been hearing about him for years. As long ago as 2012, a friend who was active in the Sheikh Jarrah solidarity movement told me about him, this brilliant, brave, sweet, sensitive boy that I absolutely had to meet. Settlers had at that point taken over half of El-Kurd’s family’s house. (Quite literally: They split it in half and lived side by side in what must have been an unbearable intimacy.) The El-Kurds were living in fear of eviction and of horrendous violence, but also with the daily realities of the occupation at its ugliest and most personal level: constant insults, harassment, threats, and humiliation, a level of insecurity that is impossible for most of us to imagine.

I never ended up meeting him, but I was not surprised when, this past spring, evictions were once again pending in Sheikh Jarrah, and El-Kurd, all grown up, emerged as a powerful voice of dissent. To be a vocal opponent of injustice in Jerusalem, if you are Palestinian, means becoming a target. Outspoken Palestinians, especially if they are as charismatic and eloquent as El-Kurd, are smeared as terrorists, extremists, anti-Semites. The result is that, time and again, Palestinians get silenced. The threat they pose to the unbearable status quo is kicked once again into the dark.

The Nation has for years been a bright and brave exception to the general censorship that pervades US media reporting on Palestine. It is one thing, of course, to give a platform to American Jews who are critical of Israel, and another thing entirely to give Palestinians the opportunity to speak for themselves. El-Kurd’s perspective and his voice are irreplaceable, and I am eagerly looking forward to his next dispatch.

Ben Ehrenreich
Barcelona

I want to commend The Nation for creating the position of Palestine correspondent and hiring Mohammed El-Kurd in that role. Before his powerful piece on Beita (“A Night With Palestine’s Defenders of the Mountain,” TheNation.com), I don’t think most American readers knew what they had been missing. Now they do. I don’t allow myself too much optimism about Israel-Palestine, but I confess that, upon reading El-Kurd’s first piece as Palestine correspondent, I couldn’t help but think that your move will be mimicked by other publications, whose editors will one day look back upon their current coverage with shame.

Nathan Thrall
Jerusalem

I write to commend The Nation for making Mohammed El-Kurd part of your team. He brings a voice from the heart of Palestine, bearing witness to the daily realities Palestinians face on the ground and sharing them with your readers. What a breath of fresh air! El-Kurd is also no novice at this. For years, I have watched him closely as he has been telling his story, his family’s story, and Palestine’s story to the world via social media.

For too long, voices like El-Kurd’s have been missing from our conversation, and reporting on Palestinians’ lived experiences, through Palestinian eyes, is desperately needed. Sure, there will be those defending Israel’s apartheid project who will bristle at the idea that a Palestinian view would be so represented in your pages. Such ire is but further evidence of the need for El-Kurd’s voice.

El-Kurd also comes from a generation of Palestinians that will have far more to do with shaping the future on the ground than the leaders of the past. Your readers are served well by reading the reporting he will bring, and I hope they will pay careful attention to his contributions. I know I will.

Yousef Munayer
Non-Resident Fellow, Arab Center
Washington, D.C.

As a professor at Brooklyn College, where Mohammed El-Kurd is getting his MFA in poetry, I was thrilled to learn that he had been hired as your Palestinian correspondent. This is an excellent move for The Nation and the nation. We are desperately in need, in this country, of the kind of eye and ear El-Kurd has brought to bear on the situation in Palestine, and it’s a credit to your magazine that he now will have a place in your pages.

Corey Robin
Distinguished Professor of Political Science
Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center
Brooklyn

The Nation has done a great thing by appointing Mohammed El-Kurd as its Palestine correspondent. There are no Palestine correspondents in the mainstream US media, for no possible reason other than the assumption—even now—that Palestinians, uniquely, are not to be trusted in the telling of their own lives. You have opened the door to change, a change that could go some way toward correcting the grossly lopsided American coverage of Israel and Palestine. I’m thrilled to read El-Kurd in your pages. I’m grateful to The Nation for doing what’s right.

Riva Hocherman
New York City
In 1883, less than 20 years after emancipation, Curtis Gentry bought nearly 1,500 acres of undeveloped land in Shiloh, a rural community in the Alabama county where he had once been enslaved. Alongside his brother Turner, with whom he was able to reunite after emancipation— unlike the members of so many other Black families—Gentry cleared that property, uprooting trees, brush, and undergrowth. Once the land was arable, he planted and harvested an array of crops, including ribbon cane, corn, and peas.

“He was a hard worker,” Bernice Atchison, Gentry’s granddaughter-in-law, told me. “Not only did he clear his own land, but he took jobs helping white people clear their land.” He taught his family how to take care of the farm while he worked on other people’s farms, bringing in extra money to the household.

Gentry’s children continued to farm after their father’s death, and each subsequent generation was trained in the ways of tending to their inherited land trust. When Atchison married Gentry’s grandson Allen in 1953, the young couple were given charge of nearly 280 acres of farmland, which included amenities built by those who came before. “We had a ribbon cane mill that made syrup. We had a saw mill. There was an old still that they had used to make whiskey back in those days,” Atchison said. “I loved farming, because you have to come to understand the land.”

In 1959, the Atchisons bought another 39 acres, and two years later, they built a house in which they would raise eight children. The couple sold vegetables and produce to loyal customers, most of whom worked in nearby factories and plants. In 1981, just after the Atchisons were certified as United States Department of Agriculture pig breeders, they received a letter from the USDA notifying them that they qualified for federal loans to buy “farrowing pens for the sows to have their little babies in,” Atchison said. She and Allen had spent years helping neighbors build their own farrowing pens, which had been paid for with USDA farm subsidies. “Helping Mr. Waldorf and Mr. Jones and Mr. Scott, we saw that the loan program had worked for them. So we went down to the USDA to get the money to build ours,” she said.

But there was a crucial difference. “They were white, and we were Black,” Atchison explained. When she and Allen went to the local Farm Service Agency office in 1981, the FSA representative, a white man named Mr. Byrd, told them there were no loan applications available, Atchison said. On a return visit, Byrd told the couple he saw no reason they needed to expand their farm.

The Atchisons made multiple follow-up trips to the FSA office, but each time, Byrd informed them they would have to...
“We had years of trying to get loans. And [the USDA agent] would tell us that there was no money or that it was all gone.”
—Bernice Atchison, farmer

wait until local white farmers received their USDA loans before the couple could even apply. From the early 1980s to the 1990s, the Atchisons were denied USDA subsidies not only for forrowing pens and pig feed but also for equipment, fertilizer, and land purchases. “We had several years of trying to go back and get loans that was supposedly available. And, of course, he would just tell us that there was no money or that it was all gone,” Atchison said. “It happened several years, year in and year out. He would tell you, ‘Oh, come back in the spring. Maybe there will be some [money] then.’” Once, when they finally succeeded in filling out an application, “Mr. Byrd tore up our application and threw it in the wastebasket. I gave him a little piece of my mind, and he told me, ‘Nigger, ain’t no money here for you.’”

The couple got no response to multiple complaints they sent to the USDA civil rights office in Washington, D.C. Ronald Reagan had gutted the office in 1983, after which, staffers later admitted, they “simply threw discrimination complaints in the trash without ever responding to or investigating them.” Back in Alabama, Byrd kept his position as the agency’s local loan gatekeeper.

Since 1965, multiple federal agencies—most notably the USDA itself—have issued reports citing, as the US Commission on Civil Rights put it that year, “unmistakable evidence that racial discrimination within the Agriculture Department ‘has served to accelerate the displacement and impoverishment of the Negro farmer.’” Through discriminatory loan denials and deliberate delays in financial aid, the USDA systematically blocked Black farmers from accessing critical federal funds. “If you are Black and you’re born south of the Mason-Dixon Line and you tried to farm, you’ve been discriminated against,” Lloyd Wright, the director of the USDA Office of Civil Rights under Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, and a Black Virginia farmer, told me. The debts Black farmers consequently accrued cost them millions of acres, which were then snapped up by white buyers. In 1920, the number of Black farmers peaked at nearly 1 million, constituting 14 percent of all farmers. But between 1910 and 1997, they lost 90 percent of their property. (White farmers lost only 2 percent in the same period.) As of 2017, there were just 35,470 Black-owned farms, representing 1.7 percent of all farms. The land Black farmers lost, some 16 million acres, is conservatively estimated to be worth $250 billion to $350 billion today.

In 1997, facing mounting debt, Bernice Atchison signed on as a plaintiff in Pigford v. Glickman, a class-action lawsuit against the USDA brought by Black farmers alleging that the agency had discriminated against them and failed to respond adequately to discrimination complaints. In the consent decree issued two years later, and in a second settlement in 2010, the USDA agreed to provide claimants with foreclosure relief, priority consideration for future federal farm loans, access to the agency’s land inventory, and billions of dollars to cancel the wrongful debt and interest charges that resulted from the agency’s discrimination. But the promised resolution never came. Instead, the USDA continued to seize Black farmers’ land through foreclosure, and the Justice Department under George W. Bush and Obama poured millions of dollars into fighting claims and denying payouts. Many surviving Pigford farmers are deeper in debt today than they were before the lawsuit.

Atchison was among those who never received debt cancellation. She has become one of the most visible and vocal Pigford plaintiffs and has testified about the failures of the settlement before Congress. Atchison and her family have lost more than 250 acres since the 1980s. She still farms the 60 acres that remain, raising “enough to fill up my three deep freezers” and to share with her kids. Allen died in 1992, amid the couple’s battles with the USDA.

In March 2021, President Joe Biden signed the coronavirus relief package, which includes $4 billion in debt relief for “socially disadvantaged farmers,” a designation that includes Black, Native American, Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Islander farmers. Despite the diversity of that coalition, the bill was attacked by conservatives like South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham as slavery “reparations,” though economists at Duke University and Harvard Law School reported that the measure offers a “pittance” compared with the land’s true value.

Also lost in the discussion of the bill was the fact that it offers debt cancellation only to farmers who have outstanding USDA loans. But because of the agency’s racist lending policies, few Black farmers ever received USDA money in the first place. Wright estimates that only 8 percent of Black farmers would benefit from any USDA loan cancellation program. Nonetheless, at least 13 lawsuits have been filed by white farmers arguing that the law unconstitutionally permits “reverse racism.” Injunctions issued in those cases by judges in Tennessee, Florida, and Wisconsin have effectively stalled debt relief.

“Black farmers have been denied services by the Department of Agriculture for 150 years. Now that a little bit of money is supposed to go to people who have been harmed for the last century and a half, white farmers have suddenly decided it’s inappropriate for one group to get money that another group does not,” Wright told me. “I tell folks that we didn’t get 40 acres and a mule. Neither did Black farmers get debt relief under Pigford. So this [the halt in payouts] is consistent with all of the other promises that have been broken.”

The USDA has vowed to fight those lawsuits, but many doubt they will ever see fairness from “the last plantation,” as the USDA is known among Black farmers. Atchison told me that she is not hopeful her acres will be returned.
"The land has been resold a couple of times since it was originally sold. I don’t know whether it can ever be retrievable," she said. "If I had gotten those loans, just think about where we would be today. Think about the assets that I would have today. That was generational wealth. Our wealth was taken away."

The use of debt to gain control of ever more land in the United States is almost as old as the country itself. In 1803, Thomas Jefferson endorsed usurious lending to Indigenous peoples as a colonial land-grabbing scheme. "To promote this disposition to exchange lands, which they have to spare and we want," Jefferson wrote in a letter to future president William Henry Harrison, "we shall push our trading houses, and be glad to see the good and influential individuals among them run in debt because we observe that when these debts get beyond what the individuals can pay, they become willing to lop them off by a cession of lands." During the Civil War, Black enslavement would be abolished in name, only to be supplanted within a decade by debt slavery in the form of sharecropping. Instead of sharing in the crop yields of the farmland they worked, landless Black laborers—many of whom were tenant farmers on the same lands where they had once been enslaved—were ensnared in a cycle of perpetual debt and poverty. Under the Black Codes, a series of oppressive laws passed throughout the South during Reconstruction, African Americans could be arrested for breaking or attempting to renegotiate labor contracts and saddled with fines they were forced to work off. Attempts to escape debt servitude were met with white terror violence. Black sharecroppers involved in unionizing efforts and other acts of dissent were massacred in 1919 in Elaine, Ark.; in 1931 in Camp Hill, Ala.; and in 1935 in Lowndes County, Ala.

