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Voices of the peoples: A member of the Minga Indígena delegation at the COP26 UN climate summit in Glasgow on November 3.
DEMOCRATS WERE SLEEPWALKING TOWARD DISASTER IN THE 2022 MIDTERM elections before they got the proverbial wake-up call on November 2. The party’s off-year election losses in the supposedly blue state of Virginia, along with setbacks in other regions, confirmed the very real prospect that next year’s voting could cost Democrats control of Congress and multiple statehouses. But President Biden and his partisan allies in D.C. and the states face more than the indignity of a disempowerment along the lines of what Bill Clinton experienced in 1994 and Barack Obama confronted in 2010. If they fail to get their act together, Democrats will suffer a defeat that increases the likelihood of Donald Trump’s return to the White House as a full-blown authoritarian.

Let’s face it: Trump is running for president in 2024. He’s already rallying backers in the first-caucus state of Iowa. Despite the last gasps of GOP dissenters like the primary-targeted Wyoming Representative Liz Cheney, he’ll have no trouble claiming his party’s nomination. Then, whatever the numbers on the evening of November 5, 2024, Trump will claim that he’s won the presidency.

That’s why 2022 matters like no midterm election in modern times. If Trump-aligned Republicans take Congress and statehouses across the country, thanks to their own gerrymandering and voter suppression strategies and Democratic fumbles, they won’t let the presidency go just because their candidate lost the popular vote. They will challenge the Electoral College results on January 6, 2025, just as they did on January 6, 2021—and they could well do so more successfully.

Those are the stakes in November 2022, when 34 Senate seats, 435 House seats, and 36 governorships will be chosen. Both parties will try to game the post-2020 Census redistricting process, but Republicans have an overwhelming advantage: Their control of statehouses positions them to draw 187 House seats, versus 75 for the Democrats.

Midterms are always tough for the party in power. But this one will be tougher than usual for the Democrats, who will go into it with an advantage of fewer than 10 seats in the House and a 50-50 split in the Senate. If there is a GOP wave, of the sort witnessed in the first midterms of every Democratic president for the past 50 years, Biden and his party are screwed. So, too, is the country.

Can that dire circumstance be averted? Of course. But Democrats must recognize the fight they’re in. They cannot continue to come off as dysfunctional, which is what happened when they let months go by amid the wrangling over the infrastructure and reconciliation bills. Biden’s image, and that of the party, took a huge hit as West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin and Arizona Senator Kyrsten Sinema tripped up the 96 percent of congressional Democrats who wanted to deliver on the party’s 2020 campaign promises. Unfortunately, Democrats are stuck with Manchin, Sinema, and the corporate-aligned House “centrists” who will exploit their ability to tip the balance.

Heading into 2022, the Democrats must bring clarity to a chaotic national discourse that Republicans are gleefully disrupting with their rants about vaccination mandates and “critical race theory.” That won’t be done by abandoning basic premises of economic, social, and racial justice for centrist compromises that disenchant and disengage base voters. And it won’t be done by opting for bland Terry McAuliffe–style candidates, with messages so muddled that voters can’t get excited about showing up in November. In 2020, Georgia Democrats nominated a pair of progressives for Senate seats in a Deep South state that had voted Republican for decades. The Rev. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff didn’t just beat the Republican incumbents; they shifted control of the Senate to the Democrats and made the promise of a Biden presidency real. To maintain that promise, Democrats need to recognize that nominating dynamic progressives is essential to closing the “enthusiasm gap” that haunted them in these off-year elections.

They also need to talk about why 2022 matters. Democrats have to put the fights over gerrymandering and voter suppression into perspective: as part of a renewed push to break the filibuster and enact the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. Their blunt focus must be on the reality that if they lose next year, the future of American democracy will be suddenly and severely imperiled.
COMMENT/JOAN WALSH

Virginia Goes Red
The news could be worse—but it’s pretty damn bad.

SUBURBAN FLEECE DADDY GLENN YOUNGKIN LED Virginia Republicans out of the wilderness in early November, winning back white suburban voters to take the governorship. But he did even more: He helped the GOP win back the lieutenant governor and attorney general offices and flip the House of Delegates from blue to red. As I write, Democrats have gone from a 55-45 edge there to a probable 48-52 deficit, with two races in recount territory.

Youngkin, the former Carlyle titan, swapped out his suits for his trademark fleece vests and reassured white suburban parents he’s just like them: anxious as hell. During the Trump years—and I start the clock in 2011, when the real estate mediocrity turned reality TV star became a political phenomenon by pitching the lie that Barack Obama wasn’t born in the United States—Republicans traded in their dog whistles about race for a blatantly racist bullhorn. Trump bellowed that undocumented Mexican immigrants were bringing drugs and crime here, characterized non-white countries as “shitholes,” and counted Nazis and white supremacists among the “very fine people” at the deadly 2017 protest in Charlottesville. But that got uncomfortable for many white suburbanites, especially women.

This year Youngkin, and much of the Virginia GOP, introduced a new, improved dog whistle. You could hear it, if you listened closely, in the panic about “critical race theory” taking over K-12 classrooms or the disingenuous closing ad featuring a wealthy white mom complaining that as governor, McAuliffe had forced high schoolers to read “explicit” books. The ad never mentioned that, for the mom in question, the book was Toni Morrison’s Beloved, but the people who needed to got the picture. It must also be said: A lot of the agitation around Virginia public education can be traced directly to the strains of parenting during Covid, when in-person schooling stopped there for much of the last 20 months.

Of course, the ultimate dog whistle was Youngkin’s slippery embrace of Trump. He welcomed the disgraced ex-president’s endorsement, but he kept him out of Virginia. He managed to convey to far-right voters to take the governorship. But he did even more: He helped the GOP win back the lieutenant governor and attorney general offices and flip the House of Delegates from blue to red. As I write, Democrats have gone from a 55-45 edge there to a probable 48-52 deficit, with two races in recount territory.

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Of course, the ultimate dog whistle was Youngkin’s slippery embrace of Trump. He welcomed the disgraced ex-president’s endorsement, but he kept him out of Virginia. He managed to convey to far-right voters he was with Trump while reassuring white suburbanites he was one of them. (And he did better with Virginia’s far-right white rural voters than Trump did.) It’s easy to say McAuliffe ran a lackluster campaign, but I covered Governor Ralph Northam in 2017 and didn’t see a whole than Trump did.) It’s easy to say McAuliffe ran a lackluster campaign, but I covered Governor Ralph Northam in 2017 and didn’t see a whole

THE PARTY THAT WINS THE WHITE HOUSE OFTEN LOSES VIRGINIA’S ELECTIONS, BUT BIDEN DIDN’T DO MUCH TO THwart THAT.
Beyond the Bans

As the Supreme Court debates the fate of Roe v. Wade, women and pregnant people are already suffering.

N THE NEARLY 50 YEARS SINCE THE SUPREME Court decided Roe v. Wade, there has perhaps never been a more consequential moment for abortion rights than the one we are in now. This fall, the nation’s highest court is hearing not one but three cases that could upend the fundamental promise at the heart of Roe: that pregnant women in the United States have a right to an abortion until a fetus becomes viable, which is around 24 weeks. On November 1, the court heard the first two of these cases, Whole Woman’s Health v. Jackson and United States v. Texas, which addressed Texas’s near-total abortion ban, the law known as SB 8. And on December 1, the court will hear arguments in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, which takes on the 15-week abortion ban passed by Mississippi in 2018. In that case, the state has made a direct appeal to the Supreme Court to overrule Roe.

As the court weighs these cases, there has been deep and understandable anxiety about what a post-Roe world might portend. But the focus on the bans, while essential, has also obscured the terrifying realities that already exist, not only in Texas and Mississippi but in numerous other states where abortion rights have been undermined by other means. And it overlooks the multiple ways that attacks on reproductive rights have metastasized well beyond abortion in recent years, endangering women’s health, livelihoods, and even lives.

Indeed, amid the yearslong onslaught against abortion, maternal health has suffered across the country. The United States is now the deadliest developed nation in which to be pregnant. It ranks in the low 50s in the world for maternal mortality, behind Bosnia, Saudi Arabia, and other countries not known for their commitments to human rights.

There are likely a number of reasons for this, but researchers at Washington University published an important study this month in the journal Contraception that found that from 1995 to 2017, maternal deaths increased dramatically in states with laws that limit access to abortion. In 2017, the states with the worst records registered nearly double the number of maternal deaths as states where women have broader access to reproductive health care. Texas, which has passed a raft of antiabortion measures in recent decades and seen numerous clinic closures as a result, was among the worst offenders.

For Black women in particular, being coerced into carrying unwanted pregnancies can be a virtual death sentence; nationally, they are three times more likely than white women to die when they gestate to term. With the passage of SB 8, which remains in effect while the Supreme Court deliberates, Dr. David Eisenberg of Washington University predicts that Black maternal mortality could increase by 33 percent.

Despite such shocking rates, there has been insufficient effort at the national or state level to improve maternal health. What there has been is a singular focus on protecting fetuses, not merely to the exclusion of mothers but to their detriment, as the “fetal protection” laws designed to protect pregnant women from domestic violence have been turned against them instead.

One particularly troubling species of fetal protection law is the fetal homicide statute. Currently, 38 states have implemented such laws. Of these, nearly 30 have enacted feticide laws that apply to the earliest stages of pregnancy. At the national level, the Unborn Victims of Violence Act recognizes an embryo or fetus in utero as a legal victim if it is killed or harmed during the commission of any of more than 60 federal crimes. President George W. Bush signed that legislation in 2004.

The fallout from these laws has been widespread and extreme. In Tennessee, Maria Guerra was arrested in 2013 for driving under the influence and child endangerment, even though she had no child in the car and her blood alcohol was within the legal limit. The reason? She was pregnant—and in an era when law enforcement uses existing child-abuse laws to prosecute pregnant women, these cases are not unusual. In Iowa, Christine Taylor was arrested after falling down some steps in her home and then jailed for attempted feticide. She, too, was pregnant.

Frequently, class matters as much as race—meaning Black and Latina women no longer serve as the default targets of fetal protection prosecutions. In 2015, journalists Nina Martin and Amy Yurkanin reported that in Alabama alone, nearly 500 “new and expecting mothers” had been prosecuted in recent years for violating the state’s chemical endangerment statute, which was intended to address people who set up methamphetamine labs in their homes. Most of these pregnant women were white, and they were overwhelmingly poor. A decade ago, my research anticipated this shift, predicting that fetal protection prosecutions could jump the so-called color line.

So what comes next? While abortion rights activists try to stave off the worst, opponents of reproductive rights will also be busy. In Virginia, the newly elected Glenn Youngkin told a crowd at a campaign event in July, “When I’m governor, and I have a majority in the House, we can start going on [the] offense” on abortion issues. Sadly, there are already blueprints in hand.

Michele Goodwin holds the Chancellor’s Professorship at the University of California, Irvine.
No Offense
David Bromwich

Homage to Mort Sahl

The comic as social critic.

MORT SAHL DIED ON OCTOBER 26, AND THE NEWS brought back memories of the 1960s and early ’70s and what it was like to grow up in Los Angeles, where he lived and worked. Sahl’s career was unpredictable and vagrant from the start; he joined the ROTC at 15 to escape the boredom of high school and eventually went into the Army Air Forces. Charged with insubordination and demoted to KP duties, he dropped out of the armed forces and put himself through college at the University of Southern California. After kicking around odd jobs in LA, he followed his girlfriend to Berkeley and became (by his own account) a habitué, brooder, and holder-forth at the local coffee houses, until his break came and he was paid a modest fee to perform his stand-up act at the hungry i nightclub in San Francisco. His fame peaked early, in 1960, with full-length appreciations in Time and The New Yorker.

It was common, in later years, to hear Sahl put down as a slow-motion, pale imitation of Lenny Bruce, but the truth is that Sahl got there first and Bruce was the follower. Apart from being Jewish and touching on “topical” social issues, they had little in common. Bruce was a stand-up comic to the bone. He had begun his career in the Catskills and did shtick that bore a family resemblance—however embarrassing in retrospect—to Milton Berle and others of an older, tamer, shallower tribe. Lenny Bruce opened the cage door and prowled at liberty. He fired once for having gone too far with a joke or a routine, because I knew who Mort Sahl was before the audience members to step up to the “Beef Box” and address him directly—“So, where was I, oh yeah”—or sometimes to the audience, nudging, “See what I mean?” The stage was his natural habitat, a social setting congenial to a not particularly sociable man. Someone must have played me one of his records, because I knew who Mort Sahl was before he took a slot in the weekday lineup of evening talkers contracted by Metromedia television, which included the equable and innocuous Les Crane and the civil rights journalist Louis Lomax. Besides Sahl, easily the most picturesque of the group was Joe Pyne. A Marine Corps veteran, with a Purple Heart from the war, Pyne was far right in politics, cocksure and brutal in approach, and he welcomed audience members to step up to the “Beef Box” and lead off with “My beef, Joe, is this—.” If Pyne didn’t like the cut of their jib or their question, he would dismiss them: “Go gargle with razor blades!” Yet it was Pyne, of all the weekday talents, who came to Mort Sahl’s defense when he was threatened with firing once for having gone too far with a joke or a borderline slander.

The dimness of President Eisenhower, and the creep and caution among liberals in the face of the anti-communist paranoia, were Sahl’s bread and butter in early days at the hungry i. But he went after the Kennedy administration with equal relish and was an unsparing critic of the Vietnam War from Johnson’s first escalation. His best stuff was in routines that would last 40 minutes or a bit longer; you can obtain a decent impression from the live performances on LPs. These usually comprise references to Freud or Marx, but it could reach back when suitable to the Civil War, Napoleon, or even Neolithic man. References to Freud or Marx were not infrequent, and not skimmed from the top.

Sahl was not so much a stand-up comedian as a walk-around conversationalist. His main subject was politics.
It was common to hear him put down as a pale imitation of Lenny Bruce, but the truth is that Sahl got there first.

Sahl diagnosed the disease of America in 1967 as “right-wing social democracy,” an ideology that is fine with war. Democrats like President Johnson and Senator Henry Jackson epitomized the stance, as did the head of the AFL-CIO, George Meany. Sahl’s favorite magazine was I.F. Stone’s Weekly, which I learned from him you could buy at the newsstand on Las Palmas Boulevard. He took an early interest in Ramparts and admired the all-purpose recklessness of The Realist.

He will not be remembered for one-liners, though the imagined advice of JFK to his father will probably last: “Don’t buy a single vote more than is necessary.” Or maybe this about the Cuba panic in the summer of 1960—Sahl on a Florida beach: “Everybody says it’s only 90 miles away, but I can’t see it.” Friend: “It’s right behind that aircraft carrier.” A nonstop irritant, he followed the method of the gadfly. He saw that aircraft carrier. “A nonstop irritant, he saw that aircraft carrier.” A nonstop irritant, he followed the method of the gadfly. He saw the thing in front of your nose and told you what it meant.

