16 Reasons to Be Hopeful in 2022

Carol Anderson
Ai-jen Poo
Robin Rue Simmons
Lori Wallach
Shannon Brewer
The Sunrise Movement
Greta Thunberg
Pramila Jayapal
The Brennan Center for Justice
Jamie Raskin
Free Speech For People
Lina Khan
The UAW Workers
Cori Bush
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“The Rise of Dreama Caldwell”

WHY STRIKES MATTER
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“The man-babies planning the Charlottesville rally worried about the mayonnaise on their sandwiches spoiling in the summer sun.”

Cover: SERGE BLOCH
The United States has just passed a grim milestone of 800,000 official deaths from Covid-19, more than in any other country, with the actual death toll likely much higher. As the nation has faced over 100 days in which more than 100 people have died and now faces the prospect of a more infectious variant that may weaken vaccine efficacy, it must be asked: How exactly did the richest country in the world get here? There are a number of reasons, but the primary one is that the United States does not have a free, universal health care system. The lack of a national health insurance program affects everything from vaccine hesitancy to the ability to get a test to how we manage the virus going forward.

In the US, we are so accustomed to paying out of pocket for essential health care that when it is provided for free, it is a foreign concept. A significant barrier to vaccination is that some people think they will be charged for it. That could be one of the reasons uninsured people are among those with the lowest rates of vaccination, with 56 percent reporting having received one dose in the latest survey conducted by Kaiser Health News, a lower percentage than Republicans and white evangelicals. The fear of having to pay for a service that is being offered for free isn’t irrational; thanks to loopholes in federal regulations, some people have ended up being mistakenly charged for the vaccine. This has also been the case with testing. While many cities offer free PCR testing, it is not universally free. A number of people have received massive bills after being tested at privately run labs. Pre-pandemic, a study found that 22 percent of Americans delay health care needs because of costs; they might avoid testing and vaccines for the same reason.

Cost and lack of access erode trust. In the US, while trust in the medical establishment is low, the trust individuals have in their primary care physicians is high. A CDC survey of unvaccinated adults in the summer showed that those who were unsure or were never going to get the vaccine reported that their primary care providers were their most trusted source of information. But the share of Americans with primary care physicians has been declining in recent years, and the US spends a lot less on primary care than other countries. Indeed, a significant number of Americans get their health care from the emergency room; one study found that nearly 50 percent of medical care sought at hospitals was emergency-room care.

All of this matters not just for vaccine uptake but for how we manage Covid in the future. There has been a lot of progress in the development of antiviral therapeutics that reduce the risk of hospitalization after infection; Pfizer and Merck have put out promising drugs. But for these drugs to be effective, treatment must begin soon after a person is infected, which means patients need early access to testing and a doctor who can prescribe them. For immunocompromised patients, the FDA has approved a routine antibody treatment from AstraZeneca, but once again cost and access are critical issues. That means that even after Covid has become endemic, we will likely continue to see disparities in disease and death along racial and socioeconomic lines.

The lack of insurance has been deadly for far too many. According to a report by Families USA, a consumer health advocacy organization, nearly one in three Covid deaths is related to gaps in health insurance. But rather than address these gaps, there has been a move to reinforce barriers. Many employers are now charging unvaccinated people an additional fee alongside their insurance. Even the White House’s first attempt to improve access to testing stopped short of making the tests free; instead, people are required to submit their bills to their insurance company for reimbursement. After pressure, the White House announced plans to make 500 million rapid tests available free of charge.

This measure and the recent call to distribute free masks in addition to vaccines would be a good start, but free health care cannot be a temporary measure. The pandemic has demonstrated that a privatized health care system cannot ensure the health of the population. We have barely survived this pandemic, and without universal health care, we won’t survive the next one.

Abdullah Shihipar is a writer who focuses on public health, race, class, and other social justice issues.
ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE NEW YEAR, ERIC ADAMS will be sworn in as the 110th mayor of New York City. The former police captain, state senator, and borough president has, in one sense, taken an entirely conventional path to one of the most celebrated offices in America. He painstakingly scaled the ladders of city and state government, working corporate boardrooms and Democratic club dinners, forging alliances with outer borough pastors and Manhattan finance titans alike.

Adams, however, is anything but conventional. The largest city in the United States is about to enter an uncertain and unpredictable era, with a new mayor who is not quite like any who have come before him. On any given day, Adams can be a populist, a plutocrat, an ascetic, or a bon vivant. He is a Democrat who was once a registered Republican. Michael Bloomberg and Bill de Blasio both enthusiastically supported him.