The government’s reversal on its promise to give millions of newly emancipated Black folks 40 acres and a mule stood in contrast to its land-giveaway policies for white citizens. The Homestead Act of 1862 took some 270 million acres of territory that had been taken from Native Americans—10 percent of all US public lands—and reallocated it in 160-acre parcels to 1.6 million Americans, almost all native or foreign-born whites, the ancestors of roughly 45 million living American adults who continue to reap generational wealth from that land grab. The Southern Homestead Act of 1866 also put free and low-cost public lands into the hands of an overwhelmingly white cohort of owners. Despite being denied these sorts of government handouts, emancipated Black farmers had acquired 3 million acres by 1875, a figure that would rise to 12 million by 1900. Land ownership by Black farmers reached its peak in 1910, when they owned between 15 million and 19 million acres.

In the 20th century, mechanization and industrialization transformed farms from “labor-intensive to capital-intensive operations,” as the historian Pete Daniel writes. Debt became endemic, with farmers borrowing money during planting season and recouping the funds when crops were harvested and sold. "If you don’t get your money on time, then you’re not going to be able to be successful," Lucious Abrams, one of the six original Pigford litigants, told me. "In order for you to have a successful crop, you need to start the first of the year putting out your lye and fertilizer, preparing your land, and seeing what type of nutrients you need to put out there. If you get your money in May or June, it’s almost time to start gathering your crop again.” For Abrams, the USDA’s loan disbursements often didn’t come in time: “They just stretch it out, and you don’t get your money till late. You don’t get enough money to operate—just enough to hang yourself.”

Abrams’s experience was not unique. As the House Committee on Government Operations concluded in a 1990 report, the USDA “categorically and systematically denied minority farmers access and full participation in the multitude of Federal Government programs designed to assist them” and therefore is “directly responsible for the loss of land and resources these farmers have experienced.”

A 1996 USDA-commissioned study found that “97 percent of disaster payments went to white farmers, while less than 1 percent went to black farmers,” and that white men were...
given thousands more in loan packages than Black men. The agency’s Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) in 1997 determined that the USDA “took three times as long” to process Black farmers’ loans as those of white farmers, and even when a loan was approved, it often “never arrives...making it impossible for the farmer to earn any money from the farm.”

The CRAT study also found that Black farmers who appealed “well in advance of planting season” to their local FSA office for loans were often falsely informed that no applications were available or were denied critical information required for the application to be processed. In 1998, the USDA’s National Commission on Small Farms reported that Black farmers were subjected to “indifference and blatant discrimination...in their interactions with USDA programs and staff.”

Local control over USDA loan disbursement is at the heart of the problem, Wright and others said. Three- to 11-person elected panels called county committees essentially control every aspect of FSA financial aid distribution at the local level, including hiring the staffers in agency offices. “The county committee system is set up to take care of their family, their friends, and themselves. And Blacks are not one of the above,” Wright told me. “They need to eliminate the county committees and...[hire staffers] federally like the rest of the government. Local control is great in most environments, but it has never worked for Black folks.”

The USDA’s horrific treatment of Black farmers also results from a civil rights department that has consistently failed in its responsibilities to the farmers it serves and to its own employees. Allegations of racism against employees have dogged the agency since the 1970s. “We’ve had racial epithets. We’ve had people called ‘nigger.’ We’ve had women assaulted. We’ve had women be retaliated against for making complaints,” said Lawrence Lucas, a high-level USDA staffer for nearly two decades and a former president of the USDA Coalition of Minority Employees. “The culture at USDA is the reason why Black farmers are having the problems they’re having now.”

The problems with Pigford began even before the consent decree was approved. More than 40 civil rights organizations and plaintiffs, including Timothy Pigford, filed letters with the US District Court objecting to the proposed settlement agreement, and in March 1999, hundreds of debt-saddled farmers trekked to Washington, D.C., to register their opposition in person. USDA lawyers and the lead attorney for the class, Alexander Pires, testified that every farmer would get full debt cancellation under the consent decree they had negotiated, which set up a two-track system. Track A offered, in Pires’s words, a “virtually automatic” $50,000 payment to farmers, even if they lacked documentary evidence. This was ideal because most farmers did not keep records, Pires testified, noting he had waived the discovery process during negotiations for the same reason.

Track B offered unlimited money if farmers had documents to back up their debt claims, but the more stringent “standard of proof was not burdensome,” USDA lawyers testified. And

The land Black farmers lost, some 16 million acres, is conservatively estimated to be worth $250 billion to $350 billion today.
if neither track appealed to a farmer, attorneys claimed, they could opt out of the decree and file their own lawsuit.

Plaintiffs responded with a litany of objections. The consent decree did not compel the USDA to return wrongfully seized farmland, nor did it direct the USDA to punish employees who discriminated. (The USDA explicitly refused Judge Paul Friedman’s request to add a sentence stating it would make future “best efforts” to ensure employees followed anti-discrimination laws.) Farmers argued that $50,000 “won’t even buy a medium-sized tractor,” as Pigford complainant Vernon Breckinridge put it. (Class counsel admitted to guesstimating that the $50,000 figure would suffice for Black farmers based on the $37,500 payment that Tuskegee experiment victims received, though the agricultural economist Donald McDowell had calculated fair compensation at $250,000.) Plaintiffs also questioned class counsel’s decision to negotiate away discovery, which meant that the USDA was under no obligation to provide Black farmers with information, including from the farmers’ own files. If an arbitrator ruled against a Black farmer, the farmer got no money at all and had no right to appeal.

“If I were a mass murderer who was found guilty of the most heinous crime in the world, I have a right to appeal,” James Morrison, of the National Black Farmers Association, said at the hearing. “Are you telling me the farmer who has spent his entire life farming, who has been denigrated, who has been castigated, who has seen nothing short of pure hell, cannot have any opportunity to control what his fate is going to be based on?”

Over those protests, Judge Friedman approved the consent decree in April 1999, writing in his opinion that it was “a good first step.” Class counsel had estimated the number of complainants would hit 2,000. Instead, more than 22,000 Black farmers applied and were deemed eligible to join the class.

Five years later, it was clear the consent decree had failed. A 2004 investigation by the Environmental Working Group (EWG) found that 9 out of 10 Black farmers had been “denied any recovery.” An estimated 64,000 farmers were rejected because they missed the court’s original filing deadline, even though they submitted claims before the court’s “late claims” period. Another 9,000 had their claims refuted and got nothing. Just 10 percent of 173 eligible Track B filers were granted compensation. Of Pigford's 22,700 claimants, just 371 got any kind of debt relief.

Under the Bush administration, the USDA “aggressively fought claims by African American farmers, contracting with United States Department of Justice lawyers who spent at least 56,000 staff hours and $12 million contesting individual farmer claims for compensation,” the EWG study found. In many cases, local FSA employees of the USDA simply contested Black farmers’ claims of racial discrimination.

“The government is holding up progress with technicalities; and the same USDA agents that discriminated against the farmers in the first place are now being called upon to respond to and reject applications from Black farmer class members. The adjudicators are not making fair and consistent rulings which has caused many of the rejections,” J.L. Chestnut, a civil rights lawyer and a Pigford class-action attorney, said in 2000 after seeing the number of rejections. His law partner added that Black farmers should go “into the streets to fight for justice in this case. Do not trust the judge, the lawyers, the adjudicators, the monitor or anyone else to resolve this case.”

A major barrier to compensation was the consent decree’s “specifically identified, similarly situated white farmer” standard, which required Black farmers to locate a white farmer “in their county who applied for the same benefit program at the same time, with the same acreage, the same type of crop, the same credit history, and received a higher payment or better treatment than the African American farmer.” The USDA had some of this information in its files, but agency lawyers denied Freedom of Information Act requests from Black farmers and their attorneys. Without those details, Pigford farmers were forced to rely on public records and guesswork. One Black farmers’ advocate described applications getting rejected for misspellings of white farmers’ names and other minor issues.

“When they gave away discovery we was already sold out, because then you put the burden of proof back on the farmers.”

—Lucious Abrams, farmer

Justice undone:
J.L. Chestnut, a civil rights lawyer and Pigford class-action attorney, raised concerns about the settlement after seeing the number of rejected claims.

“When they gave away discovery we was already sold out, because then you put the burden of proof back on the farmers—but you already had evidence that discrimination transpired all over the country over the years,” Abrams told me. “Al Pires and them, the last thing they told me was I had to go and find a similarly situated white farmer. How can I do that other than break into their fancy USDA offices, go through all the files, and then have the police be out there to take my behind to jail?”

In October 2000, just two weeks before a major filing deadline, Pires and his team admitted to the court that they were way behind. To ensure that “counsel’s failings should not be visited on their clients,” Judge Friedman added stipulations to ensure that claims would not be excluded from review. Less than six months later, he noted that the lawyers had “failed to meet the minimum requirement” on timely filings “even once,” which he labeled a “disturbing trend.” Less than two weeks later, after class counsel made what Judge Friedman called “the remarkable admission that they never had a realistic expectation of meeting” target dates, the court began to charge them daily fines for tardiness. Instead of improving submission rates, “counsel drastically increased the rate at which they withdrew
“The culture at USDA is the reason why Black farmers are having the problems they’re having now.”

—Lawrence Lucas, former president, USDA Coalition of Minority Employees

petitions,” a move that Judge Friedman wrote, “bring[s] into question Class Counsel’s fidelity to their client” and was “bordering on legal malpractice.” The US Court of Appeals would in 2002 also issue an opinion stating that Black farmers, as a result of class counsel’s incompetency, had experienced a “double betrayal: first by the [USDA], and then by their own lawyers.” Fearing for the fate of Black farmers, in 2001 Judge Friedman asked the American Bar Association Committee on Pro Bono and Public Services to “assemble a team of pro bono lawyers to assist Class Counsel on an emergency basis.” The effort made little difference.

“I went through two or three of those type of lawyers after Pires and them left me,” Abrams told me. “You sign up, they keep you for about a month, and then next thing you know, they drop you. Then a new one comes in, does the same thing.”

Bernard Bates had lost 950 acres of land, including some 200 acres originally homesteaded by his grandfather, who settled in Nicodemus, Kan., years after his own father fled the South after the Civil War. Bates told me that after a few difficult years in the 1980s, he tried to get a USDA loan but was denied an application. He joined Pigford, but his lawyer was of little use. “When we hooked up with Pigford, I thought we would have some help,” said Ava Bates, Bernard’s wife. “But in the end it was just a runaround. The lawyer lied all the way through. When we got back home and [Bernard] would try and get in touch with her, they would never answer their phone. They promised us a lot of stuff, but it wasn’t worth a hoot.”

In 2012, the former president of Bates’s local credit association signed an affidavit affirming that the lender’s board of directors, the federal land bank, and the local USDA office had colluded “to get Bernard out of farming” and that it had been decided they would “rather foreclose, even if they lost money, rather than to take Bernard’s money.” To this day, he has not gotten debt cancellation or his land back.

Attorney Tracy McCurty, the director of the Black Belt Justice Center and the co-organizer of a campaign to cancel the Pigford farmers’ debt, said there was a “ray of hope” in 2010, when Obama authorized $1.25 billion in debt cancellation funds for Black farmers who had been left out of the original class-action suit, a settlement that became known as Pigford II. But McCurty, Wright, and multiple farmers told me that because of poor oversight, much of the funding was squandered.