“CRT” Is White History

Conservatives are rebranding an inclusive, honest accounting of American history as inherently anti-white.

OR MORE THAN A YEAR NOW, CONSERVATIVES HAVE BEEN waging war against the misdefined conception of critical race theory that they themselves created. The right-wing campaign against so-called CRT largely amounts to a round-robin chorus of hysterical voices asking, Won’t someone think of the poor white children?! “CRT tries to make kids feel bad because of the color of their skin,” Representative Ron Nate, cosponsor of Idaho’s anti-CRT law, stated just after the bill passed in May. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who successfully led the state school board to ban CRT from public school classrooms last summer, tweeted in June that “Critical Race Theory teaches kids to hate our country and to hate each other.” Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed a bill muzzling history educators over lessons that might make students “feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of the individual’s race or sex.” In pursuit of that goal, Republican senators in Texas recently drafted and approved yet another anti-CRT bill—after ditching language inserted by outnumbered and outvoted Democrats that would have required teaching “the history of white supremacy,” including slavery and the Ku Klux Klan, “and the ways in which it is morally wrong.” “We don’t want to teach those little white children that they should feel guilty because of what previous white people did generations ago,” Senator Bryan Hughes explained to a local news outlet about why he filed the bill.

Eight states have passed laws and 20 more have proposed legislation to outlaw a version of critical race theory that’s wholly of conservatives’ own imagining. In reality, the 40-year-old graduate school framework provides a prism on racism as “a structured reality that’s embedded in institutions,” as law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw described it in an interview with this magazine. But those behind the current anti-anti-racist movement in education have publicly admitted to repurposing CRT to “turn it toxic,” as conservative activist Christopher F. Rufo put it, branding it as anti-white propaganda. The legislative offspring of that misinformation movement is a slew of laws seeking to limit how history is taught. In Tennessee, just after the state legislature approved an anti-CRT measure, a teacher who assigned an article by Ta-Nehisi Coates on the intersection of racism and Trumpism was fired; in Texas, a Republican lawmaker is currently circulating a list of 850 books on race and other topics he says violate the new anti-CRT law.

What’s become abundantly apparent in watching the CRT social panic unfold is how its adherents steadfastly believe and propagate the idea that a full accounting of history—one that includes long-ignored perspectives and experiences and, consequently, locates the contradictions between American
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delusions of exceptionalism and the country’s grievous reality of brutal exploitation—is somehow historically inauthentic or a kind of frivolous add-on to the textbook narratives of white benevolence and heroism. In addition to pretending they’re saving white children, conservatives have also issued breathless accusations of national betrayal, variously casting CRT as “anti-American,” “a crusade against American history,” “racist pedagogy and anti-American revisionism,” and—wait for it—“Marxist.” The idea undergirding all this is that an inclusive American history is a specifically Black history. Listen to the throngs of angry white parents at school board meetings and it becomes clear that they believe history is a zero-sum game—that a history that documents Black American existence undermines and erases white American history. Like Blackness itself, these folks see Black history as somehow both insufficiently American and inherently anti-white.

But the history of Black folks in America—through slavery, Black codes, lynchings, redlining, voter disenfranchisement, Jim Crow, racial pogroms, illegal medical experimentation, extrajudicial and state-led theft of Black land, anti-Black policing, racist mass incarceration—is white American history, too. Not only were white people present as that history was being made, they architected the astoundingly sturdy systems of oppression that have organized Black/white social, legal, economic, and power differentials since America’s settler-colonial founding.

This notion that good history should be teased out from bad is a sign of just how poorly history has always been taught in this country. This isn’t even the first time white conservatives and their allies have waged violent protest against truth-telling in history, from the campaign to ensure the dominance of the ahistorical Lost Cause narrative, which saw literal textbook history revised to promote a false narrative of white magnanimity, to the massive resistance strategy of aggressive white opposition to school desegregation. If conservatives didn’t spend so much time zealously defending their version of the past, they would know that.

The teaching of history, when grounded in truth, isn’t anti-anything. Instead, it’s a careful consideration of historical facts. There’s no way to get around the reality that Black chattel slavery built America’s elite colleges, that the state largely sanctioned anti-Black pogroms committed by white mobs, that many of our most prized national landmarks sit atop bulldozed Black communities, that our white supremacist racial order provided well-documented inspiration to a rising German political star named Adolf Hitler. Another reason this backtracking effort is futile is that this history defines our present. Ruby Bridges, the tiny 6-year-old Black girl who had to be escorted by US deputy marshals into a New Orleans school to keep her safe from frothing white anti-integration mobs, is only 67 years old today. It’s hard not to suspect that a significant number of white folks gnashing their teeth over the teaching of our horrific racial history played an integral part in making it.

Condoleezza Rice, a childhood friend of one of the four little Black girls murdered in the 1963 white terrorist bombing of Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church—who should therefore know better—recently denied there is a current effort to suppress history and aired concerns that “how we teach history” threatens to “make white kids feel bad for being white.” It sounded like she was trying to assuage white fears. But that’s nonsense. In truth, white people are finally learning their own history. And in a nation where the majority of public school children today are non-white, opponents can slow progress on telling the truth. But history will prove they were unable to stop it.
The United States Senate was a bad idea from the start. At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, populous states like Virginia supported the idea of a unicameral national legislature, with representation based on the population of each state. That’s the kind of system one would expect in a representative democracy. But less populous states like Delaware and New Jersey wanted a unicameral legislature in which all states would enjoy equal representation regardless of population, which is a system one might expect of a confederacy or a conglomerate of independent sovereign nations.

Instead of resolving the issue in favor of democratic self-government, the convention went for a compromise plan. There would be two houses: a lower house, or House of Representatives, in which representation would be based on the population of each state; and an upper house, or Senate, in which all states would have equal representation. At the very heart of our Constitution is the idea that where people live matters more than what people want.

Nor was this the only antidemocratic feature of the Senate. As originally laid out in the Constitution, senators were appointed by state legislatures, not elected by the people (although “the people” at that point meant white male landowners, making the entire idea of democratic self-government a sick joke from the very start). It wasn’t until 1913, with the passage of the 17th Amendment, that voters finally got to choose their own senators.

An institution that is so profoundly antithetical to democracy cannot be “reformed,” however, simply by changing the method of picking its antidemocratic leaders. The Senate today is the place where the popular will goes to die. It is the place where 40 people outvote 60. Its unearned nickname as the world’s “greatest deliberative body” was worth nothing when it came time to put country over party and convict a president for bribing foreign governments to dig up dirt on political rivals or for leading an attempted coup d’état. The Senate’s primary function is to do nothing, then congratulate itself for its restraint.

The Senate should be abolished. Perhaps the institution made sense hundreds of years ago, when regional differences within the incestuous cabal of white elites were critical enough to warrant an entire chamber dedicated to their vision of equality. But whatever justification might have existed in 1787 disappeared when it became an institution devoted to one region’s preservation of slavery in 1820. Once Senate representation became a race to preserve slavery; once states were admitted based on their likelihood to deny or uphold the rights of white men to own other people; once the Missouri Compromise called for the admission of “free” states and “slave” states in equal proportion to uphold the institution of slavery over the popular will, the argument that representation should be based on geography was shown to be nothing more than a tool of white supremacy.

And it still serves that essential role of propping up white power today. That’s just how the Senate works, in part because people of color are not spread evenly throughout the country. More Black people live in the five boroughs of New York City than all the people who live in the Dakotas. That these Dakotas get four votes in the Senate while Black New York City residents get, like, a 10 percent say in their state’s two senators is wrong on its face and offensively so. There’s no “good government” reason for this systemic unfairness.

There is a white-government reason, however. As we move ever closer to a majority-minority country, the Senate acts as a last line of defense for white people, a way for them to hold political advantage over everybody else. So long as white people continue to make their states unwelcoming to newcomers of color, they can be assured of an outsized voice in the nation’s politics.

The astute reader will notice that I haven’t really talked about reforming the filibuster, a rule invented by senators to make their institution even less democratic than the Constitution requires it to be. But even filibuster reform won’t address the rot at the heart of the Senate. By 2040, it is projected that 70 percent of the country will be represented by just 30 senators, while the other 70 senators will give voice to the 30 percent.

And I can make a pretty educated guess that the overwhelming majority of senators will continue to be white, even as the country browns. Nearly 2,000 people have served in the Senate since its creation in 1789. In that time, just 11 African Americans have served in that hallowed body.

You can’t reform a system that is committed to whiteness. Unless you’re going to force people of color to relocate en masse—and then let them vote once they get there—you can’t overcome the structural geographic advantages the Senate gives to white voters. The Senate needs to be abolished and replaced with a democratic institution of government.

“One person, one vote” makes sense; “one state, two votes” never did.
Empty Promises

Democrats have long campaigned on immigration reform. Will they ever deliver?

M onths ago, Senate Democrats let parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough kill their chance to pass a $15 minimum wage. When MacDonough, the unelected staffer who interprets the rules of the chamber, decided that a plan to gradually increase the minimum wage didn’t fit Senate rules, Democrats could have ignored the nonbinding opinion or fired her for standing in the way of their agenda, as Republicans have done in the past. Instead, they did nothing about it. Now, as the party rushes to resolve its social spending bill, Democrats are hiding behind the parliamentarian again. This time, they could blow their last chance to establish protections for undocumented immigrants, a promise they’ve campaigned on for decades.

MacDonough has already ruled against two separate proposals to provide millions a pathway to permanent residence. She called the plan “not appropriate” for reconciliation, the arcane budget process Democrats are using to pass their $1.75 trillion social spending bill. MacDonough’s position bestows a patina of neutrality, but in her case, the power to determine the fate of millions of undocumented immigrants is held by a former deportation prosecutor. MacDonough, as the online news collective Latino Rebels reported this week, was previously a trial attorney for the US Immigration and Naturalization Service, a job that involved handling deportation cases.

“Well, it’s the first that I’m hearing that,” said Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders when asked about the parliamentarian’s record. “But I trust that the parliamentarian will do her job independently and objectively.” Sanders added that he’s had “many disagreements” with MacDonough, including on the minimum wage. “I think there’s an absolute conflict of interest,” New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez told the activist group Make the Road Nevada and a DACA recipient, told The Nation that failing to include a pathway to citizenship in the social spending bill would reveal the “failed promises that Democrats have for the past two decades shared with the undocumented community.”

“We have over 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States, many of whom during the pandemic kept this country afloat,” Ocampo said. “Many of those undocumented immigrants were able to help organize their family members to vote in the 2020 election.”

Though the two Democratic holdouts on reconciliation haven’t come out against specific provisions, one of them, West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, told Latino Rebels in October that he believed immigration reform is “too big” to end up in the bill. “I don’t think it’s going to be in there. I really don’t,” he said. “I think it’s too big for that.”

The Democratic leadership hasn’t been as willing as the GOP’s to do what it takes to pass legislation that reflects party priorities. At least 40 House Democrats, including Representatives Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Pramila Jayapal, who leads the Progressive Caucus, as well as immigrant rights groups, are calling on top Senate Democrats to disregard the ruling on immigration reform.

“The problem is that we've tied ourselves in knots, as an institution, with rules that make it very difficult to function. If we don't like a ruling on the part of the parliamentarian, then we just need to muster a majority to change the rule.”

The Democrats’ social spending package, which accompanies a smaller, lobbyist-drafted infrastructure bill, is widely considered their last chance to meaningfully address climate change, implement crucial anti-poverty measures, and provide relief for immigrants. But the Democratic leadership hasn’t been as willing as the GOPs to do what it takes to pass legislation that reflects party priorities. At least...
A health worker sprays antiseptic solution outside stores in Seoul's Itaewon district on October 29 to prevent the spread of Covid-19 ahead of Halloween. In November, South Korea launched its “living with Covid-19” plan, which will end curfews for restaurants and implement a vaccine passport for high-risk venues like bars and gyms. The government hopes to phase out all pandemic restrictions by February.

**By the Numbers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.2°C</td>
<td>Amount by which the average global temperature has risen since industrialization, according to NASA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>417B</td>
<td>Number of metric tons of cumulative carbon dioxide emissions released by the US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>236B</td>
<td>Number of metric tons of cumulative carbon dioxide emissions released by China, the next highest national emitter</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Number of billion-dollar climate-related disasters in the US in 2020, a new record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2035</td>
<td>Estimated year in which the Arctic Ocean could be ice-free for the first time in approximately 2 million years</td>
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<tr>
<td>110K</td>
<td>Number of annual premature deaths in the US that will be caused by heat exposure by 2100, according to one high climate-warming scenario</td>
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**Infrastructure Bill Passes**

Yes, Democrats improved their midterm prospects. Those shovel-ready projects bring in votes—Assuming that enough back-ordered shovels Can get unloaded from the jammed-up boats.
UKRAINE: The Most Dangerous Problem in the World

And how to solve it.

ANATOL LIEVEN
Amid the public storm in America over the fall of Kabul, it is important not to lose sight of other looming crises around the world—some of them potentially much more dangerous than Afghanistan. For if the US political elites were so surprised by the speed of the Afghan state's collapse, that was largely because the US media stopped paying attention to developments on the ground in Afghanistan once most US forces withdrew and Americans stopped dying there in large numbers.

Of these potential crises, one of the most menacing is the armed standoff between the Ukrainian military and Russian-supported separatist forces in eastern Ukraine. Limited numbers of Russian troops (lightly disguised as “volunteers”) are stationed in the Donbas region, and Russia has deployed large forces in southern Russia to defend the territory against any new Ukrainian offensive. However, Russia has not annexed Donetsk and Luhansk (the two Ukrainian provinces that make up the Donbas) or recognized their independence.

Since the Ukrainian revolution and the Donbas rebellion of 2014, successive Ukrainian governments have vowed to recover the Donbas—by force if necessary. Despite a ceasefire in 2015 that suspended full-scale war, probing attacks and retaliations by both sides have led to repeated clashes, as in March and April of this year. Successive US administrations have expressed strong support for the Ukrainian side and for future NATO membership (so far blocked by Germany and France), though they have stopped short of promising to defend Ukraine militarily.

The Taliban victory may create a new and perilous dynamic. America's defeat in Afghanistan could lead Russia (and China) to act more recklessly, just as America's defeat in Vietnam emboldened the ambitions of the USSR in Africa and Central America. On the other hand, the political humiliation suffered by the Biden administration could lead it to try to recover its domestic and international prestige by responding recklessly to Russian actions.

Only the most insane of US politicians and commentators actually want to go to war with Russia in Ukraine. But as the outbreak of World War I demonstrated, leaders who do not intend to go to war may stumble into a situation in which they are unable to stop or turn back.