What to make of these contradictions? For the past half-century, new mayors have stormed into office with either clear mandates or policy agendas. Ed Koch was tasked with rescuing the city from a fiscal crisis and somehow taming a growing crime wave. David Dinkins, the city’s first Black mayor, was charged with turning back the revanchism of the Koch years with his rainbow coalition. Rudy Giuliani embodied a white backlash in a time of high murder rates. Bloomberg was the technocrat who would lead us out of the ashes of 9/11; de Blasio, the crony capitalist who would lead us into the post-9/11 era. One challenge was that there is very little vacant land there. To add housing in wealthy “sacred cow” neighborhoods for development, building affordable apartments along transit lines.

Adams carries with him elements of all these men. He will be the city’s second Black mayor. He has a Kochian flair for the cameras, breezing through nightclubs and comfortably schmoozing with Stephen Colbert. He won, like Giuliani, on a vow to lower the rate of violent crime. He has spoken the language of police reform while railing against the left-wing movements trying to check police power.

The difficult question to answer is what this will all add up to. With his penchant for incendiary, reality-defying statements, Adams calls to mind another politician who cut his teeth in the trenches of 20th-century New York: Donald Trump. Adams is politically far to the left of Trump and has denounced him repeatedly. What the two men share is the ability to surprise, to discombobulate: It wasn’t that long ago that Adams railed against new arrivals to the city, telling them to “go back to Ohio.”

Unlike de Blasio, Adams did not campaign on enacting any particular policy or on a large expansion of the social safety net. De Blasio promised a tax hike on the rich to fund a universal pre-kindergarten program; he never got the tax hike but delivered on pre-kindergarten.

Adams’s political agenda is thinly sketched at best. There are a few promises he made on the campaign trail and one he has already followed through on: appointing a woman of color to lead the New York Police Department. In December, he chose Keechant Sewell, the chief of detectives for the Nassau County Police Department. Whether this will fundamentally alter the NYPD—a powerful fiefdom that often avoids accountability and metes out far too much violence—remains to be seen.

Adams has made one significant promise: to make disciplining the police the purview of his own office, not the NYPD. This could make it easier to hold dangerous officers accountable, but it is unlikely to change the nature of the post-9/11 NYPD, which became hypermilitarized in the Bloomberg years.

Beyond policing, real estate is where a mayor can make the greatest mark. Adams, like de Blasio, has drawn close to some of the city’s most influential developers. De Blasio’s approach to building was not so different from Bloomberg’s; both were habitually indulgent toward developers. The difference between the two lay primarily in how much “affordable” housing they wanted to squeeze out of private sector projects.

Adams has vowed to go further. Recently, he said he would seek to build housing in wealthy “sacred cow” neighborhoods in Lower and Midtown Manhattan. One challenge is that there is very little vacant land there. To add more housing in a more equitable fashion, Adams could target low-lying, solidly middle-class neighborhoods for development, building affordable apartments along transit lines.

For tenant activists, an Adams City Hall may represent a troubling swing back to the Bloomberg years. The city’s Rent Guidelines Board determines how high rents can be raised for the approximately 1 million rent-stabilized apartments across the city, and it’s the mayor who appoints new members. Under de Blasio, tenant-friendly members froze rents for part of his tenure. Adams, in a cynical invocation of identity politics, has refused to back freezing or even rolling back rents, claiming that such a decision could adversely impact small, nonwhite property owners. In actuality, large companies own much of the city’s rental portfolio, including stabilized units.

So many other questions hang over this mayor-to-be. How much of the new administration will be filled with patronage hires and political friends who supported his campaign? In what way will Adams really wield his newfound power? We’ll find out soon enough.
When Thanos Snapped

On August 15, the West abandoned Afghanistan. While the occupation is over, a new misery has taken its place.

August 15, 2021, is a day Afghanistan will never forget. It’s the day the former president, Ashraf Ghani, ran away as Taliban forces were barreling toward Kabul, the city that had become the hub of IEDs and targeted killings over the previous year. Ghani had spent the preceding 11 days in silence, never once mentioning a single province that had fallen to the Taliban. After he jetted off to safety, he didn’t bother to issue an apology until several weeks had passed. Even now, his administration—full of ministers, ambassadors, and generals who had long been dogged by accusations of corruption, sexual harassment, fraud, incompetence, and war crimes—has never had to face questioning in Afghanistan. Those officials are now in Dubai, Istanbul, and New Delhi.