“Some of the attorneys informed the farmers that the agreement stated in black and white that ‘You’re going to get debt relief, so you really don’t need to continue to pay on this. Go ahead and buy feed and fertilizer and start farming,’” Wright told me. “So some of the farmers who could’ve struggled and paid their debts didn’t, because they were advised they didn’t have to. They ended up with interest and penalties accumulating for that five years, and it was so steep now they couldn’t pay. So many of them lost land that they otherwise would not have.”

Pires and his team were paid $15 million. After the second Pigford settlement, Judge Friedman granted a second team of lawyers a requested $90 million in attorneys’ fees and expenses. “They might have lined their pockets, but they didn’t do anything for the farmers,” said Everlyn Bryant, a Pigford legacy farmer from Arkansas. She and her late husband got $50,000—for short of the debt relief her family needed. They lost 900 acres to USDA foreclosure. “Even after the consent decree was done, I was telling the attorneys that $50,000 for a real farmer is nothing. It won’t even pay the diesel bill for one month.”

“Since the Pigford debacle, because farmers have these enormous debts, their credit is ruined with USDA. Their credit is ruined with other traditional lenders,” McCurty said. “How is it that these elder farmers in their 70s and 80s, who’ve suffered for over 30 years, are still having to present themselves pro se in federal court to delay foreclosure proceedings?”

“One of the things that really hurt was that I went across the country and talked with all these Black farmers. And this was supposed to make them whole again—and everything I told them was a lie,” Abrams told me. Living under the threat of foreclosure, his wife had a nervous breakdown; he has suffered from high blood pressure, diabetes, and kidney failure. “I thought that Pigford was going to make them whole again while they were living. A lot of them have died.”

N December 2020, President Biden nominated Tom Vilsack as agriculture secretary, infuriating many of the Pigford litigants. Lucas, the former president of the USDA Coalition of Minority Employees, said at the time that he was flooded with calls from Black farmers who worried that the appointment of Vilsack, who they believed had “shown such arrogance and indifference to civil rights,” confirmed their fear that they would never see justice. When Vilsack left the Agriculture Department at the end of Obama’s term in 2016, he presented a rosy picture of the strides the USDA had made to improve conditions for Black farmers and to end systemic racism within the agency. But according to Nathan Rosenberg and Bryce Wilson Stucki, who conducted a two-year analysis of Vilsack’s claims for The Counter, an investigative newsroom focused on food, the former agriculture secretary and his team distorted data to cover up the USDA’s continued failure to serve Black farmers. (Vilsack also made headlines in 2010 for firing Black USDA employee Shirley Sherrod based on false allegations.) After Vilsack asked Wright to return as head of the Civil Rights Office in 2009, his first task, Wright told me, was to tackle the 14,000 Bush-era discrimination complaints that had gone unaddressed, of
which, he and his team determined, 4,000 had merit. Many of those complaints exceeded the two-year limit on receiving compensatory relief, so Wright and others attempted to find a fix. “We drafted a bill to extend the statute of limitations, and some members of the Congressional Black Caucus found the money to pay for it, and that bill passed twice in the House,” Wright said. But the bill hit roadblocks in the Senate. “My office didn’t have the same contacts in the Senate as we did in the House. I found out that not only were we not being helped by Secretary Vilsack, but that he may have been putting sand in the gears. He gave me zero help in trying to get it done.”

The Counter’s investigation found that those farmers never had their unwarranted debts settled. “USDA actually foreclosed on some of them and attempted to foreclose on others before their cases were resolved—despite a moratorium, mandated as part of the 2008 farm bill, on exactly this practice,” Rosenberg and Stucki reported. In fact, from 2006 to 2016, the USDA foreclosed on “Black-owned farms at a higher rate than on any other racial group…. The agency was more than six times as likely to foreclose on a Black farmer as it was on a white one,” they wrote.

“They just can’t assume that every time they aren’t successful it’s because of discrimination,” Vilsack would later state. “I think you can do a service to your client by not only fighting hard for them, but also explaining why they didn’t get the help that they thought they were entitled to, and it wasn’t anything to do with the color of their skin or their culture or whatever.”

“The reason why we do not trust Tom Vilsack is because during his administration, farmers continued to lose their land,” Wright told me. After all, the discrimination that spurred the Pigford lawsuit isn’t in the past. A Politico study revealed that the USDA “granted loans to only 37 percent of Black applicants last year in one program that helps farmers pay for land, equipment and repairs but accepted 71 percent of applications from white farmers.”

Wright is not hopeful Black farmers will ever get their due. “Trump was able to pay farmers these soybean payments when the product price went down because China was not buying soybeans,” he said. “If you want to do something, you get it done. If you don’t want to do it, you do process. And all the Department of Agriculture has done since this administration got in is process, as it relates to people of color.”

The USDA has said it plans to fight the lawsuits that are currently holding up debt cancellation payments to Black farmers. But in August, the agency failed to appeal one of the preliminary injunctions by the appointed deadline. McCurty, who has been aiding Black farmers with legal issues for years, believes that winning the court challenges is a long shot in any case. She has pushed for Senator Raphael Warnock, who proposed the $4 billion in debt cancellation in stand-alone legislation in February, and Senate cosponsor Cory Booker to seek more creative solutions. In September, Booker announced plans to include debt erasure for Black and other minority farmers in the budget reconciliation package that Democrats are currently drafting.

In order to sidestep the lawsuits that are preventing the funds allocated by the Covid relief act from being disbursed, the proposed bill would amend the American Rescue Plan by eliminating any mention of “socially disadvantaged farmers.” Instead, the bill’s provisions include 100 percent loan cancellation to USDA farm loan borrowers who fall under the category of “economically distressed.” It also allocates $1 billion to debt restructuring for farmers. And just over another billion is divided among various services, including $350 million to those “determined to have suffered discrimination in Department of Agriculture farm lending programs.”

Wright, McCurty, and Lucas, who are advising Democrats on how to move forward with the bill, caution that history shows that if the USDA doesn’t explicitly make provisions for Black farmers, they are almost certain to be discriminated against yet again. To that end, Wright has suggested that “historically underserved farmers” should be one qualifier of eligibility for full debt cancellation, and that the $350 million allotted to victims of USDA discrimination be raised to $1 billion.

But whether any reconciliation bill will be passed at all remains to be seen. And every few months, another Pigford legacy farmer dies without seeing the federal government, or this country, do right by them. “Martin Luther King once said to tell Black folks to wait is the same as saying ‘never,’” Wright told me. “I’m not optimistic that they’ll get relief from any of these provisions, although I’m convinced that the president really intended that these programs be fairly implemented. The last plantation hasn’t caught up yet with that.”
In plane sight: Loadmasters look over Tumon Bay, Guam, during Exercise Cope North.
To get onto her family’s land, Monaeka Flores drives through a gate guarded by US military security, then continues up to a booth, where an officer scans her special military-issued ID and waves her through. Or at least that’s how it’s supposed to work. Mishaps often snarl the trip. Sometimes security mixes up her personal information with her family’s. Other times she’s barred from the land outright. In July, she missed a family barbecue because her ID, which needs to be renewed annually, had expired, and she hadn’t made it to the security office in time to get a new one. Hosting is a crapshoot, too, since the military requires visitors to get cleared before entering. Flores said a friend had recently been turned away because the background check program was down when they went to the security office.

The land, at the northern end of Guam, a US territory in the western Pacific, has been in Flores’s family for five generations. Her grandfather’s family fished, hunted, and made a living farming coconuts and raising pigs on it. But the military took the farmland in a land grab after World War II and left the rest sandwiched between two federal properties. To the immediate south is Andersen Air Force Base, the only base in the region able to service the United States’ heaviest bombers. To the north is a wildlife refuge—land the Department of Defense handed over to the US Fish and Wildlife Service instead of to the families from whom it was stolen. There is no entrance to Flores’s family’s land on the refuge side, so they must access it through the base.

The arrangement is “cumbersome, dehumanizing, demoralizing,” Flores told me. It’s part of why she and her fellow Indigenous dissenters use a particular word to characterize the US military presence: “occupation.”

Unlike Flores’s family, others across the 212-square-mile island had their land fully seized by the Pentagon, never to be returned. The military took homes, farms, and ranches to create the 23-square-mile Air Force base, the 3,000-acre telecommunications site directly south of it, and a 2,000-acre addition to the base. To build a magazine to store heavy naval munitions, the military annexed 28 square miles of Guam’s southern inland, including family properties and what is now the island’s largest reservoir. And to construct a sprawling shipyard and the main facilities for a US naval base, the military uprooted an entire village that had been bombed during World War II and moved its residents to the muddy inland hills.

Since World War II, the US military has occupied between a third and a half of Guam’s land. Construction and training have destroyed ancestral sites of its Indigenous people, the CHamorus, and damaged much of the island’s aquatic and wooded ecosystems. Decades of military dumping, spills, and herbicide use have left Guam riddled with toxic sites, many of which have yet to be cleaned.
The Pentagon’s interest in Guam stems from its strategic location: Less than 2,000 miles from Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai, and Manila, Guam and the nearby Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands are by a wide margin the US territories closest to East and Southeast Asia. For much of the past century, the military has used Guam as a hub for its operations in the region, earning it the moniker “the tip of the spear.”

Now, with US foreign policy posturing more aggressively toward China, the Department of Defense is sharpening its spear and massively increasing its forces and facilities on Guam.

The buildup, mostly in its construction phase after more than a decade of contentious planning, will relocate about 5,000 Marines to Guam. To accommodate them, the military is razing thousands of acres of Guam’s northern forests—home to unique and fragile ecosystems, the island’s main source of drinking water, and countless CHamoru burial and cultural sites—to build housing, a live-fire training range complex, a hand grenade range, and other training facilities. The military is also constructing an Army missile defense system and an aircraft carrier berthing station, which will destroy dozens of acres of coral reef. On the Northern Mariana Islands, it hopes to build an airfield, training sites, and a bombing range.

I recently traveled to Guam to spend time with some of the grassroots activists who are resisting the military buildup. While they’ve had significant wins over the years, they’re limited by their status as colonial subjects, and so far their advocacy has mostly been steamrolled by military bureaucracy. They fear that the growing militarization will further devastate the island’s environment and their ancestral sites and practices and may even, someday, make their home unlivable.

“There’s so much at stake. We’re the collateral damage of empire. And empire is betting on us being exhausted.”

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Before it was the tip of the spear, Guam was the “USS Guam.” The nickname, used by the Navy, describes the period of naval governorship on the island, which began in 1898 when the United States acquired Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War. “The Navy commander is the captain of the ship of Guam; he basically has control over the entire island the way he has control over a ship,” explained Michael Bevacqua, a CHamoru activist and professor and the curator of the Guam Museum.

In 1901, the US Supreme Court legalized the Navy’s authority over Guam. In decisions known as the Insular Cases, the court ruled that the US Constitution isn’t fully applicable on “unincorporated territories” like Guam, allowing naval governors to implement a harsh colonial program. Among other abuses, naval administrations codified racial segregation, forced CHamorus to speak English instead of their native language, and imposed heavy taxes that often resulted in the military seizing family lands.

The naval administrations continued until December 1941, when the Japanese military attacked Hawaii, Guam, and half a dozen other US and British colonies. US forces stood little chance on Guam, and its island chain, known as the Marianas, became Japanese outposts, ushering in one of the darkest times in CHamoru history. The Japanese military marched thousands of residents to forced labor camps and tortured thousands more. It implemented an assimilation program, forcing the CHamorus to adopt the culture of their third occupier in less than half a century. As the US regrouped its Pacific forces and began encroaching on the
islands, executions of CHamorus, including beheadings, became common.

The US military took the Marianas in 1944, with a bloody invasion that killed an estimated 70,000 people. Almost immediately, the United States made Guam a naval and logistics hub.

In 1950, in response to mounting pressure from CHamoru groups, Congress passed the Organic Act of Guam, which removed the naval governorship, granted residents US citizenship, and redesignated the island as an unincorporated territory of the US. Guam would go on to serve as a crucial logistics center for US wars in Korea and Southeast Asia, earning it new nicknames: “the supermarket of the Pacific” and “the world’s largest gas station.”