The consequences of a direct US-Russian clash in Ukraine would be catastrophic. A full-scale conventional war would have the strong potential to escalate into nuclear war and the annihilation of most of humanity. Even a limited war would cause a ruinous global economic crisis, necessitate the dispatch of huge US armed forces to Europe, and destroy for the foreseeable future any chance of serious action against climate change. China might well seize the chance to conquer Taiwan, leaving the United States to face a world with the other world's two greatest military powers simultaneously. Finally, given the huge superiority of Russia's armed forces over Ukraine's, the very limited number of US forces in Europe, and the deep unwillingness of European countries to confront Russia militarily, the strong likelihood is that Russia would win a limited war in Ukraine, seizing much more Ukrainian territory and imposing a shattering humiliation on the US and the West.

Yet perhaps the most tragic aspect of the seemingly unending Donbas dispute is that, while it may be one of the most dangerous crises in the world today, it is also in principle the most easily solved. A solution exists that was drawn up by France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine and endorsed by the US, the European Union, and the United Nations. This solution corresponds to democratic practice, international law and tradition, and America's own past approach to the settlement of ethnic and separatist conflicts. Moreover, it requires no concessions of real substance by either Ukraine or the US.

The depth of Russia's commitment to this solution would of course have to be carefully tested in practice; but if US administrations, the political establishment, and the mainstream media have quietly buried it, this is because of the refusal of Ukrainian governments to implement the solution and the refusal of the United States to put pressure on them to do so.

This solution to the Donbas dispute lies in the “Minsk II” agreement, reached in February 2015 by the leaders of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine meeting under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The key military element of Minsk II is the disarmament of the separatists and the withdrawal of Russian “volunteer” forces, together with a vaguely worded suggestion for the temporary removal the Ukrainian armed forces (exclusive of border guards). The key political element consists of three essential and mutually dependent parts: demilitarization; a restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty, including control of the border with Russia; and full autonomy for the Donbas in the context of the decentralization of power in Ukraine as a whole.

The Minsk II Protocol was endorsed unanimously by the UN Security Council, including the United States. Samantha Power, then US ambassador to the United Nations, told the Security Council in June 2015, “The consensus here, and in the international community, remains that Minsk’s implementation is the only way out of this deadly conflict.” Both subsequent US administrations have officially supported the Minsk II Protocol. Yet the settlement envisioned by Minsk II has not come to pass. No political agreement on
autonomy for the Donbas has been reached, Ukrainian sovereignty has not been restored, separatist forces have not disarmed, and Russian “volunteers” have not withdrawn. Three intertwined issues have so far blocked implementation: the inability to reach agreement between Kiev, Moscow, and the separatist leadership on the terms of permanent Donbas autonomy; the sequence in which the establishment of local autonomy and the resumption of Ukrainian control of the border with Russia are to occur; and how to secure the long-term autonomy of the region against an attempt by Kiev to impose central control.

Successive Ukrainian governments have insisted that Ukraine take full control of the frontier with Russia in the Donbas as the first step in a settlement, and that all local forces be disarmed or withdrawn. This must be done, in Ukraine’s view, before local elections are held and before the Ukrainian parliament passes a law permanently changing the country’s constitution to accommodate Donbas autonomy. The argument is that otherwise the elections would be rigged by Moscow and its local allies. The Russian government and the separatist leadership, for their part, have argued that if Ukraine is allowed to establish full control before local elections and a change to the constitution, Kiev will itself rig or cancel the elections and forget about autonomy.

The Ukrainian parliament did pass a law on special status for part of the Donbas on March 17, 2015, but the law was only provisional, and it was not to come into effect until after Donetsk and Luhansk held elections under Ukrainian law and allowed the restoration of Ukrainian authority. Ukraine made no commitment to revise its constitution to provide for decentralization and Russian language rights—moves that are absolutely essential if the inhabitants of the Donbas and other Russian-speaking areas are to feel like full citizens of Ukraine, and which should be insisted upon by the United States and the European Union as a matter of democratic principle. The Ukrainian parliament granted far more limited powers to the region than those envisioned under Minsk II. In particular, all powers over the police and courts were reserved to the central government in Kiev. This limited offer by the previous government of President Petro Poroshenko faced strong opposition in the Ukrainian parliament, and it has effectively been withdrawn by the present administration of President Volodymyr Zelensky. He has declared that Ukraine is not in fact bound to offer permanent autonomy to the Donbas. The Russian government has refused to consider a settlement on these terms. In July of this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin published an essay emphasizing (partly accurately, partly not) the close historical and cultural ties between Ukrainians and Russians and condemning what he suggested was the West’s strategy of turning Ukraine into an armed enemy of Russia. He repeated this charge in a speech to the Vaidal Discussion Club in October. His language was echoed in an article by former president Dmitri Medvedev and in the increasingly harsh rhetoric of the Russian media. Putin’s essay contains a strong implicit threat that if Ukraine does not implement the Minsk II plan, Russia is prepared to annex the Donbas as it annexed Crimea in 2014. The key passage reads as follows: “Apparently, and I am becoming more and more convinced of this: Kiev simply does not need Donbas. Why? Because, firstly, the inhabitants of these regions will never accept the order that they have tried and are trying to impose by force, blockade and threats.”

Moscow does not seem to be planning an early move to annexation; but if Ukraine makes any attempt to recover its lost territories by force (as Georgia did in August 2008), then Russia will certainly both defend and annex them. It is therefore highly important that the United States does not let this conflict continue to fester.

A new US approach to peace in Ukraine should begin with a public restatement by the Biden administration of America’s commitment to the principles of Minsk II in particular, and to the idea of a pluralist, multi-ethnic, and federal Ukrainian republic in general. It is only on this basis that Ukraine can ever be brought back together again and that Ukrainian stability, security, and unity can be guaranteed in the long term.

Finally, and most important, repeated opinion polls in the Donbas and (before 2014) free elections there indicated that many of its inhabitants favored autonomy for the region within Ukraine and that equally large majorities in eastern and southern Ukraine favored a multi-ethnic state with official status for the Russian language and culture, not the ethnic-nationalist state promoted since 2014 by a succession of Ukrainian governments backed by the West.
region could use its constitutional position within Ukraine to block membership. The official US commitment to eventual Ukrainian NATO membership—however empty in real terms—has in turn inhibited the United States from playing a positive role in resolving the conflict.

These Ukrainian and American arguments are, however, a classic case of circular reasoning: So long as Ukraine is involved in a territorial conflict, it will never be invited to join NATO and the EU. Nor should it be. Even if a US administration were prepared to take such a risk, Germany and France would certainly veto it. And there is no way to solve this conflict on Ukrainian terms without victory in a war against Russia, which is impossible. Realistically speaking, Minsk II’s basic terms—an end to the war and autonomy for the Donbas within Ukraine—are the best deal that Ukraine is ever going to get.

If the United States drops the hopeless goal of NATO membership for Ukraine, it will be in a position to pressure the Ukrainian government and parliament to agree to a “Minsk III” by the credible threat of a withdrawal of US aid and political support. And if Moscow were to reject or sabotage this agreement, or permit the Donbas separatists to do so, then all existing Western sanctions against Russia related to the Donbas and Crimean disputes should not only remain in place but be greatly intensified.

The United States ought to promote the following main terms for a settlement:

§ A Ukrainian constitutional amendment establishing the Donbas region as an autonomous republic within Ukraine (including those parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces currently controlled by Ukraine); and

§ A constitution for the Donbas Autonomous Republic (including its constitutional relationship with Ukrainian national institutions in Kiev) to be submitted to the people of Donetsk and Luhansk in a referendum supervised and monitored by the UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

If a majority of voters in the Donbas oppose the constitutional amendment, then they will have chosen to remain within Ukraine under its present unitary constitution. But in the likely event of approval in the referendum, the amendment would then be submitted to the Ukrainian parliament. If the parliament rejected it, a new internationally supervised referendum would be held giving the people of the region a straight choice between rejoining a unitary Ukraine and becoming independent, with a future option to join the Russian Federation.

It should be noted, however, that annexation is not Russia’s preferred option for the future of the region. Moscow could have annexed the Donbas (as it did Crimea) at any time during the past seven years but has refrained from doing so. Moscow is determined to defend the Donbas against any attempt at Ukrainian reconquest; but for good political and strategic reasons, it would much prefer that the Donbas remain a pro-Russian autonomous part of Ukraine. However, if Ukraine launches a new war, annexation will certainly follow, leading to a new crisis in Russia’s relations with the West.

In order to secure the establishment and maintenance of autonomy, the referendum on autonomy and the establishment of a regional government under the Ukrainian constitution must come before Ukraine takes control of the border with Russia. The police and courts in the Donbas Autonomous Republic would come under the regional government. Military security would be provided by a UN peacekeeping force drawn from neutral countries outside Europe and established as part of a Security Council resolution in support of the peace settlement. US and NATO forces would not be included, nor would Russian forces or those of countries allied to Russia. This peacekeeping force would also supervise and certify the disarmament of the existing separatist armed forces. The withdrawal of all Russian forces, and the withdrawal of the Ukrainian armed forces from their present positions in Donetsk and Luhansk.

The United States, of course, has a federal system, as do Canada, Australia, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, India, and South Africa. There can thus be no objection from democratic principle to a federal system for Ukraine, or to special autonomy for the Donbas. Given the vast differences in language and culture between different parts of Ukraine, a federal constitution would seem the best political system for the country as a whole. Failing that, “asymmetric federations,” in which certain regions enjoy special status or one autonomous region exists in an otherwise unitary state, are also an accepted part of certain democracies.

Such federations include Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales within the United Kingdom; Catalonia and the Basque Autonomous Community within Spain; and the Kurdistan Autonomous Region within Iraq. The “Good Friday” peace agreement of 1998 that brought an end to the Northern Ireland conflict is especially pertinent to a solution to the Donbas conflict. It took place with the close involvement and support of the United States, gave regional control to the regional police force, and established cross-border institutions and guaranteed freedom of movement between the Republic of Ireland and the

Given the vast differences between regions, a federal constitution seems the best political system for the country as a whole.
A treaty establishing Ukrainian neutrality would be a barrier against any future Russian attempt to dominate the country.

Northern Ireland region of the UK. This agreement has also been widely suggested as the only possible model for an eventual settlement of the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan and the unrest in the Indian portion of that territory.

Ideally a peace settlement would also include a treaty establishing Ukrainian neutrality for the next generation, modeled on the Austrian State Treaty and associated Austrian law on neutrality of 1955, but to be ended or renewed after 30 years. Though not strictly necessary, such a treaty would remove the greatest motive by far for Russian interference in and intimidation of Ukraine.

Ukraine and the United States would sacrifice nothing by such a treaty, since it is impossible for Ukraine to join NATO so long as the Donbas conflict and Crimean dispute remain open. Furthermore, the treaty would be a barrier against any future Russian attempt to dominate Ukraine, for it would also rule out Ukrainian membership in any Russian-dominated alliance. This treaty would therefore prevent Russia from repeating its bid to draw Ukraine into the Eurasian Union, an attempt that provided the initial spark for the Ukrainian revolution of 2013–14. From Moscow’s point of view, this would be a blow: Ukrainian membership is essential to any hope of making the Eurasian Union into a serious international bloc. By contrast, Ukrainian membership in NATO and the EU, far from strengthening those bodies, would in fact drastically weaken them. On balance, therefore, Ukrainian neutrality would disadvantage Russia more than the West.

As for Ukrainian membership in the EU, this is ruled out for at least a generation to come by Ukraine’s corruption, political dysfunction, and lack of economic progress. The deep internal problems of the EU also make Ukrainian membership in NATO and the EU, far from strengthening those bodies, would in fact drastically weaken them. On balance, therefore, Ukrainian neutrality would disadvantage Russia more than the West.

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As for Ukrainian membership in the EU, this is ruled out for at least a generation to come by Ukraine’s corruption, political dysfunction, and lack of economic progress. The deep internal problems of the EU also make Ukrainian membership in the near to medium term quite implausible. These challenges include the immense costs of economic recovery from the Covid crisis and of EU promises to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2055, a pledge that would leave little money for the huge task of subsidizing Ukraine’s economy to the point where it could join the EU.

At $285 million a year (in 2020), US economic development aid to Ukraine does not begin to meet Ukrainian needs, let alone help prepare the country for EU membership. The miserable examples of corruption in the new EU member states of Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, and of chauvinist authoritarianism in Hungary and Poland, also make it exceptionally unlikely that the EU would seek a large and impoverished new Eastern member for many years to come.

Ukrainian politicians might wish to study the examples of Finland, Sweden, and Austria during the Cold War. These states lost nothing through neutrality and developed as prosperous, law-abiding, democratic Western societies that were able to join the EU after the Cold War ended. They could achieve this not through an EU or NATO accession process but rather because the elites and populations of these countries were genuinely committed to democracy, the rule of law, and regulated market economics.

The Minsk proposal for a solution to the Donbas conflict ignores the other territorial dispute between Russia and Ukraine, the Russian annexation of Crimea. This was, however, inevitable. Since Russia has annexed Crimea (in accordance, it seems, with the wishes of a majority of the region’s population), no Russian government can give it up short of decisive defeat in war. Like other such issues in the world (Kashmir and Kosovo, for example), this
question will simply have to be shelved until it is either quietly forgotten or fundamental changes in the international scene permit its solution.

These proposals will meet with strong opposition from Ukrainian nationalists and their supporters in the West, including some in the US Congress. Such opponents, however, have a duty to say what they themselves are proposing as an alternative to a settlement based on the Minsk II Protocol. Is it remotely likely that the West can bring enough economic pressure to bear on Russia to force it to abandon the Donbas without guarantees of autonomy? If not, can Ukraine win a war against Russia to force Russia to do so? If this is impossible, will the United States ever deliberately go to war with Russia to compel it to abandon the Donbas? Without a solution to the Donbas conflict, can Ukraine ever hope to join the EU?

Since the answer to all of these questions is no, the only basis for a settlement is that of the Minsk II Protocol. At present, the US approach to Ukraine is a zombie policy—a dead strategy that is wandering around pretending to be alive and getting in everyone’s way, because US policy-makers have not been able to bring themselves to bury it.

Opposition to a reasonable compromise over Ukraine also stems in part from a fear that Russia’s strategy there is a key component of much wider Russian ambitions, and that compromise will automatically lead to Russian aggression elsewhere that “challenges the entire architecture of the post–Cold War order,” as former US ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns put it in 2014. Since the answer to all of these questions is no, the only basis for a settlement is that of the Minsk II Protocol. At present, the US approach to Ukraine is a zombie policy—a dead strategy that is wandering around pretending to be alive and getting in everyone’s way, because US policy-makers have not been able to bring themselves to bury it.

To say this is not to justify Russia’s actions in the region since 2014, any more than to acknowledge permanent US interests in Central America is to justify all past US actions there. But great powers will inevitably take a strong interest in regions on their borders, and will react with suspicion and hostility to the appearance of rival great powers there.