While Ghani was making his escape, more than 32 million Afghans were left to fend for themselves against a group that had claimed to be fighting a foreign occupation but was better known for sending suicide bombers to attack civilians: people celebrating a birthday at a lakeside restaurant 20 minutes from the city; media workers on their way home from the office; families gathering for dinner on the eve of the Persian New Year.

It was as if Thanos had snapped his fingers and half the world disappeared. Overnight, the old decision-makers were gone. Game shows, singing competitions, and insipid Turkish serials went off the air. Thousands of people flocked to the airport, hoping to catch the last flight out of Kabul. And then the economy crumbled as the US Federal Reserve, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund cut off the country’s access to billions in assets, assistance, and loans. Western Union quickly followed suit. The world, particularly Washington, wanted to punish the group that Donald Trump had signed a peace deal with just 18 months earlier and Joe Biden had watched strong-arm its way back into power. Even as they refused to open their doors to refugees, countries said it would be “impossible” to recognize the Taliban’s caretaker government.

The Afghan people were left alone and broke. Once the initial shock of the Taliban’s return to power wore off, the devastation of being without cash, employment, and an income started to sink in. Suddenly the streets of Kabul were lined with refrigerators, TVs, silverware, rugs, air conditioners, and anything else people could sell to buy food, pay rent, and keep the lights on. Today, more than half the population—some 22.5 million people—face a winter of catastrophic food insecurity; as many as 1 million children could die.

Among the many lessons of the last four months, one that has become criminally clear is that, over 20 years of occupation, Afghanistan’s economy became an aid-dependent husk. As soon as the foreign aid was cut, the entire structure crumbled, trapping the people in what the United Nations is calling a “humanitarian” catastrophe. Even commercial endeavors, which should have been independent businesses, were somehow tied to foreign contracts, international NGOs, embassies, or grants. As those offices closed, the many who depended on them began to suffer: the small shops where office staffers purchased their groceries; the tailors who sewed the suits they wore; the money changers who converted their currencies.

Through it all, of course, the Taliban leadership hasn’t suffered. Those who are suffering today are the same ones who suffered during the 20 years of Western-backed occupation and the Taliban’s alleged fight against it—the people. Crime has not dissipated. The so-called Islamic State continues to be a force. The Taliban have beaten up and detained journalists. They are accused of forcibly evicting people from their land. There are reports that they have intimidated or killed hundreds of former members of the security forces in retribution for their association with the Western-allied government. Teenage girls are still largely unable to go to school. Thousands of women are either afraid or unable to return to work.

None of this was inevitable, of course, but all of it might have been expected. It is the direct result of a single day in August that was 20 years in the making. As the world heads into the uncertainty of 2022, one thing is certain: The people of Afghanistan are still on their own.

Ali Latifi is a freelance journalist based in Afghanistan.
The Only Issue

History has flooded into evolution.
And evolution has returned the favor.

Climate change has destabilized the Earth’s Poles,” said a Washington Post headline on December 15, and it served as a reminder. The ice is breaking up. The waters are rising. The all-encompassing political question today is climate catastrophe. How can the nations and people of the world mobilize the social energy necessary to slow the process? This danger won’t be cut off by defunding, by fostering mindfulness and new sensitivities, or even by penalizing the jocular skepticism and quack science that tell us climate change is a hoax. The problem is with human nature: the way we are constituted—the most selfless as well as the greediest individuals.

Many of us know this; we feel it as a nagging reproach. We push away the anxiety, from bewilderment but also from a rational uncertainty regarding tactics. One entire political party denies or minimizes the threat. The other party addresses it somewhere near the top of an indifferent list, alongside worthy items like improved health care and free college.

How did we come to this place? For the past five centuries, Appropriate Man has sought to dominate nature. The tools discovered by science, which we find already in our hands, are valuable for aggrandizement, destruction, comfort, and self-care. We don’t intend to bury the tools, and even if the sacrifice were plausible, we don’t know how to perform it. We lack the strength to make ourselves weak.

That last sentence, italicized in the original, was written by Jonathan Schell a few months before he died. And the same thought came up more than once in our conversations. In moods of “optimism of the will,” Jonathan believed that nuclear weapons might be abolished one day and the human conquest of nature might eventually be curbed. Yet the science that yielded the world-destroying processes could never be rendered inaccessible.