Despite the territory’s usefulness to various war efforts, it was not a desirable deployment for military personnel. “Guam is valuable, but it’s not diplomatically important,” so ambitious officers saw it as a nothing assignment, Bevacqua explained. For enlisted men, “it’s not American enough...but it also never had that exotic dimension that other overseas bases had, so coming to Guam sucked.” With the dreary reputation came another nickname: “the trailer park of the Pacific.”

It took the end of the Cold War for the military to speak of Guam in favorable terms again. A federal Base Realignment and Closure initiative in the 1990s called for a drawdown of US military facilities abroad; at the same time, US allies that host bases, particularly in Asia, had plans to replace one cold war with another. The island became part of a sprawling urban complex.
“It’s why some people say, ‘We have to support the military’—because of what they did in World War II.” —Michael Bevacqua

Retaking of Guam during World War II is the focal point in the contemporary telling of the island’s history: Every July, there are large festivities to celebrate Liberation Day (when activists have attempted to recast as Reoccupation Day). “The type of patriotism that many CHamorus feel today is born in these seeds,” Bevacqua noted. That patriotism, plus the promise of economic stability, leads Guam to have a higher rate of military enlistment than any US state.

“In terms of their understanding of their relationship to the United States, it’s stuck there,” Bevacqua said. “It’s why some people say, ‘We have to support the military’—because of what they did in World War II.”

(When I asked) Catherine Castro and Phillip Santos about the military buildup, they spoke at length about the Japanese occupation. Most people living on Guam today “don’t know what it smells like to be ruled by someone else,” said Santos (no relation to Angel Santos; many people on Guam have the same surnames).

I sat down with them at one end of a long boardroom table in the clean, carpeted offices of the Guam Chamber of Commerce. As the chamber’s president and the armed forces committee chair, respectively, Castro (who is not CHamoru) and Santos (who is) are two of the most prominent local voices in favor of the buildup. During the Base Realignment and Closure initiative in the 1990s, the chamber welcomed the Pentagon’s renewed interest in Guam. And as activists have grilled the military on its plans and portrayed the Department of Defense as an occupying power, the chamber has urged unity and preached the benefits of further militarization—particularly the economic benefits.

“We want to have good-paying jobs for our people, and having an expanded military presence on Guam would support that,” Castro said.

When I pressed them for specifics about the economic benefits, Castro and Santos pointed me to a Guam Department of Labor economist, who estimated that roughly 1,500 permanent Guam residents are currently working on military construction projects and that the buildup has so far brought in about $200 million in additional tax revenue. The econ-
omist also sent a spreadsheet indicating that, since 2015, the year the plans for the buildup were mostly finalized, the Defense Department has awarded $740 million in contracts to Guam firms and $790 million to off-island companies for work on Guam. It’s hard to determine how much of that money will go to Guam residents; Castro and Santos mentioned that they had been lobbying Washington to grant more temporary laborer visas because Guam doesn’t have nearly enough “skilled” workers. Contractors have said that the buildup could require 4,000 to 6,000 additional workers from abroad by 2023.

I asked Castro and Santos for their impression of the activists’ concerns—specifically the environmental ones. “The military has done a really, really good job of being economic... I’m sorry, environmental stewards of the area,” Castro replied. “I’m really sad to say that our own local population, we need to do a better job,” she added, going on to complain about litter and abandoned vehicles along the sides of village roads. She asserted that the activists who routinely raise environmental concerns are likely acting on “hearsay,” “not maybe having read” the documents the military published to justify its projects.

“If you look at the environmental impact studies that have been conducted in these areas, you will find what you are looking for,” Castro said.

“I was like a 10,000-page document, and they gave us 90 days to read it,” said Melvin Won Pat-Borja, describing the first draft of the environmental impact statement, or EIS, on the buildup that the military published in 2009.

Environmental impact statements are heavily researched documents mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act for certain construction projects. They’re meant to compel agencies to consider environmental health before embarking on large developments. EIS law also mandates a comment process through which the public can request information or bring up issues that may otherwise be overlooked. For many projects, including the military buildup, government agencies treat the EIS process as the main or even sole avenue of public consultation.

When the Pentagon published the draft EIS, it was immediately clear to many on Guam that the military was trying to slip one past their community. It was filled with jargon and technical studies, and the military initially gave them only 45 days—the minimum required—to comment on it. “Let’s put together this massive document that these illiterate CHamorus won’t read, let’s give them a small window to respond, and when they don’t respond, we’re going to turn around and say, ‘Well, we consulted you, and nobody had anything to say,’” said Won Pat-Borja, who was a public school teacher and poetry instructor at the time.

To many, the way the military handled the EIS process echoed the prevailing dynamic between the United States and Guam: “We exist in a relationship that’s based on consultation and not consent,” Won Pat-Borja said.

Determined to protect their island from unchecked militarism, Won Pat-Borja and a group of activist-minded CHamorus succeeded in winning an extension on the public comment period, then divvied up the draft EIS and got to work. “We didn’t have a name; we were just people kind of meeting and reading,” said Leevin Camacho, then a lawyer in private practice. They read about how the military planned to bring in 8,600 Marines and build an aircraft carrier berthing station, a Marine base, and training facilities. They read about how, at their peak, construction activities would add 79,000 residents to an island of roughly 160,000 people and how the increased military presence would suck nearly 6 million additional gallons of water out of the aquifer every day.

While digging into the document, the activists decided to mobilize. They adopted a name, We Are Guåhan, using the CHamoru word for Guam, and launched a campaign that called on the community to submit comments. When the public comment period was over, residents had submitted over 10,000, from deeply researched technical questions to general statements of
disapproval—each of which the military was required to address.

Of particular concern to We Are Guåhan and Guam residents was the military’s plan to construct live-fire training ranges. The military indicated that it planned to build the ranges near the remains of an ancient CHamoru village known as Pågat. The image of .50-caliber machine guns firing over a sacred site spurred people to protest. Riding that energy, We Are Guåhan and others sued the military, alleging that it didn’t properly consider alternatives for the live-fire ranges.

In 2012, the US government announced plans for a more modest buildup. It would reduce the number of Marines relocating to Guam to 5,000 and go through a new “supplemental” EIS process that would detail slightly trimmed projects and put forth a longer time line for implementing them. The following year, the military said Pågat was no longer its top choice for the live-fire training range complex. The State Department cited an “increasingly uncertain security environment” and the need to “maximize the operational capacity” of Pacific forces. But many Guam residents believe their activism played a large role in the changes. Given the power differentials, activists considered it a huge win—but they knew the victory was only partial.

The Pentagon’s new plan comes with a fresh set of threats. In addition to reducing the scope of the buildup, the military decided to relocate the live-fire training range complex to the northern tip of the island, near the wildlife refuge in an area known as Ritidian.

For construction of the Ritidian complex and the Marine base, the military has begun bulldozing around 1,000 acres of Guam’s northern limestone forest. For millennia, CHamorus have used the plant species that live in the targeted forest tracts for food, medicine, and spiritual practices. The military has committed to replanting certain species in an attempt to preserve the horticulture of the destroyed forest areas, but according to Frances Meno, a third-generation CHamoru healer, it’s nearly impossible to keep many of those plants alive outside of their wild habitat. She has tried to cultivate herbs for her work, but they rarely live for more than a few years in a garden environment, she said. Recent biological work backs up her experience: A University of Guam study found that an endangered cycad species planted in its natural environment had a 70 to 100 percent survival rate after 15 years, compared with 10 percent when planted in restoration sites with disturbed soil—the approach the military has taken with many of what it calls its “mitigation” efforts.

With the construction underway, Meno has already had confrontations with military security while trying to collect her herbs. “If the military keeps clearing our jungle,” she told me, “there is no point for us to be healers.”

To account for stray rounds, the military must establish a “danger zone” for the Ritidian complex—that is, an area outside of the ranges in the direction of fire that is clear of people when they’re in use. And to limit its land use, the military positioned the complex so that much of its danger zone is offshore. That particular section of ocean, however, is one of Guam’s most popular fishing areas. When the ranges are complete, those waters will be closed for as much as 75 percent of the year.

“I grew up here, and I’ve been fishing here since I was 6 years old,” fisherman Mike James said. “The military is important, but also, we’re important.”

As the threats to Guam multiply, resistance has ramped up. Members of We Are Guåhan and other dissidents have begun infiltrating the island’s halls of power and culture. Won Pat-Borja, the schoolteacher, is now head of Guam’s Commission on Decolonization, a government agency that’s pushing to change Guam’s political relationship with the United States. Bevacqua was also part of We Are Guåhan; in addition to his work as a historian and an educator, he has become a leader in the
CHRIS GELARDI

the military to decide how CHamoru ancestors and artifacts are respected. They surmise that this partly stems from a conflict of interest, as Lujan is in the military himself; he had to miss recent negotiations over the military’s historic preservation procedures because he was out on active duty with the Air Force Reserve.

As a territorial official, however, Lujan has no control over the military, which strong-arms his oversight in many of the same ways it does resident activism. In an August memo I obtained via a public records request, an Air Force engineer reminded Lujan several times that, though the military must consult him on certain matters, he has no power to dictate military activity. “There is no requirement that the agency receive [historic preservation officers’] ‘concurrence’ or ‘approval,’” the engineer wrote.

When I visited Lujan in his one-story cubiced office building, he was surprisingly candid about this dynamic. For much of the interview, he spoke about how his office is doing the best it can with an undersize staff. Then, as I got up to leave, he began to articulate Guam’s lack of power in the face of the US military. “They’ve done their EISs,” he said. “Unless you have some strong pull in Congress to change their mind, it’s happening.”

Lujan then marveled at the scope of the buildup—how it will bring an influx of people to tiny Guam. “Tell me how that’s going to affect a place,” he said. “Normally, for the worse.”

For many CHamorus, hiking Págat, the area they saved from the live-fire ranges, is a spiritual experience. Climbing down jagged limestone cliffs canopied by dense jungle, hikers come to a set of caves in which they can wade into the Northern Lens Aquifer in one of the few places it surfaces. Past the caves, they can walk among shards of pottery, grinding mortars carved in rock, and the stone stilts on which CHamorus built their homes, all dating from around AD 900 to 1700. The forest’s silence is punctured only by the sounds of footsteps and lizards scurrying out of their way—that is, until a military airplane or helicopter roars by, breaking the serenity with deafening force. It’s a reminder that even having preserved this place, CHamoru resistance hasn’t changed who’s ultimately in charge.

“You can’t really impact what’s happening here on a local level,” admitted Cara Flores, a We Are Guåhan organizer and founder of a CHamoru production house. “At the end of the day, it’s really Congress that decides what happens.”

And right now Congress is choosing to further militarize the Pacific. In addition to Guam and the rest of the Marianas, it is exploring plans to build new bases in the nearby Republic of Palau and Federated States of Micronesia, island nations to which the US has exclusive military access. For the most part, Washington seems keener on staring down China than listening to the Indigenous communities that would be caught in the crossfire.

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The great surprise of 2016 was not the rise and election of Donald Trump; that path had been laid out for more than 50 years by Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, Ronald Reagan, Pat Buchanan, Newt Gingrich, and the two Bushes. The great surprise was the emergence of Bernie Sanders. A proud, self-proclaimed democratic socialist, Sanders set his political sights on capitalism—especially in its corporate form—which he clearly named and then blamed for the economic inequalities, social injustices, concentrations of power, and neglect of public health that so deeply afflicted the country. Although he identifies as an independent in the Senate, Sanders chose to seek the Democratic
Party’s presidential nomination rather than run on his own or as a third-party candidate. Never before had a socialist done such a thing, and one might have expected a fast exit. Hillary Clinton surely did. But as we well know, Sanders attracted a mass following, especially among the young, demonstrating, it seemed, that socialism was no longer anathema or capitalism sacrosanct. As a result, 2016 proved to be a remarkable moment in American political history and, perhaps, an even more telling one in the history of American capitalism.