The argument that Ukraine constitutes a US asset in the event of Russian aggression against the West is illogical and dangerous. First, the only really serious threat of military conflict with Russia is precisely over the disputed territories in Ukraine. Second, it is NATO, of which Ukraine is not a member, that exists to deter and repel any Russian attempt to dominate Europe—something that in any case is extremely unlikely, given both the comparative size of the Russian and EU economies and the lack of any evidence of such a Russian ambition. America’s greatest interest in Ukraine is the prevention of a conflict there. Even a limited new war between Ukraine and Russia would distract the United States from much more important challenges elsewhere. If the US were drawn into such a war (not deliberately but as the result of a series of accidents), this would be a catastrophe for America, Russia, the world—and Ukraine itself.

The US approach to Ukraine is a zombie policy—a dead strategy that is wandering around pretending to be alive.
Though the phrase “Defund the police” has been co-opted by the opposition to scare people away from the idea of police reform, the movement to find new ways to ensure public safety is winning a number of fights in cities across the country.
A few months ago, Salley May showed up at a mosque in Harlem where a woman was having a mental health crisis, holding children inside and refusing to allow people in or out. About 50 onlookers had gathered outside, as well as a large number of police officers.

May, a social worker, talked to the cops, “and we got them to cross the street,” she said, where they stayed. An emergency medical technician from the New York Fire Department took over managing the situation. He was able to enter the building and talk to the woman, to “really engage” with her, May said. He and May eventually brought her husband to the scene. The tense situation was resolved without violence.

May and her EMT partner are part of the city’s new Behavioral Health Emergency Assistance Response Division, or B-HEARD, a pilot program that provides a nonpolice response to mental health emergencies. Before it was launched, when a New York resident called 911 about a mental health emergency, the police were almost always part of the response. Now, in cases in the pilot precincts that don’t involve weapons or an imminent risk of harm, mental health experts are dispatched instead. When May and her team show up, there are often people gathered around with their phones out, prepared to record any police abuse. But onlookers seem to understand that B-HEARD responders represent a different approach. “They lower their cameras when they see us,” May said.

At the height of the protests over the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, demonstrators across the country started to make a potent demand: “Defund the police.” The call came after years of activism, largely unsuccessful, to reduce bloat in police budgets and increase funding for other social services, and it coincided with the police. “It’s a window of opportunity that has been opened, and I don’t think it has closed yet.”

—Paula X. Rojas, cochair, Austin Reimagining Public Safety Task Force

“Defund the police” has been co-opted by the opposition to scare people away from the idea of reform—it’s become “so politicized,” said Tracie Keesee, a cofounder of the national Center for Policing Equity. Some Democrats claimed that the slogan hurt them in the 2020 elections.

Even so, the fight to enact meaningful change grinds on at the local level in many cities. Some, like New York, are reconsidering who should show up when a resident is in need of help. Some are shifting police responsibilities to unarmed officers. Some have reduced police budgets and reinvested the money in social services like public health and affordable housing—investments that are meant to prevent people from committing crimes in the first place.

“Probably the biggest conversation is, ‘How are you defining public safety beyond just a police response? What does that infrastructure or those resources to make those things happen look like?’” Keesee said. In many places there have been significant steps forward alongside disappointing backward slides. “It’s messy,” Keesee said. “But it goes on.”

On her second day as the director of the disability justice program at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, Ruth Lowenkron read that the NYPD had killed Deborah Danner, a 66-year-old Black woman who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and was having a mental health episode, in her own home. That was five years ago; since then, more than a dozen New Yorkers, the majority of them Black, have been killed by the police while experiencing mental health crises, including Kawasaki Trawick, a 32-year-old with a history of mental illness who was shot and killed by police in his apartment in 2019 less than two minutes into the encounter.

“The response to mental health crises is a crisis, to put it quite bluntly,” Lowenkron said. “We’re not doing things the right way, and we need to change.”

Salley May could, possibly, be part of that change. She never thought she’d leave her job on a crisis response team at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan. But when she got a call asking her to join B-HEARD, her teenage children, who had been active in that summer’s protests, told her she had to do it. She jumped into five weeks of training on everything from motivational interviewing of people in distress to situational awareness—knowing where best to stand during crisis situations. Team members role-played de-escalation scenarios. Police, 911 operators, and EMTs who work in the pilot precincts were trained as well. “Leadership came and said, ‘The world is watching this program,’” May told me.

B-HEARD, she said, “is an entirely different approach” than what she was used to. When she worked at Bellevue, things often got “territorial” between her team, the EMTs, and the police. But now, instead of “immediately pathologizing” the person they respond
to, B-HEARD teams are “just making sure you’re safe, making sure you’re OK,” she said. “I’ve been waiting for this kind of program.”

Instead of sending everyone who needs care to the hospital, May now sends some to the East Harlem Support and Connection Center, which has doctors and peer counselors and offers health services, food, beds, and showers 24 hours a day. Patients are able to stay for up to five days and can return on their own later if they need more help; as of late June, nearly half had done so, according to city data. The city plans to open another support center in the Bronx in a few months and hopes to eventually open more across the boroughs.

“We are thrilled that the city is finally thinking about something that is nonpolice,” Lowenkron said. Before the Black Lives Matters demonstrations, advocates struggled merely to institute robust training for police responding to mental health crises. The protests shifted the conversation to getting police out of the response altogether. The pilot isn’t a co-response team involving police, though the cops often get to the scene first or are called later. With traditional emergency calls, over 80 percent of the people are transported to a hospital, but for the first three months of the B-HEARD program, only about 50 percent of those helped by its teams were. A quarter were helped where they were, and about 20 percent were transported to community care centers. Mayor Bill de Blasio has called for spending $112 million on B-HEARD, which should be enough to implement the new approach city-wide. “We’re headed in a good direction,” Lowenkron said.

Still, advocates had expected New York City to go much further in the wake of the 2020 protests. At the height of the unrest, City Council members pledged to cut $1 billion from the NYPD’s budget. But while the council claimed that it had reduced the budget by that amount, much of the reduction was accomplished through accounting mechanisms instead of actual cuts. Police were exempt from a hiring freeze that hit most other city workers. “The City Council just paid a lot of lip service to being committed to reforms,” said Ileana Méndez-Peñate, of Communities United for Police Reform. “We’re asking for a budget that radically shifts how money is spent away from criminalization.”

For Méndez-Peñate, the city’s attempt at reform does not represent enough of a shift. B-HEARD “creates another system that still centers police. It actually entrenches a police response rather than removes it,” she said. “New York City really needs a holistic and really well-thought-out mental health response.”

B-HEARD’s initial results show room for improvement. It is functional for only 16 hours a day, and the average response time is just over 12 minutes; other emergencies see shorter wait times for a police response. The 911 operators routed only a quarter of mental health calls to the program’s teams in its first three months of operation, and police were still responding to about 80 percent of calls in the first month. May said they are having success in getting the NYPD to step back and hand cases over to them, but some police officers still don’t want to cooperate. Half the people B-HEARD responds to are still being sent to the hospital, taken out of their communities and given emergency room care that is often brief and impersonal. “Hospital emergency rooms are not places where people go to get well,” Méndez-Peñate said.

Susan Herman, the director of the city’s Office of Community Mental Health, which is in charge of B-HEARD, sees it differently. “I think of this program as the next frontier in mental health reform as much as it is about police reform,” she said. The city had already created more mobile mental health treatment options and a hotline for urgent mental health needs. “This is the logical next step in that work,” Herman said. As for the high level of police response, “We have four agencies that are learning how to work together in a new way. I think the police are welcoming this program.”

At first, the idea was that B-HEARD would respond to all mental-health-related calls where there were no weapons or violence involved, Herman said. But the teams may also be taken off the first response for calls that always result in a transport to the hospital, which could be better served by an ambulance that arrives right away. “Every day we’re learning, every day we’re looking at the data, every day we’re talking to the team,” she said. But advocates want the city moving in the opposite direction: They want to see nonpolice actors responding to more calls, not fewer, and to eventually get emergency response to mental health calls “out of the hands of the police entirely,” Lowenkron said.

In some cities, demands—and the beginning of plans—to defund the police have faced a brutal backlash. In the summer of 2020, the City Council of Austin, Tex., voted to establish a Reimagining Public Safety Task Force made up of advocates and community members. Volunteers put in hundreds of thousands of hours, convening working groups and listening sessions and developing detailed policy recommendations on where to reinvest police resources and how to change the
city’s approach to keeping residents safe. Then they learned that their final report would simply be sent to the city manager, Spencer Cronk, and that the task force would have to fight to get an audience with the City Council. They thought there would be a deadline for council action in the midyear budget, but that wasn’t the case.

In April, after members pulled an all-nighter to get their presentations ready, only a few were allowed to speak. They walked the lawmakers through their proposals, but council members discussed and asked questions only about the “more palatable” ones, said Cate Graziani, co-executive director of the Texas Harm Reduction Alliance and a member of the task force. “There was very little engagement from City Council members.” Some said they hadn’t had time to look at the report. At the end of the presentation, there were few questions or follow-ups. Paula X. Rojas, a community organizer and co-chair of the task force, expressed her frustration with the reception and asked for commitments for action on the recommendations. “I want you to feel the emotion,” she told the lawmakers in attendance. “We are not wanting our work to end up like other task force reports [that] end up on a shelf.” She received no concrete answers.

“We were led on to believe we were part of this conversation in a really meaningful way, and it was clear that it was superficial for them,” Graziani said. “The City Council knew they weren’t going to do anything that day except clap and make poses and thank us,” said David Johnson, a criminal justice organizer at Grassroots Leadership.

Advocates had pushed the city to shift police funding to other areas, such as housing and public health, for years before the pandemic. The framing wasn’t “defund the police,” Rojas said, but rather “where should those resources be going? What makes us safer? It isn’t policing.” But efforts to actually reduce the police budget had “been unsuccessful for years,” said City Council member Gregorio Casar. In 2019, he proposed a $200,000 cut to the police budget to fund more domestic violence shelters, but “we didn’t have enough votes.”

Then Austin was caught up in the wave of protests that swept the country. Casar said his office received over 10,000 calls and e-mails about the city budget in a single weekend in the summer of 2020.

The council cut over $150 million—about one-third of the total—from the police budget that August, the biggest cut to police funding in any city. It was the first time the Austin Police Department’s budget had been reduced in over a decade. About $20 million of that money came from canceling three cadet classes and was redirected to services like domestic violence shelters, mental health first responders, homeless outreach, and abortion access. Another $80 million was saved by moving forensics and 911 out from under the APD. About $50 million of that was allocated to be spent according to the findings of the Reimagining Public Safety Task Force.

Casar saw it as “transformational.” But many advocates wanted the council to go even further. “This was their moment—they had the political cover to do something more impactful than they did,” Rojas said. Advocates demanded that the city cut the police budget by half and redirect the funds to areas like public health, housing, and economic relief. But the council failed to take further action.

A right-wing backlash started brewing in Austin and the rest of the state. “The progress that we were able to make threatened traditional power,” Johnson said. In December, pro-defund City Council member Jimmy Flannigan lost his seat after pro-police groups bankrolled his opposition, and Graziani thinks others have been cowed into settling for less aggressive action. “The retaliation was powerful, it was swift, it was effective,” she said.

Then the state took a sledgehammer to the entire local process. In June, Governor Greg Abbott signed House Bill 1900 into law, which withholds state tax money from any large municipality that reduces its police budget. Senate Bill 23, passed at the same time, requires large counties to hold elections before reducing or reallocating police funding or risk a freeze in property tax revenue. The legislation “just put a big stink in all those plans,” said Chas Moore, the executive director of the Austin Justice Coalition. The city was able to hold on to some of its reforms, such as the $20 million from the police budget that created a mental health first responder program and funded domestic violence shelters and substance abuse services. But 911 and forensics had to be folded back into the APD to comply with the new state law. Then the city passed a budget this year that goes beyond what HB 1900 requires, adding $10 million more than the police received in 2019.

Advocates got a win in November, when voters rejected a ballot measure that would have required the city to hire at least two police officers per 1,000 residents, which would have added hundreds of millions of dollars to the police budget. Beating back the proposition “can show how the movement can endure,” Casar said.

“Defund isn’t dead”

“When you’re making huge changes like this, there’s nobody that doesn’t feel the risk.”

—Brian Fullman, organizer, Barbershop & Black Congregation Cooperative

Crisis response: New York City, like a number of other localities including San Francisco, Denver, and Chicago, is creating emergency response teams for mental health crises that will not involve police.
opened, and I don’t think it has closed yet,” she said. “We haven’t lost everything we gained in the last year and a half.”

N MID-SEPTEMBER, A MULTI-RACIAL GROUP OF OVER 100 RESIDENTS OF BROOKLYN CENTER, MINN., TURNED OUT FOR A MEETING TO HELP IMPLEMENT A CITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION TO CREATE NEW RESPONSES TO PUBLIC SAFETY. AFTER AN HOUR OF OPEN DISCUSSION, ATTENDEES HUDDLED IN BREAKOUT GROUPS OF 20 TO 25 PEOPLE. SOME WERE WORRIED ABOUT THE IDEA OF REDUCING POLICE FUNCTIONS. “WHEN YOU’RE MAKING HUGE CHANGES LIKE THIS, THERE’S NOBODY THAT DOESN’T FEEL THE RISK,” SAID BRIAN FULLMAN, A LEAD ORGANIZER WITH THE BARBERSHOP & BLACK CONGREGATION COOPERATIVE. BUT ADVOCATES WERE “LITERALLY PERSUADING PEOPLE IN THE MEETING.” IT WAS SCHEDULED TO RUN FROM 6:30 UNTIL 8:30; PEOPLE WERE STILL TALKING HOURS LATER.

About a year after George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, police killed Daunte Wright, a 20-year-old Black man, after pulling him over for an expired vehicle registration about a dozen miles away in Brooklyn Center. In the wake of Wright’s death, Brooklyn Center residents took to the streets, only to be met by a militarized police response. It “was almost equivalent to a sledgehammer smashing a thumbtack,” Fullman said. “We knew that we had to respond in a way that wasn’t just talk,” said Mayor Mike Elliott.

In the aftermath, Elliott, Fullman, and various community organizations “got together in a room,” Fullman said. Elliott wanted to pass a police reform measure; Fullman told him that if he didn’t involve the community, “you won’t be able to pass it.” They held a series of forums at which residents testified about the abuse they had suffered at the hands of police. The attendees told lawmakers that they wanted nonpolice options for mental health crises and small disturbances like loud music. They didn’t want police in charge of traffic enforcement. The City Council members who had been on the fence got on board after hearing the stories, clearing a path for the resolution. “Those testimonies led to City Council members flipping, because these are constituents of theirs,” Fullman noted. “Our community demanded these changes,” Elliott said.

In May the City Council passed a resolution calling for a new approach to public safety. Its measures include the creation of an unarmed Community Response Department for medical and mental health emergencies, an unarmed civilian Traffic Enforcement Department, and a Department of Community Safety and Violence Prevention, helmed by a public health expert, that would oversee the other two as well as the police and fire departments. It also calls for regulation of the city’s use-of-force policy and the immediate implementation of a policy change directing police to issue citations for nonmoving traffic violations and non-felony offenses or warrants rather than make arrests.