No phrase is more sacred to secular activists than “human flourishing,” but the campaign against climate disruption will set boundaries on our flourishing. Such acts of collective self-denial have emerged in the past only as means to a political end—as when Cromwell proposed that members of Parliament resign their military command for the public good. Now the elimination of convenience and luxury will be part of the end itself. We can “thrive” and be “resilient”—two more favorite words—only in the changed conditions we must now impose on ourselves.

Schell believed that we face an almost insoluble puzzle about the limits of imagination. We project past regularities into the future and are unavoidably constrained by our habits of thought and action. It is hard to go beyond the local—hard, anyway, to stay out there for long. We are primed to notice only high-contrast disruptions of routine, or immediate threats to our well-being. Imagination on a planetary scale is difficult; for most people most of the time, it is close to impossible.

In his essay “Nature and Value,” which I quoted above, Schell offered a broad summary of our predicament. By the release of carbon in the atmosphere, the deposit of plastic on the ocean floor, the large-scale destruction of wildlife and its replacement by domestic animals for milk or meat, human existence has rerouted and overloaded nature:

The walls of separation that once divided the human artifact from nature have come down.
History has flooded into evolution. And evolution has returned the favor and flooded history.

People who worry professionally about democracy, culture, domestic and foreign policy—the things that occupy a magazine like The Nation—are dealing with history before the flood. But now consider the Covid pandemic, in all its endless variety. We know that it originated in one of two ways, a laboratory accident or human encroachment on the natural environment. What should be the consequences of this knowledge?

How much easier to talk about the threat of China, the new enemy on the horizon! That is an old-world problem, familiar and sensational. Meanwhile, we may notice occasional floods and tornadoes; we may even pause a day or two over the mass-incineration fires in Australia and California; but we take them in as if they were epiphenomena—freak occurrences, no matter how overwhelming. So we absorb the events that signify a larger degradation, but they pass. And mostly these are tolerable changes. We don’t notice that there are fewer songbirds, fewer insects. And maybe the trees are dying (as sugar maples now are dying in Connecticut), but it happens gradually, and there are other trees around. If spring comes a few days later, what of it? There was no snow last winter, or very little, but how many of us pay much attention, and for how long?
The Nation
1.10–17.2022

Putting in a heat-pump system is not like buying a new Peloton. And yet the change must come.

The commitment required to avert climate catastrophe is going to be staggering, expensive, and, at the same time, tedious and ordinary. Putting in a heat-pump system is not like buying a new Peloton. And yet the change must come, to the exclusion of other expenditures, if we are going to maintain a shred of decent living half a century from now. If there were ever a cause that demanded single-minded attention, this is it.

One commonly hears it said, with a shade of regret by people over 50: “I won’t live to see the end of this.” Is it possible to shrug your shoulders morally? The nature of our lethargy is to look on the catastrophe as one more transient discomfort, amenable to political solutions like the other problems on the usual list. The truth is that this will cost a lot and it won’t be fun. It adds up to an obstruction our commercial culture can do nothing with.

This reformulation will be full of drudgery and very little uplift. No wonder Barack Obama—who knew enough and knew better—avoided the subject for most of his presidency. No wonder Donald Trump took care to know no better but instead retained “the possession of being well deceived.” The task calls for clear scientific explanation accompanied by political persuasion—in short, exactly the kind of leadership we haven’t yet seen.

According to a poll published in September, a staggering 83 percent of parents support the teaching of “critical race theory” in schools. Or to be more specific—because they are never granted modifier-free descriptors, as their white peers are—83 percent of Black parents are in favor of CRT in their children’s schools. In a USA Today/Ipsos poll, 71 percent of Asian parents and roughly 60 percent of Hispanic parents said CRT should be part of the curriculum in their children’s schools. A Fox News survey conducted in Virginia—the state that is home to the Loudoun County School District, where some of the most visible battles over CRT have taken place—revealed that among Black parents with more than a passing familiarity with CRT, more than twice as many approved of it as opposed it. These polls didn’t specify to parents that critical race theory is a 40-year-old legal framework for analyzing the ways racism is embedded in American institutions, not a lesson plan that’s actually used in K-12 classrooms today. But we can assume that those parents regard CRT as a concept that includes the study of slavery and anti-Black racism and support teaching those topics in our schools. In a small poll of parents of New York City schoolchildren, a group that is more than 80 percent people of color, over three-quarters of respondents supported the idea that students should learn about the “damages of white supremacy,” while 79 percent supported teaching about the Black Lives Matter movement.