Capitalism has had a strange relation to the history of the United States. Whereas most societies of the Euro-Atlantic world have defined their histories at least in part around their transition from feudalism to capitalism or their complex (and often explosive) encounters with the latter, the history of the British North American colonies and then the United States has generally assumed a simultaneity in origins. The historian Carl Degler once wrote that capitalism came to North America “on the first ships,” and as simplistic as that might sound, he captured a wider sense that private property, acquisitiveness, and individualism were the foundations on which this country was built.

Some historians have emphasized the conflicts between different forms of capitalism—commercial, agricultural, industrial, corporate—but save for a couple of decades when social historical writing became prominent, capitalism in the United States has rarely been problematized as a historical phenomenon. Louis Hartz built an entire history of the “liberal tradition” in the United States around the absence of a feudal past, and while this so-called “consensus” view of American history was soon subjected to a withering attack by scholars, the break with European feudalism has generally been accepted. With the rise of neoliberalism and the end of the Cold War, capitalism all but vanished as a subject of interest—somewhat ironically, given the dominance that capitalism appeared to achieve around the world.

The crash of 2008, however, proved to be a scholarly as well as a social and economic wake-up call. The study of American capitalism gained new attention and soon spawned cottage industries around the history of slavery, the advent of financial instruments, and the racist exploitation that American capitalism has long appeared to thrive on. Many pieces—mostly monographic and narrowly construed—of what could be a big new story have come to litter the scholarly field, raising provocative questions that are often disconnected over time and space.

Jonathan Levy’s *Ages of Capitalism*, one of the first large-scale and synthetic works to pull together much of the new interest and interpretive orientation of this history-of-capitalism field, thereby fills an important intellectual need. It is an ambitious and impressive book, a cut above much of the recent literature not only in its scale but in its determination to construct a historical arc based on clearly articulated concepts. It may also share much more with the older, “consensus” view than Levy or the many other scholars who embrace his perspectives would care to think.

Unlike many who have been writing on the history of American capitalism, Levy explains how capitalism should be defined and identifies its stages of development and geographical variations. Also unlike many of his peers, Levy is not just offering an “economic” history: His book is a study of changing political economies and the attendant cultural manifestations (save for religion). Some of the best pages in the first half of *Ages of Capitalism* are, in fact, devoted to literature, social thought, and popular culture, to the ways in which Americans grappled with the challenges that capitalist relations and values presented and the ways in which capitalism reshaped the contours of everyday life. Levy has a grasp of economic theory that should satisfy even skeptical readers from the field of economics, together with a rich historical perspective that economists generally lack if not dismiss.

Current scholarly avoidances notwithstanding, capitalism has been understood in a variety of ways: as a form of labor exploitation and surplus extraction; as the privatization of property and the expanding circulation of commodities; as a large and increasingly interconnected web of production and exchange; and as all of these put together in multiple dimensions. Immanuel Wallerstein and, more recently, Sven Beckert have insisted on understanding capitalism as a world system with complex and differentiated parts. Levy does not engage with these interpretations; perhaps for the benefit of general readers, he simply lays out his own. Capitalism, Levy writes, is “capital.” Lest anyone imagine that this is just a tautology, he explains that capital is not a thing but a “process” in which a legal asset is imbued with a pecuniary value in view of its capacity to yield future gain. This is not just the profit motive, which Levy acknowledges has existed from time immemorial; instead, it is a historically specific form of investment in which money, credit, and finance are the crucial components, and the empowerment of capital’s owners (i.e., the capitalists) has been the result.

Levy presents his interpretation—including the salience of different types of liquidity—as three “theses” in the book’s introduction, although one would be hard-pressed to find a general thesis or argument that runs through the rest of the book. He also claims that the United States’ history of capitalism may be divided into four “ages” with steadily narrowing chronological spans. The first is the “Age of Commerce,” which takes us from Britain’s reorganization of its North American colonies to the secession of the slaveholding states: two full centuries. The second is the “Age of Capital,” which begins during the Civil War and extends to the Great Depression: eight decades. The third is the “Age of Control,” which encompasses the tumultuous period from the New Deal through the 1970s: five decades. And the last is the “Age of Chaos,” initiated by Paul Volcker’s interest rate “shock” and the election of Ronald Reagan, and it remains intact, according to Levy, as of this writing: four decades and counting.

Each of these ages, Levy continues, is marked by the preva-
The sprawling Age of Commerce presents Levy with some of his greatest synthetic challenges because of its transitional quality. He identifies 1660 as capitalism’s takeoff point owing to the mercantilist empire that England was intent on building once the English Revolution subsided and the monarchy was restored (of course, the English had been colonizing Scotland and Ireland with an iron fist well before the 17th century), but he also acknowledges the unevenness of capitalist development. The Earl of Shaftesbury—a “gentleman capitalist,” as Levy calls him—hoped to create a neo-feudal society replete with baronies in South Carolina, one of several proprietary colonies. (John Locke helped him draw up the plans.) Although that idea pretty much failed, the method of land distribution in South Carolina made it the most aristocratic of the American colonies and, later, states. Elsewhere, the household, with its own hierarchy of power and its orientation to subsistence and local trade, proved to be the center of economic life well into the 19th century. While some have regarded this household economy as a form of precapitalist “petty commodity production,” Levy sees it as the basis of expanding commercial growth chiefly because of the two forms of capital that defined the age: land and slaves.

Land speculation was surely rife from early on, and the pressure for land (Levy calls it lebensraum, invoking the Nazis’ ambitions to Germany’s east) convulsed North American politics—involving both the British government and Native peoples—for many decades. That pressure made for a “politics of property” that swept through Levy’s Age of Commerce. The American Revolution only further empowered white—especially rural—household heads, and in the ensuing struggle between the Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian visions of the country’s economic future, the Jeffersonians and their so-called “empire of liberty” won out, feeding a speculative credit cycle of booms and busts. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803, transacted on Jefferson’s watch, nearly doubled the size of the United States, moving it toward continental scale and making for a version of the West Indies in the lower Mississippi Valley. (Oddly, given its enormous political, economic, and demographic impact, Levy doesn’t mention that the purchase was made possible by the successful slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue.)

Land and slavery went more or less hand in hand during Levy’s Age of Commerce. Enslaved labor accounted for most of the North American export trade as early as the mid-18th century and helped propel the economic growth of the United States during the first half of the 19th. Indeed, as Levy sees it—following the conceptual logic of many other scholars in the burgeoning slavery-and-capitalism field—enslaved people epitomized the era’s “capital assets”: They were private property with transactional liquidity, riding the volatile credit cycles and steadily boosting their owners’ wealth and power.

Over time, the United States witnessed two capitalism taking hold, one based on land and enslaved laborers in the South and the other based on a developing industrial society in the North, where production had “sphered” from the home and wage labor had been turned into a “badge of male independence.” These capitalism were not, Levy tells us, fated to come into conflict. But after 1840, shifting commercial patterns and a divergence between “southern rigidity and northern transformation” made for a crisis in the “geopolitics of commerce” that harkened back to the Earl of Shaftesbury’s plan. The slave South seceded, and in the ensuing war, the Age of Commerce came to an end.

The Civil War and Reconstruction laid the basis for a new financial system and with it a new class of financiers.

Out of the ashes of war and emancipation (or “the political destruction of enslaved capital”) arose what Levy terms the Age of Capital. Better described as an “age of industrial capital”—since by Levy’s definition, every age of capitalism is necessarily an age of capital—this period encompassed America’s industrial revolution and the transformation of the United States into an industrial and increasingly urban society. The production of capital goods came to the fore; a new manufacturing belt developed that stretched from the Northeast through the Midwest; a new class of industrialists and financiers ascended to power; and a major reorganization of the production process—mass production—took place. Some of the greatest fortunes in American history were made in this era, and some of the most violent labor struggles erupted.

Levy places a great deal of emphasis on the “money question,” and for good reason. The Civil War and Reconstruction laid the basis for a new financial system and a new class of financiers who enriched themselves in the war-driven bond market, and one of the great—and ongoing—struggles was over the money supply and whether creditors or debtors would be the beneficiaries. The creditors won on a variety of fronts, and in the new political economy of post–Civil War America, the once-powerful slaveholding planters were relegated to the back bench of policy-making and the formerly enslaved (who made emancipation and the Confederate defeat possible) were left in thrall to sharecropping—in Levy’s words, a less “efficient capitalist economy” than slavery had been. The two figures hovering over Levy’s Age of Capital are Andrew Carnegie, who got his start in the railroad business, made a fortune in wartime finance, and became a pioneer of the steel industry, and Henry Ford, who drew on the wisdom of Taylorism and ushered in mass production and the assembly line.

But the sailing was not smooth. Between the Civil War and the dawn of the 20th century, two serious financial panics, each followed by a deep economic depression (in 1873 and 1893), rocked
American capitalism in town and countryside alike. Levy devotes two chapters to the social upheavals that ensued and that put “class conflict” into the political lexicon of the United States. Organizations like the Knights of Labor won a mass following, demanded an eight-hour workday, and denounced the system of “wage slavery.” Bitter strikes took place along the railroads and in factories, only to be crushed, in many cases, by private armies, state militias, the US Army, or court injunctions. In the agricultural districts of the South and the Plains, the Farmers’ Alliance and then the Populists joined in the critique of capitalism and shared both an “anti-monopoly” ideology and a commitment to cooperatives with the Knights. Yet their defeats were, in Levy’s account, virtually preordained. The “politics of property” gave way to the “politics of income,” and the class consciousness of the period was that of the capitalist class rather than the working class (“class consciousness from above”) or the agricultural producers. Progressivism, which gets limited attention here, subsequently turned “anti-monopoly” into “anti-trust” and “free silver” into the Federal Reserve. The corporatism and widespread fascination with social engineering—including racial segregation—that were central to what has been called the “corporate reconstruction” of American capitalism are almost entirely ignored by Levy, save for the example of Henry Ford.

What doomed the Age of Capital was the Great Depression, and what ushered in the Great Depression was the ever-repeating capitalist credit cycle, this time having infiltrated the New York Stock Exchange, which had soared to unprecedented heights—an “orgy of speculation,” some called it—during the 1920s before collapsing in 1929. In the aftermath, the fault lay with the Federal Reserve and the Hoover administration, both of which were committed to the gold standard. Despite an interest in “administrative intelligence” and an “associational state,” Herbert Hoover was ill-equipped either to recognize or to deal with the scale of the crisis, which, as Levy writes, “destroyed the U.S. economy and with it his presidency.”

From the rubble of the 1929 crash, Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal brought forth a new capitalist age, which Levy calls the Age of Control for its goals of “de-volatizing” capitalism and using the power of the state to put bread-winning men back to work. We don’t get much of a sense in Levy’s book of the changing political economy of the United States in the 1930s, which involved the growing influence in the Democratic Party of capital-intensive and internationally oriented industries and of newer investment bankers, in part because he effectively passes over the years between 1900 and 1920. But Levy does recognize the corporatist bent of the early New Deal interventions (especially the National Industrial Recovery Act) and the potential for the sort of authoritarian solution evident in Germany and Italy. Mussolini and his Fascist state received very good press in the United States during the 1920s and early ’30s (the head of the National Recovery Administration had a portrait of Mussolini in his office), and even the liberal journalist Walter Lippmann encouraged FDR to assume dictatorial powers.

The muscle-flexing of an increasingly militant labor movement pushed the New Deal leftward at crucial points in 1934 and 1935 and for a time helped ward off the growing opposition of Southern Democrats, the National Association of Manufacturers, the US Chamber of Commerce, and the quasi-fascist right. The result was the construction of a new liberalism focused on male pay as the chief currency of distributive justice and the maintenance of private control over investment. The New Deal would, therefore, remain a form of capitalism whatever its social democratic features or the complaints of its enemies.