“We are adding more tools to our toolbox so police aren’t the only available resource,” Elliott said. That will “actually improve the public safety.” It’s a promise that drew so many residents to the community meeting in September to figure out how it should be implemented.

Fullman credits robust community involvement for Brooklyn Center’s concrete progress. “It wasn’t no magic,” he said. “We put the community at the center of it…. We created the space and opportunity for residents to be on board.”

The process is in its very early stages. The city is currently forming committees to implement each of the resolution’s pieces. The goal is to have most of it in place by April 11, 2022, the anniversary of Wright’s death. Fullman hopes that it will transform the “warrior-style mentality” of police, end the police response to traffic violations, and increase investment in services that address addiction, homelessness, and mental health. “This is what public safety looks like,” he said. But he’s not an abolitionist; he believes there will still be police when the process is completed.

Activists in Minneapolis, which was ground zero for the protests in 2020, have also been trying to redefine public safety with bold steps, but it’s been a bumpy ride. Last year, the Minneapolis City Council voted unanimously to eliminate the police department and create something entirely new, although what that would be had yet to be determined. But the effort ran aground on the city’s charter, which calls for maintaining a police force of a certain size. That “gave way for the residents of Minneapolis to be able to push for [change] more directly,” said JaNaé Bates, the communication director for the Yes 4 Minneapolis campaign. Her group and a coalition of faith leaders, small businesses, labor unions, and racial justice organizers pushed a ballot measure that enabled city residents to weigh in directly on whether to amend the charter and pave the way for replacing the Minneapolis police force with a new Department of Public Safety. The proposal divided elected Democratic officials in the state, however, and voters rejected it. Still, it garnered 44 percent of the vote, and organizers emphasized that the ballot measure excited many in their communities. To get on the ballot, the measure needed 12,000 signatures; organizers collected more than 20,000 going door-to-door in the middle of February in Minnesota. “We changed the conversation about what public safety should look like,” Corenia Smith, campaign manager for Yes 4 Minneapolis, said in a statement after the election. “Now, we will work to hold leaders and the system accountable. We will work to heal our city and create safer streets for all our communities.”
A number of other cities are working on alternatives to having the police respond to mental health crises. Denver has implemented a pilot program called Support Team Assisted Response to send a paramedic and a mental health professional instead of cops to a variety of calls. Chicago is dispatching a paramedic, a mental health clinician, and a police officer trained in crisis response to two areas of the city. San Francisco has a new Crisis Response Team to respond to calls related to mental health, drug use, and homelessness. Albuquerque has created a new Community Safety Department that began sending social workers to patrol blocks and respond to calls.

San Francisco, along with Portland, Ore., and Philadelphia, has been shifting safety duties in public transit to unarmed officers, and in February Mayor London Breed proposed redirecting $120 million from the police budget to other services. Berkeley, Calif., is working on removing police from traffic enforcement.

Cat Brooks, a cofounder of the Anti Police-Terror Project, has been fighting to reduce the role of police in Oakland, Calif., and shift money to mental health and other services “even before the advent of Black Lives Matter,” she said. “We spent years getting laughed out of rooms.” Then in 2020 the Oakland City Council created a public safety task force and promised it would work toward a 50 percent reduction in the police budget. That led to a heated debate this year with Mayor Libby Schaaf, who had proposed increasing funding for the police; in the end, the council diverted over $18 million from the police funding in Schaaf’s budget and doubled funding for social services, including a nonpolice response program for mental health emergencies. But while that was “a win,” Brooks said, “it wasn’t the win.” The police budget still wasn’t reduced from its previous levels. “We’re going to continue this campaign until we get 50 percent [reduction in the police budget],” she said.

Activists around the country now have to contend with the politicized idea of “defunding the police” itself. Most of those I spoke with have moved away from the phrase. While Moore believes his fellow Austinites want real police reform, he thinks the word “defund” scared a lot of people. “In hindsight I do wish that we as a movement had come up with a better slogan,” he said. “We just didn’t have enough time to do the political education of what ‘defund’ actually meant.” In Brooklyn Center, Fullman explained, “‘defunding’ is a word that we do not use, because of the public definition it has on it now. What we’re saying is ‘reallocating funds’ to meet the inequities of the community.”

In New York, Mayor de Blasio’s term is up at the end of the year, and former Brooklyn borough president Eric Adams will replace him. Adams, a former NYPD officer, strongly opposed the idea of defunding the police during his campaign, leading some to see his victory as a repudiation of the movement. But in the same election, New Yorkers picked a slate of new council members who will make up the most diverse and progressive body the city has seen. “A lot of candidates who were specifically ‘defund’ candidates won,” Méndez-Peña said. “It was clear that New Yorkers really want to see some change.” Herman wants B-HEARD to operate in more precincts by the end of the year and eventually in all of them. The City Council is now considering a bill that would institute a nonpolice response to mental health crises citywide.

“Movements ebb and flow,” Brooks noted. “Last summer was a movement flowing.” But the tide hasn’t turned entirely. Activists “are doing a kick-ass job extracting everything we can before the movement ebbs again, because this door will close.”

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NAMEd ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF 2021 BY KIRKUS REVIEWS
Behind closed doors and with little fanfare, on October 8, President Joe Biden signed the Helping American Victims Affected by Neurological Attacks Act into law. Known as the “Havana Act”—a misnomer since most of the purported “attacks” took place far from Cuba—the legislation authorizes the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department to compensate a growing number of agents and diplomats who have experienced a cluster of cognitive-related injuries from a mysterious, and still unidentified, source. The impetus for the new law came from complaints by a number of injured US personnel that their own government, particularly during the Donald Trump era, has been dismissive of their medical needs and the legitimacy of their injuries.

“We’re not making this up—this happened to real people,” one injured Havana embassy official stated in a dramatic interview with NBC News in October. “It just seems important to humanize this,” another told NBC, “to help all my fellow Americans understand that, as much skepticism as still seems to surround this, it’s very real.”

Indeed, public skepticism remains high—enhanced by proponents of the mass hysteria theory as the likely explanation gaining traction in the opinion pages of the media, as well as by misleading coverage of a secret government study that debunked the initial theory of a “sonic attack” in Cuba. “Is the Havana Syndrome Real? A Newly Declassified Report Says It May Be Crickets,” The National Interest reported.


The portion of the document that is readable does not support any such assertions. But 80 percent of the 98-page report, written for the State Department by the elite JASON scientific advisory group, has been redacted on national security grounds—to protect the intelligence operatives present among those in Cuba who experienced what is officially being called an “anomalous health incident.” About half of the approximately 200 cases of AHIs in China, Colombia, Austria, Germany, Australia, India, Vietnam, and other locations have been reported by members of the CIA.

The fact that CIA spies are involved...
has cast a long shadow of secrecy over the efforts to resolve this national security mystery. As in the case of the JASON report, information has been restricted and heavily censored; official investigations have been compromised by the lack of access to classified records; and congressional oversight has been kept at arm’s length until recently. The lack of transparency has delayed progress in determining the cause and culprit behind these incidents. Most important, it has left those who experienced these traumatic injuries in the dark about what happened to them and what it means for their health and well-being.

“Excessive Secrecy”

Since late 2016, when a CIA operative experienced what was described as “severe pain and a sensation of intense pressure in the face, [and] a loud piercing sound in one ear,” the saga of the syndrome has been dominated by secrecy. For weeks, the CIA kept secret that its agents were reporting being stricken, one by one, in their Havana homes by what they described as “an invisible beam of energy”—in hopes of ascertaining what was happening to them before it became public. But after rumors of a mysterious malady spread through a panicked embassy community, Ambassador Jeffrey DeLaurentis, the chief of mission, convened a staff meeting in late March 2017 to discuss the incidents. Close to 50 embassy personnel gathered in a SCIF (sensitive compartmented information facility), where DeLaurentis explained that the mystery ailments were being investigated and that medical support was available. “He concluded the meeting by asking the assembled staff to avoid talking about the situation outside the secure confines of the embassy, even with their families,” because the matter was classified. “We thought that was nuts,” one official told ProPublica. “There were family members who were attacked at home. How could we not tell them to watch out for this?”

The delay in sharing information between the CIA and the State Department was a critical error in managing the emerging crisis, according to the first internal State Department investigation—an investigation that itself was delayed as the Trump administration appeared to stall any inquiry that would acknowledge the CIA presence in Cuba. By law, any security incident involving embassy personnel requires the convening of an Accountability Review Board, usually within 60 days of a credible episode. But even as reported cases of injuries to US diplomats and operatives multiplied in Cuba and then spread to the Canadian embassy, the ARB was not convened until early 2018—more than a year after CIA agents first reported symptoms. “Both at [Havana] Post and in Washington, response to the incidents was characterized by excessive secrecy that contributed to a delayed response,” the ARB concluded.

The ARB evaluation itself became a major example of that excessive secrecy. The State Department refused to show the report to Congress’s investigatory arm, the Government Accountability Office, approving a briefing instead. The Trump administration similarly resisted a request from the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Robert Menendez, to turn over an unclassified copy to Congress.

Nor was the ARB report shared with a team of investigators from the National Academy of Sciences that had been commissioned by the State Department to identify the cause of the injuries. In an interview, Dr. David Relman, the chairman of the NAS’s Standing Committee to Advise the Department of State on Unexplained Health Effects on U.S. Government Employees and Their Families at Overseas Embassies, told me how his team was denied access to relevant national security records. Even an unclassified CDC epidemiological assessment was off-limits; the NAS team finally obtained the CDC report through unofficial channels.

The JASON report was among the classified assessments withheld from NAS investigators. Stamped secret and titled “Acoustic Signals and Physiological Effects on U.S. Diplomats in Cuba,” the “rapid response study” evaluated eight tape recordings, made in Havana by US personnel, of a shrill buzzing sound they associated with their injuries. Through acoustic analysis, the JASON team concluded the recorded sounds were “an excellent match” to the mating call of the Indies short-tailed cricket.

But the report clearly pointed out the tenuous correlation between the recordings and the injuries. Seven of the recordings were, in fact, not made “simultaneously with reported onset of symptoms” but rather at different times and places; moreover, some victims reported hearing no sound at all. The JASON scientists specifically

The lack of transparency has left those who experienced traumatic injuries in the dark about what happened to them.
stated that “the sound pressure intensity levels of the recorded and audible sounds are not, by themselves, the cause of reported long term harm” to the victims. The main takeaway from the report was not that the din of lovelorn crickets caused the Havana syndrome but that something else did.

Microwaves, perhaps? Neither microwaves nor other energy sources could “produce both the recorded noise/video signals and the reported medical effects,” the JASON report said, leaving open the possibility that a directed-energy device could indeed generate the health incidents alone. Contrary to BuzzFeed’s assertion that JASON “dismissed” microwaves as the potential cause, the study contained a section on mitigating the threat of “electromagnetics” if they were identified as the source of the syndrome. Those recommendations are, predictably, redacted.

The Trump administration managed to cover up the existence of the classified JASON report; it endeavored to do the same with the unclassified NAS report. Dr. Relman noted that the NAS expected the State Department to publicly release its report after it was submitted in August 2020. Instead, the administration withheld it. “The American people and their elected representatives deserve to read what we have found,” Dr. Relman stated publicly in October 2020, in an effort to prod the State Department to release the report. The study was eventually leaked to The New York Times and NBC News—presumably by one of the victims who had obtained a copy—and then was posted on the NAS website on December 5, 2020.

Reviewing all plausible theories—chemical poisoning and psychological factors among them—the NAS team concluded that “many of the distinctive and acute signs, symptoms, and observations reported by [State Department and CIA] employees are consistent with the effects of directed, pulsed radio frequency.” It was beyond the NAS’s ability to identify the source, the report observed. But, its authors warned, “the mere consideration of such a scenario raises grave concerns about a world with disinhibited malevolent actors and new tools for causing harm to others.”

**The Question of Russia**

**A** s cases of anomalous health incidents among intelligence, military, and diplomatic personnel have proliferated around the world, the identity of those “malevolent actors” and what “new tools,” if any, they may be using have become the subject of intense speculation and debate. A study released by the Cuban Academy of Science in September, for example, dismissed the idea that such actors and devices exist. “No known form of energy can selectively cause brain damage (with laser-like precision) under the conditions described for the alleged incidents in Havana,” the report stated. The injuries experienced by the US and Canadian embassy communities were likely due to “a heterogeneous collection of medical conditions, some pre-existing before going to Cuba and others acquired due to mundane causes.” It also cited conditions for the “psychogenic propagation of malaise”—commonly known as mass hysteria—as a causal factor for the trauma experienced by some victims.

Other authoritative investigators have made similar arguments. An early FBI investigation into the source of the maladies included an evaluation by the bureau’s Behavioral Analysis Unit that also focused on psychogenic causes—without actually interviewing any of the US personnel whose brain injuries were medically confirmed. “I mean, I have verified physical injuries,” Kate Hubbard told NBC’s Andrea Mitchell, describing the concussion-like brain disorder that has left her unable to work and ended her diplomatic career. The FBI study remains classified.

US scientific experts also dispute that a directed-energy device could inflict such injuries actually exists. As Cheryl Rofer, whose 35-year career at Los Alamos Laboratories included work on microwave technologies, argued in Foreign Policy, “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, and no evidence has been offered to support the existence of this mystery weapon.”

But an informed debate on weaponized microwaves has been rendered nearly impossible given the tight secrecy that surrounds the R&D of such technology. Both the United States and the Russians have been exploring such technologies for decades. The CIA began to research the potential for microwave weaponry as a component of its MKULTRA mind control program in the 1950s—after analyzing Soviet scientific literature that suggested that microwave radiation could be used to disorient military and diplomatic personnel. One early MKULTRA experiment was titled “Effects of radio-frequency energy on primate cerebral activity.” In the mid-1960s the Pentagon’s Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) initiated another secret study—code-named “Project Pandora”—of the impact of microwaves on the behavior of monkeys, in an effort to determine whether the Soviet program of beaming microwaves at the US embassy in Moscow was an attempt to debilitating personnel posted there. The “Moscow Signal,” as the radiation was referred to in secret cables, targeted the embassy from 1953 to 1979, creating an eerie, if distant, precedent for what appears to be the targeting of US personnel around the world today.

More recent Moscow-connected cases are receiving renewed attention from investigators. In 1996, a National Security Agency counterintelligence officer named Mike Beck was stricken with extreme vertigo in his hotel room while on a mission to a “hostile country.” “There is intelligence information from 2012 associating the identity of those malevolent actors and what new tools,” if any, they may be using have become the subject of intense
“Sometimes even more valuable than compensation is knowledge.”

—Mark Zaid, counsel to eight former staffers of the US embassy in Havana

enemy over time and without leaving evidence,” states an NSA document that was declassified in 2014 as part of a workers’ compensation case Beck filed after he and a colleague on that mission both developed a rare form of Parkinson’s disease. “The 2012 intelligence information indicated that this weapon is designed to bathe a target’s living quarters in microwaves, causing numerous physical effects, including a damaged nervous system.”