The fact that Black and other nonwhite parents—that is to say, those parents whose kids make up the majority in America’s public school classrooms—believe that the perspective provided by CRT would enrich their children’s education seems newsworthy at a moment in which the battle over school lesson plans is raging. And yet, since a false characterization of CRT became fodder for conservative hysteria just over a year ago, there’s been almost no media coverage examining Black parents’ feelings about CRT in schools.

Instead, the white backlash has been given center stage. Conservative anti-CRT groups like Moms for Liberty and Parents Rights in Education—which claims CRT creates “a false sense of entitlement” in nonwhite students—bathe in the same media spotlight these groups use to illuminate egregiously misinformed fears about CRT. (Is there not a single reporter who wants to ask a representative for PRe, which expresses alarm on its website about students being “disciplined and even expelled for representing opposing views,” when it plans to address the long-standing issue of Black kids being four times as likely to be suspended as white kids?) The right-wing political establishment and conservative mediasphere have tried to paint this as a broad movement of parents Fighting the Power, as when
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Indiana Republican Todd Rokita issued a polemical “Parents Bill of Rights” that suggests CRT, Black Lives Matter, and the notion that “systematic racism has...produced disparities between races” are antithetical to “Hoosier values.” As Slate’s William Saletan wrote in a piece about the Virginia gubernatorial victory of Republican Glenn Youngkin, who had held “Parents Matter” rallies focused on promises to ban CRT, this isn’t, as white conservatives claim, “a backlash of parents. It [is] a backlash of white people.” That the school districts where opposition to CRT has been loudest are those where the presence of nonwhite students has grown over the past two decades tells us everything we need to know. How odd that a media apparatus that normally cannot get enough of destructive bothsidesism now seems wholly uninterested in getting Black parents’ firsthand takes on the matter.

This oversight isn’t surprising, considering that the media has also done a terrible job of correcting the right-wing misinformation campaign around CRT. The press has chosen to elevate the tender feelings of white parents instead of interviewing parents who have actually experienced anti-Black racism about the way white conservatives have twisted CRT into a bogeyman, and how Black history has been denigrated as inherently “un-American.” Of course, this is not new. During the Trump years, the press spent an extraordinary number of hours hearing out aggrieved white GOP voters. After Black voters flipped Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania for Joe Biden—and Black women drove turnout that made Georgia go blue not once but twice—the endless barbershop interviews with African American voters never materialized, and a few outlets even fretted about the president-elect’s inability to win over white working-class voters. Criticizing this lopsided approach, the writer Noah Berlatsky noted that Black people “receive little empathy precisely because they are discriminated against and because their suffering is seen as natural and unremarkable.”

That would explain why CBS News last month posted a tweet that asked, “How young is too young to teach kids about race?” The network had blatantly overlooked the experiences of Black and other nonwhite kids, who mostly learn about racism through firsthand experiences at disturbingly young ages—never at a time of their choosing. “They say, ‘Our children are too young to hear about racism.’ Who is our children?” asked a Black parent named Caron LeNoir in a Washington Post piece that is among the few CRT-focused articles that actually features Black parents’ voices. “I don’t remember a day of my life when I wasn’t taught about racism, or learning about it through just existing.” Black kids are always dealing with the actual consequences of racism. A 2008 Harvard/University of California study found that by the time they’re 4 years old, white kids “express negative attitudes and stereotypes” toward nonwhite kids, while Black and Hispanic kids show no “in-group” bias toward those who look like them. A 2019 study concluded that both Black and white preschoolers have already developed “a strong and consistent pro-White bias.” A whole body of medical scholarship has demonstrated the deleterious impact on Black and other nonwhite kids of not seeing themselves reflected in the world.

We are deep in the throes of a white grievance movement, inflamed by fears that white dominance is decreasing. The media’s coddling of white folks isn’t helping. As long as the story continues to privilege white fearmongering, the press should be considered a contributor to the problem of white supremacy in education.
In late November 2021, the writer and venture capital investor Li Jin tweeted, “DAOs (decentralized autonomous organizations) represent the next step forward in the labor movement.” In her 20-tweet thread, Jin gave a brief history of the American labor movement, including issues with declining membership, bureaucracy, and bloat, before pivoting to DAOs as a new paradigm for worker ownership: “Versus unions, transparency of DAOs’ governance and on-chain flows of capital lessens risk of embezzlement and corruption, since there is visibility into how funds are flowing into & out of the treasury. And open rules for member admission mitigate institutional discrimination.” The response from many leftists on Twitter was swift and negative, reacting to the perceived implication that technology—cryptocurrency especially—could be a substitute for political and social change.