Yet despite a number of significant developments—taking the United States off the gold standard, enabling large-scale capital-intensive corporations to return to profitability, and investing in public works, especially in the West and South (an embrace of Keynesianism)—the New Deal was floundering by the late 1930s, showing some of the features of a “jobless recovery.” It was, as most historians recognize, World War II that turned the tide. What Levy calls a “third” industrialization took shape, this one built around aluminum, hydroelectric power, and electronics and bolstered by “Big Government.” The United States won a “war of the factories,” and abetted by the Bretton Woods monetary agreements, it emerged with unprecedented power in global affairs, with a domestic “broker state” tied to a new national security apparatus. A postwar “hinge” in which labor and capital struggled over the meaning of “industrial democracy” swung in favor of capital, though with important concessions to organized labor in the form of wages, benefits, and cost-of-living adjustments. A “golden age of capitalism” based on home ownership and mass consumption dawned in the United States, while “varieties of capitalism” arose among the country’s allies, fortified by US consumer goods.

The problem, according to Levy, was that postwar liberalism never fashioned a public investment strategy, and by the mid-1960s it was being rocked by social rebellions across the country, a new war in Southeast Asia, and rising competition in the global market. Moreover, unlike during the New Deal years, the Democratic Party failed to maintain an adequate electoral coalition, especially as the Great Society was unveiled. Liberal Democrats began to suffer political defeats, and in the 1970s American capitalism saw a deepening crisis marked by recession and inflation (“stagflation”), declining corporate profit rates, a shift of capital to the Sun Belt, two “oil shocks,” and a growing offensive on the part of capital against the postwar gains of organized labor. The incomes of middle- and working-class men went flat, and a new political conservatism began to blossom among them (though this history is much more complex than Levy allows). Rather than revitalize New Deal Keynesianism, the Democrats, especially under Jimmy Carter, looked to deregulation. Carter termed the policy “de-control,” and in 1979 he appointed the inflation hawk Paul Volcker as head of the Federal Reserve. Volcker’s determination to dramatically boost interest rates helped bury Carter’s presidency and drove the last nail in the coffin of the Age of Control.

What doomed the Age of Capital was the Depression, but what ushered it in was its credit system.
ven so, Levy arguably could have placed the end of the Age of Control a decade earlier with the political debacles of 1968 (including the Tet Offensive in Vietnam), the growth of inflation, the first oil shock, Nixon’s scuttling of international gold convertibility, and the rise of Sun Belt capitalism (where real estate became the driving force and conservatism the anchor) at the expense of the manufacturing belt. Either way, a new period of American capitalism that Levy designates the Age of Chaos became ascendant in the 1980s, guided by an increasingly powerful financial sector seeking speculative investments and devising new instruments—leveraged buyouts, subprime mortgages, credit default swaps, financial derivatives—to fuel its rise.

The Reagan administration proved to be a great facilitator, both by accelerating the deregulatory trend begun under Carter and by providing federal aid for capitalism’s attack on labor, especially in crushing the Professional Air Traffic Controllers’ strike in 1981. “Neoliberal” ideas—Levy uses the term hesitantly—regarding markets, globalization, and the role of the government in promoting the mobility of capital came to prominence. Indeed, so influential did they become that in the 1990s the Clinton administration fully embraced them—along with Reagan’s heavy-handed approach to welfare and criminal justice reform—and, in the process, advanced the explosive expansion of the IT sector and the Internet. Not surprisingly, it was Clinton, following the lead of investment banker and Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, who oversaw the deregulation of some credit instruments, the loosening of home lending rules, and the repeal of the New Deal era’s Glass-Steagall Act, which had mandated the separation of commercial and investment banking. “Flow, fluidity, risk, individual choice, the blurring of boundaries, the collapse of walls, [and] globalization” became the values of Levy’s Age of Chaos (though it’s not entirely clear which age of capitalism was not chaotic).

Both finance capital and the Federal Reserve, now under Alan Greenspan, believed that they had found the keys to profits, transactional liquidity, low inflation, low interest rates, and the benefits of rising consumer debt, especially in terms of housing. The largest investment banks piled into the mortgage-bundling business, imagining an endless source of returns. But as we know, it all went bust in 2008, as home values faltered and defaults skyrocketed. The Great Recession, which ends Levy’s book, followed. With the Obama administration making policy during this great crisis, one might have expected the onset of a new age of capitalism. Yet here Levy sees only more continuity, as Obama assembled a team that harked back to the Clinton years and focused on bailing out the financial sector. What did change were the political dynamics: As Levy presents it, the left dropped the ball and handed the initiative to the right, particularly the Tea Party movement, which helped to scorch the Democrats in the 2010 midterms and laid the groundwork for the right-wing populism that quickly took charge of most state governments and then enabled Trump’s election in 2016.

Ages of American Capitalism is a big book, one that is clearly the product of wide-ranging research and serious thinking. Anyone interested in the economic history of the United States will find it of genuine value, and at nearly 800 pages, one would hesitate to ask for more subject matter and discussion. But there are odd omissions, oversights, and discontinuities that speak directly to a series of relevant questions: How did American capitalism develop? How did the political economy turn in a certain direction? How can we best understand some of the deepest struggles that erupted in this country? Did American capitalism ever have any important rivals?

Levy begins with the making of the British Empire and the political reorganization of Britain’s North American colonies. He also considers Jefferson’s “empire of liberty.” Yet this is pretty much the last we hear of empire, colonial conquest, the different forms of imperialism, and the extension of American power beyond the country’s borders—at least until we get well into the 20th century. There is barely a mention of Texas’s annexation (driven not only by slavery but also by the effort to control the international cotton market), of the US-Mexican War, of the massive financial investment in northern Mexico after the Civil War (which played a hand in the coming of the Mexican Revolution), of the “Open Door” policy (mentioned in a different connection), of the Spanish-American War (which turned the United States into a different kind of imperial nation), or of the Vietnam War (mentioned as a sidebar to other discussions).

Yet ever since the 1950s, when William Appleman Williams and his many students refashioned American “diplomatic” history by insisting that foreign and domestic politics were inextricably linked, it has been impossible to think about the search for markets, the drive for territorial buffers and bases, the construction of a national security state, and the interventions against socialist and communist movements as not being a fundamental part of the history of American capitalism. At the very least, we need some perspective on whether the development of American capitalism encouraged imperial projects and what these projects meant for it. After all, the American political economy between 1945 and 1989 was to a large extent organized around the growing threat of socialism and communism. How much, then, did the end of the Cold War, particularly the breakup of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, contribute not to a brief period of optimism for what Levy calls a “new economy” but to the apparently chaotic character of the entire age—to a new world disorder?

Levy is hardly the first to argue that the labor of enslaved African peoples was crucial to the economic growth of British North America and then of the early United States. Nor is he the first to depict enslavement as a form of capitalism or enslaved people as capital assets. Yet these are arguments that simply ignore the...
Monumental
Oscar Dunn and His Radical Fight in Reconstruction Louisiana
by Brian K. Mitchell, Barrington S. Edwards, and Nick Weldon
softcover • 256 pp. • $19.95
winner of a 2021 Phillis Wheatley Book Award
“At a time of a renewed struggle for racial justice, [Monumental] speaks to our moment as well as that of post–Civil War America.”—Eric Foner, Pulitzer Prize–winning historian

Monumental tells, for the first time, the incredible story of Oscar Dunn, who rose from slavery to become America's first Black lieutenant governor and acting governor. This graphic history recounts a uniquely American story about determination, scandal, betrayal—and how one man's principled fight may have cost him everything.
multi-decade debates, beginning with Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) and moving through Eugene Genovese’s *Political Economy of Slavery* (1965) and Barbara Fields’s *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground* (1984)—neither of which merit so much as a footnote—that complicated the relationship between slavery and capitalism, owing to the forms of power, labor exploitation, and development that systems of enslavement entailed. They ignore as well the rich literature on dependency and dual-economy theory (meaning the contradictory process of capitalist development) that has focused on Latin America and Africa but has been linked directly to slavery by scholars like Ernesto Laclau.

Those comfortable with understanding slavery as a form of capitalism (perhaps the essence of capitalism) but interested specifically in the concept of “racial capitalism” will be sorely disappointed. Levy not only doesn’t bother to address this—and there are many grounds on which to push back on the concept—but he also pretty much sidesteps the issue of whether American capitalism (perhaps the essence of capitalism) but interested specifically in the concept of “racial capitalism” will be sorely disappointed. Levy not only doesn’t bother to address this—and there are many grounds on which to push back on the concept—but he also pretty much sidesteps the issue of whether American capitalism fed, in fundamental ways, on the exploitation of people of color, both within the United States and elsewhere around the world.

What we call “Jim Crow” was more than a system of segregation and disenfranchisement; it was an entire regime of domination and subordination integral to the Southern road of post-emancipation capitalism, and it was very much a model for the organization of American capital overseas—think of the Panama Canal Zone, Central America, and the Philippines—as well as for South African apartheid.

Regarding capitalism principally as a process of investment has wider implications than merely for the study of slavery and race. It also limits our perspective on how capitalism, in its various forms, works to dispossess, dislocate, cast off, and ruthlessly exploit. What moves in Levy’s book is capital, and the movers are the capitalists. Little attention is given, for example, to migrant labor, in the United States or in global circuits, which went into the making of capitalism as an international system. To what extent does capitalism produce and then thrive on surplus populations as well as surplus value? Likewise, little attention is given to immigrant communities and how they simultaneously stoked the engines of capitalism and devised strategies and institutions designed to protect them from its worst effects. And there is little acknowledgment of American labor’s long history of civil and political exclusions. Save for a brief period in the mid-20th century, the American working class has been composed chiefly of people with precarious civil status and limited political rights: enslaved people, women, and children in the leading sectors before the Civil War; European and Chinese immigrants, many of whom returned home or could not vote, in the second half of the 19th century; people of African descent who fled disenfranchisement and repression in the South only to find new forms of discrimination and oppression in the North and West; and growing streams of undocumented workers, especially in recent decades, who run the constant risk of arrest and deportation.

Although Levy can be attuned to issues of culture, we miss as well an orientation to the collective sensibilities of the capitalists. His suggestion that the Gilded Age witnessed the class consciousness of capital is more or less dropped thereafter, in good part because we lack a clear view of the shifting relations between the different sectors of capital and the political parties and policies that governed the country: the core of political economy.

Donal Trump makes some appearances in the last pages of *Ages of American Capitalism*; Bernie Sanders makes none. Neither does Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party USA, the Popular Front, or the Progressive Party of 1948. Nor do we meet Thomas Skidmore, William Heighton, William Manning, or Fanny Wright, who in their own ways were critics of the capitalism emerging in the new republic, although we are reminded of the doubts raised by Dickens, Emerson, Melville, and especially Thoreau. Critics of capitalism on the right, from pro-slavery theorists to the Nashville Agrarians, are not to be found either.

Levy is no cheerleader for American capitalism; his book is written with a critical edge throughout. Yet it is also a book born of a neoliberal age when capitalism seemed omnipresent and hegemonic; when capitalists appeared as masters of the universe whose power derived from the invention and manipulation of financial instruments; and when opposition was regarded as insubstantial, misguided, and pointless. Occupy Wall Street is mentioned parenthetically, the anti-globalization movements of the 1990s not at all. The renewed interest in socialism, fed and harvested by Sanders in his two presidential campaigns, is passed over.

Strikingly, Levy concludes with the hope that a “democratic politics of capital” may emerge or that “post-capitalist futures” may be imagined. But there is little in his history that could be excavated for such a politics or such a future.
The Riddle of Who We Are

Francisco Goldman’s altered states

BY ED MORALES

Throughout his fiction and nonfiction, Francisco Goldman has mapped the many border lines that pervade his life. Some of his novels have mined his Central American family connections. His journalistic work has uncovered the genocidal policies of the US government and its Guatemalan government collaborators. Sometimes he has adopted the detached demeanor of a forensic investigator looking into horrible crimes. Other times he has revealed in arch wittiness or an achingly sad prose filled with regret about personal loss, the kind that every human feels. His portrayal of his mixed identity, however, is not mired in lament about his tragic, internally warring selves, but rather is defined by a celebration of the fully realized intersections that make up an individual. Guatemalan, Jewish, American, Latinx, widower, father, novelist, journalist, Northeasterner, Mexico City denizen—Goldman embraces them all.