That information, and the name of the country where Beck sustained his injuries, remain highly classified—despite their obvious relevance to understanding the causes of the current cases of unexplained health incidents. Sources familiar with the still-secret intelligence report told The New York Times the country was Russia.

Russia is also tied to the more recent case of veteran CIA officer Marc Polymeropoulos, who experienced extreme vertigo with nausea and tinnitus in his hotel room during December 2017 trip to Moscow. He subsequently developed debilitating headaches that forced him to retire from the agency. For three years, the CIA medical office rejected his requests for medical treatment and workers’ compensation, but under the new leadership of director William Burns, his claims have been accepted as part of the increasing cohort of AHI cases. Polymeropoulos considers his case, and those more recently reported, to be “an act of war.” He has become a high-profile proponent of an aggressive US response.

These cases have contributed to a rough consensus within the national security agencies that the AHI injuries are real; that the cause is some type of modernized, and mobile, microwave-energy device; and that the likely culprit is Russian military intelligence. “Senior officials in the Trump and Biden Administrations suspect that the Russians are responsible for the syndrome,” reported Adam Entous, who has covered this story extensively for The New Yorker. “Their working hypothesis is that operatives working for the G.R.U., the Russian military-intelligence service, have been aiming microwave-radiation devices at U.S. officials, possibly to steal data from their computers or smartphones, which inflicted serious harm on the people they targeted.” During a June summit in Switzerland, Biden reportedly raised the issue with Russian leader Vladimir Putin. The memorandum of their conversation remains classified.

Seeking Transparency

Along with “excessive secrecy,” the Trump administration’s response to the health incidents, according to its own ARB report, was characterized by a “lack of senior leadership, ineffective communications, and systemic disorganization.” But those affected did not find the Biden administration any more responsive or transparent, at least initially. “We have been disheartened to learn and experience that staff within the Department continue to 1) Deny employees and injured family members access to proper medical evaluation and treatment 2) Reject scientific evidence regarding the injuries and treatment needs and 3) Invalidate our injuries and experiences,” a group of 21 State Department officials wrote on May 25 to Deputy Secretary of State Brian McKeon. They demanded that the State Department leadership “stand by the women and men advancing our foreign policy by prioritizing the health, safety and security of our officers.”

In 2018, eight former members of the Havana embassy community retained the renowned Washington, D.C., whistleblower lawyer Mark Zaid to represent them. On their behalf, Zaid played a role in pressing Congress to pass the Havana Act. Along with The New Yorker’s Entous, Zaid—the founder of the James Madison Project, a public interest legal firm dedicated to promoting right-to-know matters on national security—filed a FOIA lawsuit seeking access to thousands of pages of secret records generated by the State Department’s investigations of AHIs. “Congress needs to push for greater transparency from the executive branch as to what it knows about these incidents. Sometimes even more valuable than compensation is knowledge,” Zaid observed. “We’re looking for answers,” he told NPR in mid-October. “We’re tired of the subterfuge of the US government hiding this information.”

Leading members of Congress repeatedly pressed both the Trump and Biden administrations for more information—and have repeatedly complained about the failure to comply. “The Department has not been forthcoming with key details about the incidents involving the serious injuries incurred by several of these personnel,” stated a letter that six senators, led by New Hampshire’s Jeanne Shaheen, sent to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo just before Trump left office. “We also have very limited information regarding the Department’s assessment of causation and ways to prevent future incidents. It is imperative that the Department provide us the relevant information currently in its possession.” Shaheen and Senator Susan Collins subsequently drafted the Havana Act, which mandates reports to Congress by the CIA and the State Department on the distribution of compensation funds in an effort to increase the flow of information to lawmakers.

Biden signed the bill with a growing sense of urgency to resolve this mystery as cases mushroom around the world. In August, Vice President Kamala Harris’s trip to Vietnam was delayed by the evacuation of two US officials from Hanoi who had...
suffered syndrome-like symptoms. In September, a member of the CIA entourage accompanying director William Burns to India experienced an AHI; in October, five families of US diplomats in Bogotá were reportedly stricken as Secretary of State Anthony Blinken prepared to visit Colombia.

Indeed, beyond the harm done to dozens of individuals who have been diagnosed with brain trauma, the phenomenon of unexplained health incidents is creating a crisis of confidence in the national security and foreign policy establishments. Recently, the State Department relieved Ambassador Pamela Spratlen of her duties supervising the Health Incident Response Task Force only six months after Secretary Blinken appointed her “to reaffirm our commitment to make certain that those affected receive the care and treatment they need.” Spratlen reportedly refused to reject the FBI study on mass hysteria, offending the injured Foreign Service officers for whom she’d been appointed to advocate. Around the same time, the CIA’s Vienna station chief was relieved of his duties for failing to aggressively investigate multiple reports of AHIs among his agents in Austria. “It’s obvious how a US adversary would have much to gain from the disorder, distress, and division that has followed,” said Senator Shaheen.

That the Biden administration is actively investigating the mysterious injuries to US national security personnel is no longer in question. The State Department and the Pentagon have established task forces to intensify their bureaucratic focus on the issue; the CIA has upgraded its efforts by appointing a new task force chief—an undercover counterterrorism operative who is a veteran of the campaign to track down and kill Osama bin Laden. The Joint Intelligence Community Council has held classified high-level briefings to share information between agencies. “Addressing these incidents has been a top priority for my Administration,” Biden said in a statement issued when he signed the Havana Act. “We are bringing to bear the full resources of the U.S. Government to make available first-class medical care to those affected and to get to the bottom of these incidents, including to determine the cause and who is responsible.”

When and if that determination comes, it will be met with widespread skepticism given the intensity of the debate surrounding this enigmatic phenomenon—unless the investigative record is declassified for public scrutiny. Five years after CIA operatives first experienced mysterious health problems in Cuba, the paper trail of secret documentation is long and getting longer; and there are no signs that Biden plans to lift the veil of excessive secrecy that has characterized and compromised this inquiry from the beginning. As a growing list of individual health incidents morphs into a perceived but still unexplained national security threat, that lack of transparency will continue to deprive AHI victims of the information that they have a need to know—and, like the rest of us, the right to know.

Five years after the CIA first reported health incidents in Cuba, the trail of secret documents is getting longer.

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George Packer is one of the most successful long-form journalists of his generation. For more than two decades, he has been among this country’s leading liberal commentators. Offering a political and often personal chronicle of the vicissitudes of American liberalism over the past century, he has sought at once to reclaim and repurpose a political tradition he knows is in crisis.

With each book, the task has gotten harder for him. In an early treatise, *Blood of Liberals* (2001), Packer reckoned with a New Deal and Great Society liberalism that had been assailed from the right and abandoned by the Democratic Party. Taking an inventory of this liberalism’s decline through the life of his maternal
grandfather and namesake, Alabama Congressman George Huddleston, an agrarian populist who opposed the New Deal during the 1930s, he then followed the life of his father, Herbert, a law professor and academic administrator at Stanford who committed suicide after suffering a stroke at the height of the New Left campus protests in the late 1960s. Joining the ranks of liberals pressing for the revival of a hawkish foreign policy in the early 2000s, Packer supported the post-9/11 wars, only to see them lead to an era of futile and seemingly endless military conflict overseas. Writing dispatches for The New Yorker tracking the unfolding catastrophe in Iraq, he published Assassins’ Gate in 2005, recording his disillusionment with the Iraq War, which he believed had squandered an otherwise noble purpose. Soon Packer’s liberalism was in for another challenge: the Great Recession of 2008. His next book, The Unwinding (2013), confronted the collapse of middle-class prosperity at home and the role that Democrats, as well as Republicans, had played in its demise.

Across a formidable body of work, Packer has maintained his belief in a liberalism capable of perfecting itself and in the United States’ exceptional role as the agent of this perfection. “The real question,” he wrote in The Fight Is for Democracy, a collection of essays by writers stressing the importance of liberalism and human rights in the Global War on Terror, “is not whether America is an empire, but what to do with the power we have.” The surest guide to action is not to reject liberalism, he argued, but to embrace the most “vibrant, hardheaded” version of it—the kind of assured liberalism that characterized those midcentury elites who had fought and won the Cold War. Despite the abominations of Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, the declining life chances of Americans of modest means, and a war in Afghanistan that (until recently) dragged on to no apparent purpose, Packer held firm to this vision of an aggressive liberalism capable of transforming the United States and the world together.

Packer’s new book, Last Best Hope, returns to this theme of liberalism in crisis and in need of renewal. Joining those who have worried that liberalism finally reached a breaking point in the time of Trump, he still insists that his strain of liberal internationalism abroad and liberal pragmatism at home is the only thing standing in the way of the excesses of an authoritarian right and an unhinged, utopian left. While this is not a new subject for Packer, the tone and tenor of his latest book is decidedly insular. At times he does not seem wholly convinced by his own increasingly abstract pronouncements. Never fully answering the question of how we arrived at our current predicament, Packer does not explain how a revitalized liberalism can get us out of it. The search for causes and policy remedies remains secondary to the reassertion of ideological precepts: above all else, that liberalism and America in general remain our era’s last best hope.

To his credit, Packer identifies a core problem: Inequality in the United States, he argues, has crossed a threshold that fatally compromises the public trust and comity needed to inspire and achieve effective and robust government. But how to solve the problems of inequality and the country’s crisis of confidence and cohesion is another matter. For the readers of Packer’s new book, it is never entirely clear what needs to change—we mainly need to remember and reaffirm the idea that defines us: that we are a people uniquely capable of transforming the United States and the world together.

According to Packer, the exceptional role that the United States and elite liberals had to play in world history faltered only in the 1960s and ’70s, as the country began to splinter into a set of competing Americas. These different Americas now conform to partisan lines, but they are best understood not in the clichéd hues of red and blue but in terms of the widening inequality of the past half-century and the divisions it created among what Packer terms the “four Americas”: “Free America,” “Real America,” “Smart America,” and “Just America.” The first two align mainly with the Republican Party and the last two with the Democrats, but each represents a different challenge to the liberal consensus that defined the political landscape during the Cold War and, in Packer’s view, created a society with “more economic equality, more shared prosperity, and more political cooperation” than we have today.

Packer recognizes that inequality is a material condition produced by political and economic forces, actors, and policies. But the notion of a “common faith” grounded in storytelling, underwriting collective agreements that

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allow us to work toward shared goals, is what interests him most. This begs an important question, however: Was the common faith that supposedly existed before today’s rampant inequality, cultural division, and partisan animus undermined by inequality, or did it depend on certain kinds of inequality and intolerance as its precondition? The fact that the midcentury liberal world that serves as Packer’s baseline became mired in a long, unjust war in Vietnam; was riven by racial despotism and the protests against it; had been shaped by restrictive immigration quotas and repressive ideas about women’s roles and normative families; and remained intolerant of non-normative sexualities—all of this is barely mentioned, because Packer does not wish to confront a basic challenge to his entire historical account: What if the conflicts of our time have deeper roots? What if America was already many countries, not one? What if there never was a truly common faith?

Avoiding these larger questions that hover in the background, Packer marches us through his potted history of the Four Americas. Starting in the 1970s and ’80s, he argues, as the previous liberal consensus broke down, a Free America arose that elevated the prerogatives of capital accumulation, the privatization of public goods, and the reallocation of labor’s share of the profits to private businesses. Reaganism, or market conservatism, was Free America’s gospel, though Packer makes too little of how the Reagan administration married a vision of lower taxes and fiscal discipline against welfare spending with a punitive moralism, a sharp law-and-order politics, and a penchant for proxy wars. But either way, Free America arose out of the embers of the liberalism that had dominated the early Cold War era and began a transformation of US political culture.

By the late 1980s, and reaching its apex with the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 and ’96, Free America helped give birth to Smart America. Accepting Free America’s broad economic policy parameters, including free trade, financial deregulation, and shrinking government transfer payments to the poor, Smart America was led by a new generation of technocrats and progressives; it did not eschew Free America’s emphasis on individual responsibility and pared-down public initiatives, but it did seek to temper the cuts to social spending and the welfare state with moderately higher taxes and multicultural tolerance for those who played by the rules.

By the 1990s, it was clear that the succession of Free America and Smart America—the milieu in which Packer came of age as a journalist—had engendered a qualitatively new governing compact, one that spoke of meritocracy and equality of opportunity yet failed to “enlarge the middle-class democracy of the postwar years,” resulting in “rising inequality and declining social mobility.” With large swaths of the country saddled with debt, a crumbling infrastructure, failing public institutions, and low-wage jobs, Republican Free America and Democratic Smart America gave birth to two angrier, less reasoning offspring, each with a growing influence inside the two parties. On the right, we saw the rise of Real America, appealing to white denizens of the abandoned hinterlands and deindustrialized heartland, who believed that the elites of Smart America had left them behind. On the left, a Just America arose with a large, diverse, downwardly mobile cohort of college-educated millennials who felt no less betrayed by a broken meritocracy.

Packer’s Four Americas comprise a basic two-by-two square representing the elite and the base of the two major parties at odds with one another. These Four Americas, Packer argues, place us at a double impasse: Both parties are tilting in multiple directions at once and without any dominant faction in charge.

Having provided this schematic rendering of our political stalemate, Packer turns to a more distant history for possible ways out. He offers sketches of Horace Greeley, Frances Perkins, and Bayard Rustin: a journalist, a government official, and an activist, each an intellectual leader in a successful liberal reform movement. Greeley, who was involved with the anti-slavery movement in the run-up to the Civil War, allows Packer to tell the story of the refounding of the United States with the abolition of slavery. Perkins, who served as FDR’s labor secretary, helps him consider the progressive transformations of the state as it became more oriented toward the needs and aspirations of the wage-earning majority, culminating in the New Deal. Rustin, who helped organize the 1963 March on Washington, allows Packer to revisit the way the civil rights movement seeded a broadly inclusive vision of racial and economic democracy.

Underlying each of these movements, Packer argues, is the struggle for equal citizenship, which he defines as the art of self-government through democratic consent. This ideal is the core of the American exceptionalist promise, and it remains, he writes, the “road that connects our past and future.” Searching our history for progress and inspiration, rather than for evidence of crimes and idols to destroy, is refreshing these days, but in the wrong hands the pursuit falls flat. Not too long ago, Barack Obama framed his election to the presidency in terms of “hope and change” and as the culmination of “our better history,” one bending inexorably toward greater economic equality and less racial injustice. It proved to be another dream deferred.