Black Socialists in America reacted with consternation for another reason: The group is already working on this technology and hasn’t received much support from the crypto community. Its Dual Power App is a tool for decentralized digital organizing and securely coordinating collective ownership of housing, health care, or banking assets.

As the cryptocurrency investor and influencer Cooper Turley defined them, “DAOs are Internet communities with a shared cap table and bank account.” A cap table is the spreadsheet that tracks equity and ownership in a business. In a DAO, this ownership is registered through token-based governance rather than in shares of stock. DAOs are different from cooperatives, because they exist on the blockchain—a ledger of transactions that publicly records every time cryptocurrency changes hands. DAOs are part of a new collection of Internet structures called “Web3,” which includes virtual environments, digital art known as “nonfungible tokens” (NFTs), and cryptocurrencies. I think Jin was wrong about unions: If you are working in the digital economy, you should still organize your workplace—but you should also join a DAO.

In 2018, I was a founding member of the Freelance Solidarity Project, a division of the National Writers Union dedicated to improving the lives of gig workers in the media world. I also cofounded a media company called Dirt, which until recently was entirely funded by NFTs and is cited as one of the first efforts to form a media DAO. We’ve distributed tokens that will soon allow their holders to steer the work that Dirt publishes.

Journalists are an especially promising case study for the future of DAO-based digital work, because journalists prefer to be steered by other journalists and not by outside capital. Qualified individuals could purchase or be given tokens that have value on the blockchain and enable proportional governance of the DAO. They can vote on which projects to fund while still maintaining editorial independence and their own ethical standards, as codified in the DAO. Because of the smart contracts governing DAOs, money is immediately distributed once a vote is complete—no more invoicing for payment.

Here’s a brief sketch of Web3 incentives for journalists as I see it, viewed from the perspective of the past few decades of media disruption. The dot-com boom and bubble started in 1995. Journalists who saw the opportunity might have gotten involved, but the bottom hadn’t yet fallen out of magazines and newspapers. By the 2008 recession, the media was in trouble. Some journalists might have chosen to join the social technology “gold rush,” but the pitch to them wasn’t to become financial stakeholders in Facebook; it was to use Facebook’s tools to promote their work for free. Next came the so-called pivot to video—the elimination of reporting jobs in favor of video jobs built on faulty metrics that didn’t translate into revenue.

People have been saying that media companies are technology companies for a long time. But the incentives for individual media workers to get involved are only now coming to fruition.

DAOs aren’t a substitute for free child care, universal health care, or student loan forgiveness—in fact, all those things would strengthen both union and DAO participation. But they can be a powerful tool to fund creative projects together: no banks, no overhead, and no disparities in the geographical ability to participate.

In his essay “Notes on Web3,” Robin Sloan writes, “I think Web3 is propelled by exhaustion as much as by excitement.” It’s not enough to ask media workers, “What do you have to lose?” It is incumbent on DAO evangelists to outline what can be gained. To me, that means cooperation and coexistence between the labor movement and new paradigms of digital work. I think we should all dual-card.  

Daisy Alioto is a cofounder of Dirt, an entertainment newsletter.
Inflating the Issue

Anticipating an impact on their electoral fortunes, Democrats are hoping to get ahead on a pressing question.

Republicans, along with some prominent right-wing Democrats, have been hammering the Biden administration over rising food and gas prices for months. In November, when the Labor Department announced that consumer prices had risen 6.2 percent from October 2020 to October 2021, Democrats are hoping to get ahead on a pressing question. Anticipating an impact on their electoral fortunes, Republicans, along with some prominent right-wing Democrats, have been hammering the Biden administration over rising food and gas prices for months. In November, when the Labor Department announced that consumer prices had risen 6.2 percent from October 2020 to October 2021, Democrats are hoping to get ahead on a pressing question.

White House officials and party leaders have been scrambling to respond to the price scare, worried that it could cost them their congressional majorities in the midterm elections next year. After initially dismissing the price increases as merely transitory, Democrats are trying to revamp their messaging, highlighting falling unemployment and the few helpful programs they’ve actually managed to pass with their majorities, like the enhanced child tax credit payments. In recent weeks, they’ve sought to rebrand Build Back Better, the president’s signature social spending plan, as a counter to inflation concerns. “If you want to fight inflation, support Build Back Better,” Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer said on the chamber’s floor last month.