With his latest novel, Monkey Boy, he returns to these many identities in an uncanny work of autofiction in which Goldman becomes Francisco Goldberg, a Jewish Guatemalan American novelist and journalist born in the Boston area and living in Brooklyn. Like most creatures of autofiction, Goldberg is not Goldman exactly, but he does allow Goldman to confront the trauma and pain that haunted the past of both of his parents as well as his own childhood. Like Goldman, Goldberg grew up in a Boston suburb, an “idyllic-seeming town off Route 128,” and is the product of a Jewish father who fled Ukraine because of its violent anti-Semitism and a Guatemalan Catholic mother forced into exile, as a result of US intervention.
and the country's own pogroms. *Monkey Boy* is a way to confront, work through, and even embrace these dark and unhappy legacies, to find meaning and joy in them.

*Monkey Boy* has larger ambitions as well. It seeks not only to tell us a story set in “America”; it asks us whether there ever was such a place. Breaking Goldberg's identity into its constituent parts—English- and Spanish-speaking, of Latinx and Jewish ancestry, residing in large cosmopolitan cities and in the suburbs of New England—Goldman's narrative suggests that America has never been one thing or another, but rather a constantly shifting constellation of socially constructed affiliations, stitched together in memory and experience. Goldman has used the strategy of autofiction in the past, most notably in his novel *Say Her Name*. But in *Monkey Boy*, Frankie Goldberg is more than Goldman's alter ego; he is a stand-in for a growing number of Americans who identify as multiracial.

Goldman came of age before there was much language to describe such a state, and, through Goldberg, he is determined to read this multiracial identity back into a childhood where he was not even sure if the fact that his classmates called him “Monkey Boy” was racist or something else. Like his Spanglish-purveying contemporaries Sandra Cisneros and Junot Díaz, Goldman ably maneuvers a skill set of bilingual expression, code-switching between English and Spanish, not to resolve the tensions found in his identity so much as to make the reader feel comfortable with navigating its contradictions. After all these years, Goldman seems to believe that his life, like many of ours, is a riddle, and that, he insists, is OK.

*Monkey Boy* takes place over five days and follows Francisco Goldman's return to the Boston area, where he catches up with an old girlfriend, an old family employee, and his estranged sister, while visiting his mother in a nursing home. His jokey musings give way to elegiac descriptions of his childhood in New England, dotted with references to the faceless towns off Route 128 and the grimy underpinnings of gentrified Boston, from Back Bay to South End.

Goldberg is an extremely fluid, knowing narrator. His grasp of Boston and of New York City, particularly the Upper West Side and Brooklyn, is that of an insider. Yet the cool, calm, collected way he moves through and describes these cosmopolitan and urban spaces only makes his revelations about his father's cruelty all the more unnerving. As Goldberg slips backward and forward through the path of his life, as he moves from Boston and New York to Guatemala and Mexico, he also offers us a tale of his father's violence toward him and his mother.

In one particularly disturbing passage, Goldberg describes being detained by police from a neighboring town after he and his friends crash a party. When his father comes to pick him up, rather than defending his son, he assaults him inside the police station. “I'd never felt such shame, such a helpless rage of my own, had never experienced anything so sordid as being on that police station floor being beaten up by my father,” Goldberg recalls with a kind of anguished nausea.

Goldberg’s narrative allows you to believe that this violence, alluded to several times, is at the root of his inability to reconcile his many identities. Apparently stemming from his father’s frustration with his mediocre career as a designer of false teeth, it also has deeper roots: The violence and terror his father experienced as a Jew in Ukraine during the pogroms in the early 20th century followed him to the United States, and he became the perpetrator of it at home.

But Goldberg’s father is not the only one who fled trauma and political upheaval. Goldberg's mother, whose family had a toy store business in Guatemala City, was forced to stay in Boston after the CIA's overthrow of Jacobo Árbenz set off turmoil in 1954. Once in the United States, his mother doesn't reveal much about the darkness in Guatemala or her family's ambivalent position as small property owners. But Goldberg embarked on a project of investigative journalism on the strength of his early fiction writing, moving to Guatemala and writing about what was happening there through the “eyes of [his] primas and their friends.” Later, he finds himself reversing the path of his mother's migration, staying in Guatemala while writing investigative articles on the country's civil war in the 1980s.

In these examinations of Guatemala's past and present, Goldberg also explores a secret his mother and family had long hidden: the identity of a Black ancestor, his great-grandmother. It’s a different kind of violence, one often denied by Latin Americans in many countries, who have been socialized to believe that their mixed-race societies no longer need to confront issues of race and, in particular, the ways in which some families have sought to hide their own Black heritage. Goldberg recounts his mother “giggling” at his suggestion that her grandmother was Black; she responds by saying, “Ay Frankie, that's not true.” With *Monkey Boy*, Goldman at once explains how trauma is passed on through his parents' experience of mid-20th-century America and—particularly through his passionate rejection of its “American Dream” and the violence of American-backed dictatorship—offers an unsparring critique.

The end result of Goldman's autofictional journey is a study of both the violence inflicted on his parents' families and his own efforts to better understand this difficult past, which leads Goldberg to reject the American assimilation that his parents groomsed him to embrace. Forgetting where one came from—once the model for the children of immigrants—was a strategy his parents used to escape the pain of their pasts. But for Goldberg, remembering is a way not only to honor his many identities but also to confront the United States' foreign policy during the Reagan era and beyond.

To connect with his “difference,” Goldberg dedicates much of his energy

Ed Morales is the author of *Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico* and *Latinx: The New Force in America’s Identity Debate*. [Image 205x377 to 331x519]
to researching the genocidal anticommunist and anti-Indigenous campaigns of the 1980s in Guatemala. After several years away from journalism, Goldberg becomes absorbed in an investigation of the assassination of a human rights activist bishop by the Guatemalan government in 1998, mirroring the one in the recent HBO documentary *The Art of Political Murder*, based on Goldman’s reporting. The bishop story haunts Goldberg, and it follows him back in Boston too: Goldberg meets up with a friend of his family, María Xum, who works in a laundromat in East Boston, and finds himself disheartened as María tells him that a woman she knew was threatened by the henchmen of then-General Otto Pérez Molina, whom Goldberg refers to as “Cara de Culo” (“Assface”) and who is suspected of being responsible for the bishop’s murder. “Now Cara de Culo sends his emissaries all the way up here to wait in a parking lot outside a supermarket in order to threaten to turn poor Zolina and her relatives into invisible murder clouds; they come with visas, welcome, enjoy your stay.”

Goldberg’s investigation into Guatemala’s history also leads him to realize that his mother had long been living a double life, even in the United States: “My mother, like so many other immigrants, has lived her life between two cultures and countries.” Even “after enough years had passed, she may have felt that she didn’t quite fit in either, never in the United States, no longer in Guatemala.”

Despite his mother’s efforts to help ease his path into an America working on an outdated “melting pot” idea, Goldberg finds comfort in not belonging: “One of the strangest things I’ve done with my own life has been to follow her path, in a sense willfully divesting in order to pour myself into the mold of the divided, not quite belonging anywhere.”

Goldberg finds himself caught in a state of neither-here-nor-there transnationalism, an experience familiar to many recent Latin American immigrants and migrants, who can no longer expect the US to fulfill its postwar promise of a steady, unionized job and are confronted instead by the neoliberal ethos of gig-economy entrepreneurialism, exploitation, and constant migration.

Even if Goldberg’s ambivalence about his American identity is a central theme in the first two-thirds of the novel, it’s not until more than 250 pages into *Monkey Boy* that Goldberg directly engages with his sense of liminality, taking inventory of his many dualities: his Jewishness and Catholicism, his American and Guatemalan identities, the “whiteness” of his Jewish Ukrainian father and the “mestizones” of his Latinx mother.

Goldberg recalls how in Brooklyn he was perceived as Puerto Rican and in Britain as a Pakistani, and how in Havana, Spanish tourists mistook him for a Muslim. Shifting from one marginalized identity to another—and none exactly his—Goldberg comes to identify with all of his identities at once and none in particular.

Goldberg’s most “genuinely religious” experience, he tells us, comes in a syncretic “widows’ Mass” in a Mayan town in the Central Highlands of Guatemala, where “hundreds of widows of men murdered in war” gathered secretly, with the Mayan priest performing the Catholic ceremony in his native K’iche’. Like the half-Catholic, half-Jewish writer Natalia Ginzburg, who claims to be “fully one, fully the other at the same time,” Goldberg declares himself to be “three-quarters Jewish and three-quarters Catholic,” keeping “a quarter secret only for myself.”

Goldberg’s rejection of his own binaries is refreshing. In American identity discourse, the use of “halfness” has so often been framed as a tragic dilemma of being divided into two. “Just as Jesus Christ was both fully a man and fully God, rather than the Son of God dressed up as a young Jew or anything like that,” he muses. “E pluribus unum implies a mestizo unity, neither a melting together nor an Ann Hunt library of white and a pushed-off-to-the-side infinity of separately shelved selves.” As much as white supremacy tries to reassert itself by insisting that we must be one thing or another, Goldberg insists that we can take control of defining our racialized selves and maybe come a little closer to the truth.

Yet even as Goldberg insists that he can find such liberation, he cannot entirely escape the past: The horror of Europe’s anti-Semitism and a genocidal military dictatorship cannot be fully erased, and they are also coupled with Goldberg’s own memories of his parents, who were unable to fully come to terms with these pasts. Goldberg is deeply moved by Proust’s claim that the second half of a man’s life could be the reverse of the first, and his rewriting of America’s immigrant narrative, as well as its racial one, serves that purpose. But by the end of the novel, we begin to realize that it is the parts of his life that he can’t control, and that he can only remember, that are the true zones of in-betweenness—zones of pain and regret but ultimately also of creativity. In his efforts to create an archive of the past where all the voices in his life speak at once, he finds not only the violence of his parents’ Ukraine and Guatemala, but also art. Here his various identities—Jewish, Catholic, Guatemalan, Ukrainian, and American—all can share a border.
People Watching

Mike Nichols, the egalitarian auteur

BY LINDSAY ZOLADZ

The only piece in their revolutionary comedic rep-ertoire that Mike Nichols and Elaine May chose never to record was called “Pirandello.” As a result, the 18-minute meta-theatrical sketch lives on only in the mythical retellings of those lucky enough to have seen it onstage in the early 1960s.

It began with the pair playing young siblings imitating their par-ents fighting; then, without announcing the transition, they moved seamlessly into playing the parents them-selves. At some imperceptible point, they fall out of character and become Mike Nichols and Elaine May having an uncom-fortably personal onstage argument. She would insult his virility; he would storm into the wings in a huff. Then he’d come back and grab her so hard he would sometimes tear her shirt; she would sob. They ad-libbed new cruelties every night to keep each other on their toes. Once, according to Nichols, he slapped May a few times, and she clawed at his chest hard enough to draw blood. “It was a dance they did together,” writes Mark Harris in his panoramic biog-raphy, Mike Nichols: A Life, “based, as much as anything, on their own awareness that they were capable of hurting each other and their desire to see how close to the edge they could get.” Once they found that edge, they would employ their safe word, turning to the au-dience and announcing with a grin, “This is Pirandello!”

In the mid-1980s, a few decades into his long and varied stage and filmmaking career, Nichols proposed a broad theme that united his directing work: “I think maybe my subject is the relationships between men and women, without much of anything else, centered [on] a bed.” I would narrow it a bit further and say that the uni-fying trait of a Mike Nichols production is, approximately, “This is Pirandello!”