Contributing to the staleness of his approach to the past, Packer understates the ways in which these moments of significant reform were sparked by societal rupture, radical politics, and collective action. Slavery’s abolition was not the result of Greeley’s agitation, but rather a civil war, including the mass desertion of slaves from plantations and their enlistment in the Union cause; the New Deal was spawned by the near-collapse of capitalism, the rise of industrial unionism, and the twin specters of fascism and world revolution; the civil rights movement sought to overthrow patterns of anti-Black domination forged over a century. Packer likewise fails to explore the dialectics of reform and reaction: For every reform won, a counter-struggle to make citizenship a non-universal privilege arose—and many of these reactionary movements also won lasting victories. The defeat of Reconstruction by white supremacy after the Civil War; the segregation and anticommunist hysteria that followed World War II; and the truncated civil rights era, which saw a war on crime substituted for a war on poverty by the end of the 1960s, traduce the notion that liberal progress best represents the arc of history.
f Packer can be Whiggish about the past, he has a rather too jaundiced view of our present predicaments. According to him, we have entered a cul-de-sac defined by the sudden eruption of conflict between Real and Just America, or what he sees as the extremities of white nationalism and “wokeness”—each in its own way illiberal, chauvinistic, and intolerant. But insofar as his historical narrative ignores the longstanding, consciously reactionary, and structurally racist dimensions of our political life, which have proved difficult to overcome and which liberal reformers have failed to vanquish, Packer finds himself with a set of political arguments that do not clearly answer the questions being posed in the current moment. Ignoring the radicalism of many of his liberal reformers and especially the reform movements they championed, he remains ill-attuned to the fact that social change grows less from the noble work of broad-minded individuals and ideas than from messy protest and forms of collective struggle that have often been deemed immoderate and even incendiary in their own time.

Packer tries to anticipate his left-wing and right-wing critics by offering just enough solici­tude toward both Real and Just America. Those in Real America who are now animated by white status anxiety define for him the demotic core of the country’s founding egalitarian ethic (“a country of white people…with belief in themselves as the bedrock of self-government”). The multiracial activists of Just America, in turn, are advancing a righteous cause in the face of the most consistent exception to the American “code of equality”: Black exclusion. Both nonetheless represent for Packer an unreasonable and unreasoning development—and also a sudden one. Despite his interest in historical antecedents, he opines that the “American character changed” in 2014, when the sharpening conflict between Real and Just America shattered the “optimistic story of incremental progress and expanding opportunity in a multiracial society.” Packer does not fail to acknowledge that the Free America of market fundamentalism arose by making common cause with racial segregationists, that “racism informed [this] political movement from its beginnings.” Yet he immediately seems to forget this point, and he also elides how Smart America played its own role in undermining incremental progress and expanded opportunity in a multiracial America. The fact that the Clinton-led Democratic Party ended “welfare as we know it” and built the world’s largest carceral state and deportation regime during these years goes unmentioned—even though these policies abandoned the predominantly urban, Black and brown working-class in the process and are a core reason why something like Just America has come into being.

Packer also downplays the racism transacted between Free and Real America. Distancing himself from the idea that the deep-seated racial animosity found in Real America might have been a source of Trump’s appeal, Packer instead focuses on the anger caused by a justified sense of lost sovereignty. “Real America,” he writes, believes it has “no way to participate in self-government.” This lost sense of control, Packer argues, has less to do with the political manipulation of white status anxiety than with a series of economic dislocations. Here he does recognize the role that Smart America played: It lost the affections of heartland producers, Packer notes, by helping initiate a new phase of globalization that left American workers behind. He quotes the economist Larry Summers describing his tenure as Clinton’s treasury secretary: “I don’t think I ever went to Akron, or Flint, or Toledo, or Youngstown.” For Packer, you can date Trump’s election to this moment. That one imagines Steve Bannon nodding in agreement illustrates a problem with this line of thinking: focusing on lost sovereignty while avoiding the role that race and ethnic scapegoating have played in defining, if not constituting, the sense of loss. Whether it is Black criminal panics that Packer himself indulges.

Like many other contemporary liberals, Packer is Whiggish about the past but jaundiced about the future.

ow Packer handles the George Floyd rebellion is instructive in this regard. Despite being the largest and most significant protest movement in decades, it induces in Packer what
he describes as nausea—indeed, it represents for him the antithesis of hope. It is “utopian and nihilistic,” he writes, a strange combination given that the first descriptor seems to undercut the second. If one of Trump’s failures, for Packer, was politicizing the pandemic, the failure of left progressives—which occupies much more of his attention—was turning a social movement “on behalf of an oppressed lower class” into “an affair of, by, and for professionals,” one that sought “a revolution in consciousness” and “diversity in elite organization” and made “grand systemic analysis” the occasion for “small symbolic politics” and a “withering fire on minor faults.”

What is odd about this argument is that Packer never inquires into the characteristics of the hundreds of thousands of people who participated in the protests across scores of US cities and towns (and even overseas); nor does he consider the array of movements and organizations under the banner of Black Lives Matter that have developed over the past decade or more. Instead, he describes the protests as “howls in an institutional void,” while remaining curious about their substantive institutional agendas, from ballot initiatives to end felon disenfranchisement to electing progressive prosecutors, ending cash bail and punitive fines and fees, and holding police publicly accountable for the use of violent force. One would think a book interested in the art of self-government and inclusive citizenship would take a mass effort to reform (or even abolish) a prison-industrial complex that currently has one in 40 American adults under criminal state supervision, that disenfranchises millions with felony convictions and practices inhumane confinement, torture, and abuse, more seriously. Instead, we get what W.E.B. Du Bois once called “car-window sociology.”

In fairness to Packer, one of the hardest arguments to get right these days is the relationship between professional-class liberalism and anti-racist reform. There are good grounds on which to criticize the elite skew of professional-class anti-racism and the nonprofit education and corporate management complex, which often ventriloquizes the struggles of the poor facing prison, poverty, and premature death in narrow arenas of elite jockeying for promotions, prizes, and clicks. But Packer’s brand of centrist contrarianism, with its empty solace of an industrial-era class politics, is no better, and it works against his larger purpose by ignoring how, in an age when millions of people are precariously employed, non-unionized, undocumented, or denied work due to felony convictions, racial and class divisions cannot be readily disentangled.

If Real America is made up of downwardly mobile middle-class white Americans who imagine themselves to be in revolt against an administrative state in alliance with “woke capital,” Just America represents a working- and middle-class multiracial revolt against a carceral and neoliberal state that has redistributed wealth upward and instituted mass precarity over the past four decades. It should not be so difficult to determine which “narrative” is more faithful to the history that has shaped our current impasse, or to the democratic aspirations to move beyond it. A n argument that has been popular with centrist liberals, and one that has also been welcomed by conservatives since the end of the civil rights era, is that “limousine liberals” and Black militants destroyed the possibility of a struggle for common dreams at the end of the 1960s, thus awakening a right-wing backlash. In this view, left progressives are paradoxically ineffective Democrats and at the same time useful idiots of a right-wing ascendancy. Channeling Arthur Schlesinger’s “vital center,” Packer writes that today’s “wokes” remind him of nothing so much as 1930s communists, a collection of activists that “lashes together the oppression of all groups in an encompassing hell of white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia and transphobia, plutocracy, environmental destruction, and drones.” (If they have done so—good job!) To bend the analogy in the other direction, Packer reminds this reader of the archetypal Cold War liberal, someone who believed that he might harness the right in a governing coalition because while the anticommunist witch hunter Joseph McCarthy was bad, at least he hated the right people.

Packer is correct that recent elections have not delivered “the promised realignment” of durable democratic majorities. But his own search for narrative solutions to structural deficits does not go much beyond the discourse either. He ends Last Best Hope with a (mostly) worthy laundry list of egalitarian policy recommendations: repairing the social safety net, supporting organized labor, equalizing public school funding via state and federal taxes, breaking the monopoly power of megacorporations, reviving a democratic press, and passing a new democracy law (including a bizarre recommendation to fine people who don’t vote). But he thinks of these items less in terms of our concrete political situation—the play of existing policy proposals, the effective balance of forces, or the ongoing struggles required to achieve those goals—than in relation to what he sees as the broader challenge to create an “activism of cohesion…that brings Americans together across tribal lines.” Packer is aware of how commercial tech platforms and media monopolies have steadily deformed our information ecology, but lacking a compelling structural analysis, he falls back on scolding the media for becoming too “woke.” Ironically, for a believer in democratic politics and self-government, and someone troubled by the culture wars that he sees all around him, Packer tends to view our ailment as a cultural “inflammation of politics,” not one constituted by material conditions and social forces. A believer in institutional reform, he is nonetheless angry when movements actually seek difficult institutional changes (such as to prisons and policing).

Packer finally never confronts the limits of his vaunted midcentury liberalism. Its “vital center” not only helped create middle-class prosperity; it also elevated anti-communism into a program of endless war, turned a blind eye to the consolidation of the American economy and finance into a set of big banks and corporations, and channeled racial reform into narrow legal remedies. That some Americans had more faith, more cooperation, and more equality was undone not by the recklessness of the 1960s and post-’60s New Lefts but by the excesses of impe-
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rial overreach, the economic impact of rising global competition, and the turn to austerity in public policy. A similar observation might be made about the post-'92 liberal internationalist project abroad and the neoliberal reform project at home, both supported by Packer’s generation of pundits. Insofar as Real America and Just America have validity as descriptions of actual political factions, they are the outcome of these failed projects, which brought about civic decay and economic decline at home.

Packer’s tendency to separate out the failures of these foreign and domestic policies is certainly not his alone. In the United States, liberals and conservatives alike have lurched for several decades from overseas interventions to declarations of a moral equivalent of war on some domestic evil, passing the baton back and forth, promising an end to political drift and dysfunction with every clarion call. In doing so, they have wasted not only valuable resources but also precious time, while making sure to ride every wave to avoid the debasement of their own intellectual and political authority.

Packer’s effort to renew the liberal faith by divvying up the past into a set of progressive parables is sadly endearing. His failure to consider how the same liberal faith he sought to renew decades ago has contributed much to the dismal political and economic situation we confront today feels like malpractice. But this, too, is suggestive of Packer’s plight: Instead of realistically assessing the challenges of the current moment, he aims to restore something more ineffable than what we have lost. The melancholy emissary of a fading cause, he can only look backward instead of facing a profoundly daunting future, including what is already proving to be the next restructuring of capitalist civilization and the place of the United States within it. His weary tone belies a certain irony: that his brand of aggressive liberalism still has some juice. Before the massive new federal spending proposals and the withdrawal from Afghanistan prompted howls of protest from inflation and foreign policy hawks, the moderate reformism and bland patriotic assurance that best represent Packer’s own politics seemed to have found a successful champion in Joe Biden. Our last best hope is that Joe Biden’s diminishing agenda might still succeed while continuing to disappoint them.

Direct Action

The practical politics of protest

BY ERIN PINEDA

HE SUMMER OF 2020 WAS A SUMMER OF PROTEST. IN the spring, anger over the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin initiated one of the largest and most sustained periods of mass protest in the United States in decades. Enormous Black-led multiracial protests spread across the country, ultimately feeding into a global wave of collective action calling for racial justice and police abolition. Last summer was also the summer before a presidential election—a moment in which the engines of national partisan politics and electioneering were kicking into high gear. So perhaps it was inevitable that the grassroots politics of protest found its way—for better or worse—into the stump speeches of Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

At the Democratic National Convention in August, the party seemed to celebrate the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, embracing the movement—rhetorically, at least—as part of the Democratic coalition. The convention opened by featuring, on the first night, some members of the families of Floyd and Eric Garner, who was killed by police in New York City in 2014. A few days later, a video tribute to the recently deceased congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis interspersed footage from the 1960s with images from the
current protests, tying the past and present of Black struggle to the Democrats through the vehicle of Lewis’s life. Meanwhile, at the Republican National Convention, Black Lives Matter was no less present and no less tied to the Democratic Party. Echoing a different set of connections to the 1960s—the politics of a conservative “law and order” backlash—Rudy Giuliani ominously warned that “a vote for Biden and the Democrats” would risk bringing “lawlessness to your city, to your town, to your suburb.” Whereas the Democratic convention featured members of the families of Black men killed by police, the Republicans gave prime-time speaking slots to Mark and Patricia McCloskey, a couple facing charges for brandingish weapons at Black Lives Matter protesters who were marching by their home in St. Louis.

The events of that summer drew electoral and protest politics together in a way that might feel familiar, even obvious, to most Americans. Given the increasingly polarized environment in the United States, it might seem natural that politicians would identify in protests an opportunity to position themselves politically, and that citizens, in turn, would interpret this positioning through their own commitments and thus their own partisan preferences.

Yet while elections have long been at the center of political science research, their connections with protest have not. As Daniel Q. Gillion observes in his new book, The Loud Minority, many of his fellow political scientists have tended to exclude protest from their consideration, ceding the study of social movements largely to sociologists and historians. As a result, their research has often neglected one of the main questions of US political life: how protest affects institutions, policy outcomes, elite incentives, and elections.

With The Loud Minority, Gillion seeks to step into this void. A scholar of political behavior—broadly speaking, the study of mass political attitudes, identities, and actions—he is also a student of movement politics in the United States. In his 2013 book The Political Power of Protest, he studied the effect of racial justice movements on policy agendas within an array of formal political institutions, from the presidency to Congress to the Supreme Court. Protest, he argued, served as a kind of informational cue for policy-makers and elected officials, by increasing the salience of particular issues and providing incentives for political elites to attend to the protesters’ demands. Forced to assess the intensity of protests as a means of understanding minority concerns, these elites would eventually conclude that addressing the issues at stake in “high salience” protests—those that are large in scale, persistent over time, and provoke a police presence—could well serve their own political or partisan interests.

Despite the limited attention paid to how protest influences US elections, Gillion contends that over the past 60 years, the Democratic and Republican parties have increasingly “absorbed” and “represented” the demands of protesters. The partisan realignment that began in the 1950s and ’60s—which was spurred in part by the midcentury civil rights movement—made both parties (along with their constituencies) more ideologically unified and cemented their relationships to the protest movements associated with them. Over the decades since then, the link between protest and partisan affiliation has only become stronger, as mobilized voters go to the polls to support or reject candidates based on their relationship with contemporary protest movements. As Gillion puts it, “protesters’ voices” have increasingly become “the party’s voice, and that voice [is] unapologetically ideological.”

To show us how protest became yoked to the parties, Gillion takes us through the various moments in the electoral process: conventions, the campaign donation cycle, Election Day. At political conventions, protesters mobilize not only to influence party platforms but also to capitalize on media attention in order to communicate with the electorate. By doing so, they turn conventions into opportunities to dramatize for voters the relationship, or gap, between partisan agendas and activist demands. At conventions, after all, Gillion writes, “the cameras are on and rolling.”

Gillion marks the emergence of this dynamic at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, when the breakaway Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, organized by a coalition of civil rights workers, attempted to unseat the Mississippi delegation and contest the statewide disenfranchisement of Black voters. Since that moment, activists have regularly transformed these political gatherings into sites of protest—from the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, where police brutalized anti–Vietnam War demonstrators, to the 2004 Republican convention in New York City, where a new generation of anti-war activists found themselves corralled into so-called free speech zones. Despite the repression they faced, Gillion argues—or perhaps because of it—the protesters succeeded in reaching a larger audience and influencing political action far beyond the convention.