New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is among the Democrats trying to make the case that the spending bill would help lower prices in the near term, as it invests in things like health care and child care. “If you are worried about inflation, it’s important to understand why it’s happening: supply chain, labor, and healthcare complications,” Ocasio-Cortez tweeted. “We can address these issues by investing in infrastructure, wages, healthcare & benefits.” But while most economists say President Biden’s spending package won’t increase inflation, some also say it won’t help reduce it either, at least not anytime soon.

Inflation has surged virtually everywhere this year for all sorts of reasons, depending on the country or the sector. But the United States has seen some of the biggest jumps. The latest report, released in December, found that prices rose nearly 7 percent over the 12 months ending in November, a nearly 40-year high. And the specific dynamics behind these price increases, mostly the result of pandemic-related disruptions to the economy, are unlike anything we’ve ever experienced.

“The discussion I think has got to be broader than just inflation, which in fact is a very serious issue,” Senator Bernie Sanders told The Nation in December, pointing to “the state of the economy” as essential context. “Unemployment is reasonably low. And we have come a very long way from where we were a year ago, and it’s important to remember that. That wages are up, that we were able to help take this country out of the very, very severe recession a year ago—I think those are factors that should be looked at this month.”

Figuring out how to deal with inflation, Sanders continued, is a complicated issue. But he believes lowering the cost of prescription drugs “would be a very important step forward,” along with making sure that working families can afford their basic needs.

Though Republicans have seized on rising prices as their latest political talking point, they haven’t publicly offered a plan to coalesce around, beyond repeating the delusion that stopping Biden’s plan to expand the social safety net is the only way to fight inflation.

“Well, I think the first thing we should do is not pass another big spending bill. That would be step one,” Missouri Republican Senator Roy Blunt told The Nation. When asked what step two would be, he stepped into an elevator and replied, “See you!”

Asked whether Republicans have discussed any other policy ideas to deal with inflation, Iowa Senator Chuck Grassley said, “There’s no discussion on that, because it’s all geared towards stopping the Democrats from feeding the fires of inflation [with] this $6 trillion spending.” In reality, the bill is $1.9 trillion over 10 years.

West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, one of the Democratic holdouts in the evenly divided chamber, has long cited inflation concerns, parroting Republican arguments in his effort to derail the package. Democrats were hoping to pass the Build Back Better Act by Christmas, but Manchin, who’s been a no vote all along, is using the recent inflation numbers to drive another news cycle on his obstruction. Biden admits that he’s unsure whether he will be able to win Manchin’s vote for the bill while inflation numbers are this high, but he’s going to keep trying to persuade him. Meanwhile, party leaders concede there’s no chance of passing the social spending bill this year, announcing they’re pivoting to voting rights legislation instead.
SNAPSHOT / Brandon Bell

An Ill Wind

Photographers sit inside a theater at an American Legion building in Mayfield, Ky., on December 16. Multiple tornadoes struck several Midwestern states late in the evening of December 10, causing massive destruction and dozens of casualties. The tornado that devastated Mayfield had winds of up to 190 miles per hour, the highest recorded that day, and a path that was at least 163 miles long.

By the Numbers

638K
Number of people displaced by violence within Myanmar

1,343
Minimum number of people who have been killed by the Myanmar military since it seized control of the government in February 2021

11K
Number of people arrested by the junta since the coup

2K
Estimated number of soldiers who have defected from the military

60%
Amount that the kyat, Myanmar’s currency, has lost in value since the coup

25M
Number of people living below the national poverty line, or about half the country’s population

14.4M
Number of people in Myanmar who will need emergency aid in 2022, including more than 5 million children, according to UN estimates

Why Those Texts Had No Effect

Did the loser reject every message
As he watched on TV blow-by-blow?
Or did Meadows know not to disturb him
When he’s watching a favorite show?

—Katrina Janco
16 Reasons to Be Hopeful in 2022
THE YEAR 2021 DEMANDED EVERY BIT AS MUCH FROM progressives as the difficult years that preceded it. Joe Biden replaced Donald Trump only after the outgoing president urged on a coup attempt and was impeached for the second time. In the face of an ongoing pandemic and the economic uncertainty extending from it, Biden found himself struggling not just with Republicans but also with corporate-aligned “centrist” Democrats who were disinclined to govern boldly. That set the stage for a year that saw progress come slowly and presidential approval ratings decline. Progressives had to fight to keep the administration from missing historic opportunities, while at the same time they championed an urgent racial justice agenda that faced a growing backlash, defended abortion rights, and struggled to save the planet. It wasn’t an easy year, but these leaders fought the good fight—and gave us hope for 2022.