Which is to say that Nichols’s work is almost always about the dizzying, insular, sometimes brutal acts that men and women perform in intimate relationships—about the lines they deliver to themselves, to each other, and to the people watching them. Consider the twisted parlor games that Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton play on their guests (and, by extension, on the audience) in Nichols’s brilliant, still-crackling 1966 film adaptation of Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, or Meryl Streep and Jack Nicholson putting on the gradually crumbling appearance of a happy couple in 1986’s Heartburn. There’s even a dash of “Pirandello” in Melanie Griffith’s yuppie cosplay in Working Girl or Robin Williams’s fleeting attempt to play it straight in The Birdcage. Nichols’s brilliantly acted penultimate film, 2004’s Closer, oozes with it: Clad in a pink wig in a strip club’s private room, refusing to confirm whether her name is Alice or Jane, Natalie Portman memorably tells Clive Owen with a prac-ticed wink, “Lying’s the most fun a girl can have without taking her clothes off.”

And yet one of the most common knocks you hear about Nichols is that he was too much of a chameleon to be consid-ered a truly great director—or that he never quite lived up to the subversive promise of his first two features, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and The Graduate. I heard these criticisms earlier this year during the Q&A portion of Harris’s virtual reading at the 92nd Street Y in New Y ork City, and they were certainly present in his subject’s recent critical reception. “Unlike virtually every other director associated with the New Hollywood—Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, Stanley Kubrick—Nichols was not an auteur,” Louis Menand wrote in The New Yorker. “There is no such thing as a Mike Nichols picture.”

What subtly emerges between the lines of Harris’s magnificent biography, though, is a more collaborative view of filmmaking—a refreshing alternative to the auteurist approach that figures the his-tory of American cinema as simply a linear continuum of Important Films made by Great Men. In fact, as Harris points out, the second half of Nichols’s career in particular was enlivened by his egalitarian creative partnerships with a number of female actors and writers, among them Streep, Portman, Nora Ephron, Carrie Fisher, and Emma Thompson. Of course, you could trace it all back to his partner in “Pirandello”: As Harris observes, Nichols “was one of the few directors of his gen-
eration whose formative professional years had been spent with a woman who was his creative equal, and he felt at home around them.”

The female-driven films that characterized the second act of Nichols’s career—
*Silkwood, Heartburn, Working Girl,* and *Postcards From the Edge*—did not enjoy the critical adulation of his earlier work. (Some of the most spirited criticism in Harris’s book comes during his reappraisal of *Heartburn*: “Almost every male critic who disliked the movie expressed bafflement that Nichols would take on a subject as minor as domestic unhappiness from a woman’s point of view,” he writes, citing examples from the likes of Roger Ebert and Stanley Kauffmann.) But this period of work also revivified Nichols, bringing him back from the brink of depression and professional failure. This was especially true of his collaboration with Streep. “Her effect on Nichols was transformative,” Harris observes of their time together on *Silkwood*. “They created a way of working—intense conversations about the character and the script, well before shooting started, but very little micro-direction once the cameras rolled—that would remain in place for decades.”

“I think he was a genuine feminist,” Portman tells Harris. “There was nothing, nothing there except him seeing you as a creative, interesting, talented human. It is the rarest, finest quality, and not many directors of his generation had it.” Ten years ago, that may have seemed like a throwaway comment—a feel-good showbiz cliché. But as we continue to assess the damage of Hollywood’s long history of tyrannical male behavior, that particular virtue of Nichols’s work should not go underappreciated.

Mike Nichols was born Igor Michael Peschkowsky in 1931, the first child of a Jewish couple in Berlin. His family sent him, along with his younger brother, to New York City when he was 7. America was fun—“we’d never had food that made noise like Rice Krispies,” Nichols recalled—and after a bleak early childhood lived under Nazi rule, little Igor made concerted efforts to assimilate. “From the moment he could say it without an accent,” Harris writes, he became “Mike Nichols.”

The future comic was a lonely, serious child. While he was still in Germany, an allergic reaction rendered him permanently unable to grow hair. (Throughout his life he wore hairpieces, and eventually he became famous enough for Taylor to introduce him to her wig guy.) But Nichols’s outsider status allowed him to acquire a skill for noticing and mimicking the minutiae of human behavior, which would come in handy later. “I think there is an immigrant’s ear that is particularly acute for ‘How are they doing it here? What must I do to be unnoticeable, to be like them?’” Nichols said. “You’re forever looking at something as someone who just got here.”

After the premature death of his father, a doctor, in 1944—he’d diagnosed himself with cancer and, accurately, given himself a couple weeks to live—a wayward Nichols arrived at one of the only colleges that didn’t require placement tests: the University of Chicago. He quickly fell in with a lively gang of writers and performers who formed the Compass Players, a precursor to the still-thriving improv institution The Second City. Among them was a caustic, lightning-witted woman he’d met in pass- ing a few times before the fateful day he noticed her sitting alone on a train station bench. “May I zit down?” he asked in an exaggerated German accent. “Eef you veesh,” she played along. “You are Agent X-97” She was, of course, Elaine May. It was their very first bit.

As they worked out a routine of tart, observational pieces and characters that would more or less invent modern sketch comedy—nervous teenagers unsure of what to do with their cigarettes during an acrobatically awkward make-out session; a mother chiding her rocket scientist son for not calling her often enough—they found that they complemented each other perfectly. At first they giggled around Chicago, but once they relocated to New York in late 1957, their ascent to mainstream fame was so speedy it’s barely an exaggeration to say it happened overnight. By January 1958 they had booked a headline gig at the Blue Angel and a coveted spot on the NBC variety show *Omnibus,* which was watched by tens of millions of people. That year their comedy album *Improvisations to Music* charted. By 1960 their show *An Evening With Nichols and May* was the star-studded, perpetually sold-out toast of Broadway.

May overflowed with so many ideas that she sometimes needed Nichols to tell her when to stop; a refrain Harris heard throughout his reporting was “She would fill, and he would pace.” This was the late 1950s, the era of the Smothers Brothers, Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce. May was one of the only famous female comics of her time, which meant Nichols was virtually the only famous male comic with an ego sturdy enough to share the stage each night with a blazingly talented woman. But gender parity was not a faddish liberal cause for Nichols and May; it was a practical necessity for the continued success of their act. Each night, they walked a tightrope in tandem. “As soon as we weren’t in balance,” Nichols recalled, “great angers arose. We flew apart.”

That happened more quickly than most people anticipated. In July 1961, less than a year into their wildly successful Broadway run, they reached a creative impasse. Nichols wanted to polish and stick with the material that worked, while May, a true believer in improv, felt deadened by doing the same thing night after night. She would fill; he would pace. In July 1961, after 311 performances, they closed the show long before it had a chance to grow stale. What happened in the ensuing years, Nichols observed, “is that we became two individual people rather than Nichols-and-May.”

Spanning the better part of the 20th century and flitting through plenty of illustrious social circles, Harris’s book is a trove of usable wisdom about the creative process. “Big isn’t true,” Nichols tells his actors, a pithy mantra of naturalism onstage and on-screen. Also: “As soon as you have figured out how to get your laugh, don’t do that.” On pacing and timing onscreen, Nichols’s early mentor, the director Billy Wilder, tells him, indelibly, “Don’t forget to leave some string for the pearls.”

But *Mike Nichols* is also full of cautionary tales about the pitfalls of precocious success. (As Orson
Welles, who would know, warns him on that particular subject: “Better late than early.”) For the entire 1960s, Nichols was a golden boy. As a theater director, his first play, Neil Simon’s *Barefoot in the Park*, was widely considered a turning point in bringing unfussy naturalism to the stage. His first two films flouted the anachronistic prudishness of the Motion Picture Production Code and so helped usher in the unapologetically frank tone of the coming New Hollywood. When he won the 1968 Best Director Oscar for *The Graduate* at the precocious age of 36, Nichols appeared to be a voice-of-his-generation talent who could do no wrong. Incurably self-aware, he waited for failure like an expected house guest who was running unbearably late.

Failure did arrive—behaving politely at first, then monstrously. Nichols’s third and fourth films, the excessively ambitious *Catch-22* and the more modest, character-driven *Carnal Knowledge*, were middling successes, but neither lit the world on fire the way his first two films had. Then he started laying eggs. Perhaps the most inscrutable work in his filmography is 1973’s *Day of the Dolphin*, which, like *The Graduate*, was a collaboration between Nichols and his friend and screenwriter Buck Henry. Except this time the pair had not placed a finger on the pulse of a burgeoning generation: They had simply made a sci-fi thriller in which George C. Scott plays a marine biologist who teaches two dolphins how to speak English and who gets embroiled in a plot to train the dolphins to assassinate the president, or something. Rebroiled in a plot to train the dolphins to assassinate the president, or something. Rebroiled in a plot to train the dolphins to assassinate the president, or something.

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Mohammed El-Kurd is a Palestinian poet, writer, and activist who grew up in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. When he was 11 years old, settlers carrying rifles and backpacks, and supported by the Israeli army, took over half his house.

This spring, El-Kurd returned to Palestine from the United States, where he had been studying for his MFA, to fight a renewed push to expel his family and neighbors from their homes. In the process, he helped spark what has come to be known as the Unity Intifada. He has since been named one of the 100 most influential people of 2021 by Time, and The Nation recently tapped him as our inaugural Palestine correspondent. In October, he published a book of poetry, Rifqa.

NE: You grew up in a home besieged by settlers. Can you tell us about that experience?

MEK: It’s not unique that our house was taken over by settlers. What was unique is that our house became this kind of media hub to which many journalists, many activists, many people came. And in a lot of ways, we were constantly on display. Coming home from school every day, I had to speak to a group of internationals and tell them about what’s happening. And I was like 11, 12, 13, 14. This, in a lot of ways, functioned as a media training for me. It also highlighted this idea that what we talk about is not a metaphor. When we talk about this regime, which demolishes homes or takes over homes, these settlers who commit colonial violence, it’s not in our distant memory—it is in our backyards.

And it’s not just me—it’s thousands of Palestinians who grow up in similar circumstances, but each case has its own nuance that isolates you from relating to other Palestinians. So, in our case, we had settlers living in half our home, which gave us sympathy and solidarity from people but also gave us many critiques from people, like “How do you accept this upon yourself?” As if we had a choice in it. And it’s a big battle to live in as a child, not just the physical force and violence of the policeman or the settlers with rifles, but also the violence of living with the misinterpretations of others. The reality you encounter is constantly denied by others. As a child, you’re forced to reckon with these definitions that people have of you. And that really messes with you.

NE: Can you tell us about your book of poetry, Rifqa?

MEK: The book is basically an homage to my grandmother, Rifqa. To me, she represented this matriarch who said the truth, no matter who was on the opposite end. And this kind of disregard of the power imbalance inspired me to strive to be fearless.

NE: I can’t help but see in you a legacy of our greatest writers, Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani, who were very politically active while producing fiction and creating.

MEK: Thank you so much—it’s really humbling to hear it. These writers were particularly formative for me. They taught me what it means to utilize language in a powerful way, what it means to rearticulate things and go against official state language, even call out state language as propaganda, and then offer the public this reinterpretation, this way you see things as a person on the ground.

And I hope there is a resurgence of this kind of Palestinian tradition in which authors and writers are engaged politically, because we know we possess a freedom that our political leaders do not have. We are not chained to these institutions that keep us hostage to the wishes of the international community, to the ethnocentric standard of Western civility. We can actually kick our feet up on the table and say, “This is what I believe.” And that is powerful to people who are watching.

NE: You have said that every media outlet should have a Palestine correspondent. Why?

MEK: I think we are constantly in the center of American decision-making, of American conversation, as a topic—but as a people who have political or narrative agency, we are absent. So it is only right to center Palestinian voices, perspectives, visions, in the narrative-shaping machine that is the media. I am not asking journalists to be biased toward Palestinians. On the contrary, I am asking media to be objective and actually show both sides, because it’s only right. I’m not asking for a favor.
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