Gillion also considers the differences in how liberal and conservative activists conceive of their role at conventions. During the 2016 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, where Gillion’s team interviewed protesters about their motivations and goals, liberal protesters expressed intense discontent with the party and hoped their actions would pressure politicians, influence the nomination process, or shape the views of vot-
ers watching from home. Liberal protesters also showed up at the GOP convention in Cleveland that year, aiming to persuade voters to join them in their opposition to the Republican Party. Beside them, a smaller number of conservative demonstrators rallied rather than protested: They wanted to show the intensity of their identification with the Republican nominee—to tie themselves more tightly to the party and to Trump.

Gillion’s account hinges on what he calls “ideological protest,” or what we might more straightforwardly think of as protest’s partisan character. He argues that voters view protests and social movements through a partisan lens—seeing some as “liberal” and others as “conservative,” based on which party is most associated with the issue at hand. Protests make particular issues more salient for voters, especially those who sympathize with the activists’ commitments and consequently feel motivated to act politically. But protest does more than simply mobilize voters; it also makes them more partisan, strengthening their support for the party they claim as their own and the political identity they view as more representative of their commitments and collective interests. “Put simply,” Gillion writes, “protest moves individuals to cultivate the seed of their existing partisanship.”

Most protests, of course, do not take place at political conventions, but as Gillion shows, they still operate as ideological links between voters, parties, candidates, and policy issues. After waves of what he calls “liberal protest” between 2016 and 2018 in Phoenix, Ariz., and Portland, Ore.—including teacher strikes against low pay, student walkouts and “die-ins” for stronger gun control laws, airport protests in opposition to Trump’s Muslim ban, and local iterations of the 2017 Women’s March—Gillion finds that proximity to such protests markedly increased campaign donations to Democratic candidates. While these protests also spurred what he describes as a “monetary backlash”—signaling their opposition, conservative voters increased their contributions to Republican candidates—its magnitude was comparatively small. “In other words,” Gillion concludes, “when liberal protest occurs, everyone makes money. Democrats just make more of it.”

Protests likewise increase the turnout on Election Day, operating as a mechanism of voter mobilization. In 2016, Gillion suggests, despite a widespread rejection of Black Lives Matter by conservatives, the strongest effect of the movement’s activism was in mobilizing Black voters and, more generally, liberal voters. In the lead-up to the election, Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and the Democratic Party all credibly linked themselves to the movement, Gillion argues, and voters responded by expressing their support for the movement by turning out for Democratic candidates.

Voters may indeed be, as Gillion writes, “the silent majority watching protest from the comfort of their home.” But in any given election, the silent majority that matters most is the one that feels connected to the loud minority in the streets.

**The Loud Minority argues that protests are an essential element of democratic politics.**

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Alone I spirit myself away
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born on the balcony,
certainly not thanks to me,
the gardener was the wind.
They skin me with precision,
their beauty sinks in
with the same noble knife
used by the missing.
I remember your laughter
whirling all around
when I confessed
that flowers frighten me.

Mine is a young pain,
it’ll take patience,
waiting as the bird
at the edge of a field
just barely sown.
I loved you with a human love, like
taking off one’s clothes at night and
putting them back on in the morning.
Now in these boundless days
I write you an invisible letter
to tell you there’s a wonderful path
a pearl that goes rolling fast
down a tree-lined avenue
towing lightness with it,
towing wakefulness.

I see the world
through your transparency,
I see its awful charms,
always faking itself opaque
then once again awake,
I see how we are hurt
by the lightness in this world.
Today the dead resemble the living
they don’t call they don’t miss me,
they dissipate into their lives
without wishing me close by.

CHANDRA LIVIA CANDIANI
(Translated by Brian Robert Moore)
form and substance—likewise suggests that its interaction with electoralism and with the Republican Party is by nature neither liberal nor democratic. When, on January 6, hundreds of Trump supporters, mobilized by months of calls by him and other Republican officials to “stop the steal,” stormed the US Capitol, they were not strengthening or engaging with the structures of liberal democracy; they were both abusing and threatening them. Trump insisted that his was a “sacred landslide” victory, and the rioters agreed, despite all evidence to the contrary: They declared that their collective will represented a far truer one than that of the majority of voters who elected Biden. In the aftermath, 147 congressional Republicans legitimated that notion by voting against the certification of Biden’s win.

It is as easy to overstate the threat of the insurrection as it is to underestimate it. Those assembled on January 6 had no apparent plan to prevent Biden from taking office. Nor is it likely they knew much of Trump’s. But among the rioters were militia members and white nationalists, Proud Boys, off-duty police, small business owners, and elected members of state and local Republican governments—a snapshot of the modern right in all its shades. What they shared was less a specific demand than an insistence that true American democracy, properly construed, requires the domination of others—the disenfranchisement of the wrong kind of voters, the hardening of borders against the wrong kind of entrants, the use of overwhelming force against the wrong kinds of protesters. In the months since then, Republican lawmakers have affirmed this core idea, ratcheting up their efforts to restrict the franchise and to criminalize protest.

All loud minorities are not, in fact, equal. The repressive force regularly meted out against Black Lives Matter activists—the armored phalanxes of riot police, the mass arrests, the physical brutality of cops empowered to restore “order”—stands in stark contrast to the restraint and deference shown to right-wing protesters, including those on January 6, and tells a powerful story about which loud minority is perceived as a threat to the existing order and which is considered a privileged representative of it.

Million opens his book with Nixon’s 1968 invocation of the “silent majority,” linking it to Trump’s use of the same phrase nearly 50 years later. Nixon’s “silent majority,” like Trump’s, referred implicitly to the coalition of white voters he hoped to mobilize—those whose values and identities stood opposed to the loud minority of Black radicals in the streets, in 1968 no less than in 2016. Yet in taking up the concept, Gillion inverts its meaning: Against Nixon and Trump, he insists on the continuities between activists and electoral democracy and argues that the former needs to be understood as part of the ordinary institutions of the latter.

Repackaged as a metaphor for the entire electorate, however, Gillion’s “silent majority” masks the deeply anti-democratic nature of the contemporary right. The cross-class coalition of white Americans who previously constituted the silent majority of the Nixon era no longer enjoys the material, cultural, or electoral power it could once take for granted. In this moment, several dangerous dynamics meet and interact with one another: intensified right-wing and white nationalist mobilization, combined with the violence of the police, and at the same time a Republican Party increasingly dependent on voter suppression and arcane constitutional procedure to maintain power without assembling a majority coalition of voters. What Gillion depicts as a productive, progressive dialectic between the grassroots and electoral democracy—focusing largely on examples from the left—looks more like mutual radicalization when we consider the right.

Insurgent grassroots action can remake American democracy—indeed, can build a democracy worthy of the name. I share this belief with Gillion. But it can also serve as a wellspring of reaction, feeding and accelerating the growth of a racial authoritarianism already well established within American institutions. Simply put, democracy depends on the defeat of some loud minorities.

You Couldn’t Lose Me

It was like waking up in California—the awkward blossoms, the sky an aggressive blue. I remember the smell from your armpits, the greenhouse windows covered in white paint, where the air was heavy. The silver weeds. A small herd of farm animals at the Agricultural College wore the field to dust.
The wind was hot and fresh on our faces. The donkey looked so dumb trying to walk. It was simple: Beneath your shirt was skin. I remember that first year, pulling your briefs from the hamper.

RICHIE HOFMANN
Free to Kill

Netflix’s Squid Game

BY E. TAMMY KIM

About halfway through the new Netflix horror series Squid Game, one of the contestants, a career gangster named Jang Deok-su (played by Heo Sung-tae), comes upon a gruesome new strategy. Thus far, he and several hundred other men and women, dressed in identical green polyester track suits, have been told by an anonymous army of enforcers that they are in a six-round tournament of literal elimination. Each round is a different challenge based on a children’s game, like marbles or tug-of-war; each is played to the death and for an unimaginably large jackpot. Every person who loses dies, and their deaths add to the prize money. Despite these macabre stakes, a sense of fairness has prevailed in the game’s early rounds: Do your best in competition, and if you survive, retreat to the school-gym dormitory to eat and sleep. But Jang sets out to test this boundary. He steals an extra helping of food, and then, when the man deprived of his meal puts up a fight, Jang kills him in public view.

Jang expects to be punished for this. Instead, his victim’s murder is tabulated as a death in the game and the jackpot is increased. Jang laughs with relief and self-satisfaction. He realizes that he is free to kill, whenever and however, to improve his chances of winning. Now not only the structured games but the meal and sleep breaks, too, are elimination rounds.

In the gym, Jang’s fellow contestants see the new score and panic. Not many of them are accustomed to mortal combat; they have come because they are poor and mired in debt. The night of Jang’s transgression, the savvier among them form groups and pull their spindly metal bunk beds together for protection. Team members take turns playing sentinel while their comrades catch a bit of sleep. Still, people kill and die. (Think Hunger Games or Battle Royale with Tarantino-style violence.)

The following night, the series’ main protagonist, Seong Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae), a gambling addict and delinquent dad and son, hallucinates while he is on watch. He sees canisters slide across the gymnasium floor, spewing orange smoke. A man in a hard hat and red bandanna, the uniform of labor protest in South Korea, dodges a flurry of police batons. “Gi-hun!” the man cries out before an officer cracks his skull. When Seong is startled back to earth by one of his teammates, he explains what he’s seen. He had worked at the Dragon Motors auto plant and gone on strike. “We set up a barricade like this…. The company fired us, saying they had no money.” Much like the Squid Game, real life in South Korea is a zero-sum fight.

All but the youngest Koreans will recognize this lightly fictionalized reference to a labor confrontation that is seared in the country’s memory. In 2009, the carmaker SsangYong (“Twin Dragon”) Motors pleaded poverty and laid off 2,646 employees at its headquarters plant in Pyeongtaek, a city south of Seoul. In response, nearly a thousand employees went on strike, some for as long as 77 days, occupying the factory site and facing a violent assault by Pinkerton-style security forces and Korean police. For years afterward, the surviving workers sought reinstatement and compensation in the courts, and 30 employees and several of their spouses died, mostly by suicide.

This history animates Seong’s
Squid Game is the most popular Netflix show ever made. In its first 10 days, it ranked number one in 90 countries and was so popular in its home nation that it strained the Internet’s infrastructure, leading the service provider SK Broadband to file suit against Netflix. With superlative ratings has come an avalanche of commentary. Viewers in South Korea have used Squid Game as shorthand to discuss joblessness and real estate scandals and to parody the economic promises of President Moon Jae-in. Critics in the United States have praised the show in weirdly Brechtian terms for using genre conventions to satirize capitalism and offered comparisons to the Academy Award–winning Parasite.

Many of the Korean films and TV shows that have broken through in the West—Parasite, The Handmaiden, and now Squid Game—are gory parables about class. (Many K-dramas, which are more even popular around the world, do this in spades, though usually with a bootstrap twist.) We are eager to project ourselves into these stories, and South Korea appears to be just the right distance away: in Asia but strongly influenced (some would say “occupied”) by the United States, the country is high-tech and hyper-capitalist yet appears to retain Old World values (filial piety and clannish loyalty). All this makes for a perfect site of rebellious fantasy.

In Squid Game, Seong’s Dragon Motors backstory gets the series closest to allegorizing capitalism, a stated intent of the writer-director. The contestants echo a uniformed rank-and-file, while the enforcers, strapped with machine guns, clad in hot-pink jumpsuits and combat boots, and anonymized by helmets, mirror the police who were set upon the SsangYong workers. The commander of the island (a sort of death-camp paymaster) and the visiting VIPs who pay to spectate are also depersonalized. In baroque gilded masks, the men gaze out over the gladiatorial field while luxuriating in an abundance of food, drink, and naked women. They speak English and Mandarin, but their wealth erases every national and moral boundary.

Hwang envisioned these men as “real-life power elites and billionaires or gods who rule the world”—the sort of men who run companies like SsangYong Motors. At the time of the strike, SsangYong had been acquired by the Chinese state-owned Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation, and the bosses’ distance from the Pyeongtaek factory undermined the workers’ leverage. (SsangYong is now part of the Indian car giant Mahindra.) Though the union believed that the business was solvent and that the firings had more to do with strategy than necessity, it took 10 years for some of the laid-off workers to get their jobs back.

In 2006, three years before the SsangYong occupation, another real-life Squid Game erupted in a different part of Pyeongtaek. At the time, the United States and South Korea were eager to break ground on Camp Humphreys, the largest overseas US military base in the world. The decision to consolidate the 30,000 US troops stationed in South Korea on one mega-base had been made decades earlier, but the residents and rice farmers continued to resist being evicted. Some 18,000 riot police confronted 5,000 activists, injuring and arresting hundreds. The setting was darkly cinematic: a tract enclosed by barbed wire, helmeted soldiers, and on the losing end, an undifferentiated crowd.

While watching the second half of Squid Game, I kept thinking about Pyeongtaek. I was last there in 2018 and felt overwhelmed by its collisions of mass industry, unbridled housing development, migrant farm and factory labor, and neocolonial militarism. As a second city—a secluded island, compared to Seoul—it doesn’t look much like a capitalist avatar. But as Hwang has noted, that is part of the contradiction: “the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.” He finds it “tragic,” he said, that so many people around the world—facing the economic and somatic devastation of the pandemic—identify with Squid Game. So what comes next? “We need to ask and consider and find out who has structured the economy this way,” Hwang declared.

“Who has turned us into racehorses?”

E. Tammy Kim cohosts the podcast Time to Say Goodbye.
Letters

Get Carter

I should be grateful that Rick Perlstein devoted 5,000 words to reviewing my biography of Jimmy Carter (“True Colors,” October 18/25). That’s a lot of words. Unfortunately, the essay is less a review of the biography than a litany of the author’s complaints about Carter as a politician. For Perlstein, Carter is just not left enough, not liberal enough—and not a populist. I am reminded of a letter that Arthur Schlesinger Jr. sent to Victor Navasky in 1998 when I published a biography of McGeorge and William Bundy: “I would like to have said to Kai Bird that fair-minded scholarship triumphed over evident political disapproval in his very good book on the Bundys.” Perlstein’s review of The Outlier does just the opposite, allowing his ideology to blind him to the nuance of the biographical narrative. This is an old problem between historians and biographers. We need both—but in my view biography is the higher art.

KAI BIRD
NEW YORK CITY

A Stream Called Drowning Creek

Thank you for publishing Ada Limón’s beautiful and powerful prose poem “Drowning Creek” [September 6/13]. Sustained metaphor, lines that breathe and carry the weight of thoughts and feelings… what a treat. I had almost despaired of reading poems in magazines; I’m glad I took the time to read this one.

RON LUCE
ATHENS, OHIO

Comment drawn from our website letters@thenation.com

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Dancing in the Streets: Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs of New Orleans
by Judy Cooper

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