John Nichols

HISTORIAN WHO EXPLAINS NOW

Carol Anderson

The Emory University professor employs deep historical analyses to identify the roots of current crises, and in 2021 her voice was vital. In her latest book, The Second: Race and Guns in a Fatally Unequal America (Bloomsbury), Anderson revealed how the Second Amendment has been used to arm and empower white supremacists from the founding of the republic to the night Kyle Rittenhouse started shooting in Kenosha, Wis. And in a column for The Guardian on impunity, titled “White Supremacists Declare War on Democracy and Walk Away Unscathed,” Anderson explained why the Capitol insurrectionists felt so confident that they could attack the very underpinnings of our democracy. “American democracy’s most dangerous adversary is white supremacy,” Anderson wrote. “Throughout this nation’s history, white supremacy has undermined, twisted and attacked the viability of the United States. What makes white supremacy so lethal, however, is not just its presence but also the refusal to hold its adherents fully accountable for the damage they have done and continue to do to the nation. The insurrection on 6 January and the weak response are only the latest example.”

National Visionary

Ai-jen Poo

When Speaker Nancy Pelosi spoke before the House’s approval of the Build Back Better agenda in November, she gave a shout-out to Ai-jen Poo, the Domestic Workers Alliance executive director who in 2011 launched Caring Across Generations to address the nation’s crumbling care infrastructure. A decade after the campaign’s launch, its call to action, “Care Can’t Wait,” echoes throughout the halls of Congress, as legislators propose to invest in a too-long-delayed expansion on the promises of the New Deal and the Great Society. And President Biden has embraced that campaign’s proposals for federal investment in Medicaid—which would expand access to home- and community-based services for people with disabilities and aging adults and provide caregivers with fairly compensated, union-protected jobs.

Municipal Visionary

Robin Rue Simmons

The House Judiciary Committee took historic action in April when it marked up HR 40, the bill by Texas Representative Sheila Jackson Lee to establish a commission to study and develop proposals for reparations to Black Americans. But less than a month earlier, on March 22, Evanston, Ill., became the first US city to create a government-funded reparations program. The plan to provide grants to Black residents to address historic patterns of housing discrimination and segregation was spearheaded by Rue Simmons, who represented the city’s predominantly Black Fifth Ward. “We’re not a unique city in Evanston,” she said. “We reflect the racial disparity across the nation. What makes us different is that we decided to take this first step—not perfect, not complete.” Now the executive director of FirstRepair, which advocates for local reparations, Rue Simmons explained in August that “actual reparations, not just their study, can be enacted by cities nationwide. All it takes is determination, humility and an unwavering commitment to reparatory justice.”

Carol Anderson

“American democracy’s most dangerous adversary is white supremacy.”

—Carol Anderson

Illustration by Serge Bloch
“Even when you think you’re doing this by yourself, there are so many people out here, fighting with us and continuing to fight with us.”
—Shannon Brewer

FIGHTING COVID ON A GLOBAL SCALE

Lori Wallach

When Covid vaccines began to be widely distributed, this veteran fair-trade activist recognized that getting Americans vaccinated, while essential, would not be enough to end the pandemic. People around the world would have to be vaccinated. Utilizing knowledge gained from her decades of work as director of Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch division (a position she left in December to launch the Rethink Trade program for the American Economic Liberties Project), Wallach worked with the Our World Is Not for Sale network and others to advocate for a waiver of global intellectual property rules that would allow for ramped-up vaccine production in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. And she’s continued to put the pressure on the World Trade Organization, which she’s argued must “get out of the way.”

FIGHTING AT THE EPICENTER OF THE ABORTION BATTLE

Shannon Brewer

For the past 20 years, Brewer has worked at the Jackson Women’s Health Organization, the Mississippi clinic at the epicenter of the fight to overturn Roe v. Wade. Should the Supreme Court reverse Roe—and we have no reason to believe it won’t—Brewer, who took the helm of JWHO in 2010, just might be the last director of the last abortion clinic in Mississippi, which serves people from across the South, where access has been decimated in recent decades. But Brewer is far from alone. As she defends the Pink House, as the clinic is known, from a steady stream of anti-abortion zealots outside its building and a dizzying number of targeted restrictions on abortion providers (or TRAP laws), she does so with the support and admiration of next-generation activists from far and wide. As she acknowledged to hundreds of demonstrators in front of the Supreme Court as the justices heard oral arguments in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization on December 1: “I’m realizing that even when you think you’re doing this by yourself, there are so many people out here, fighting with us and continuing to fight with us.”

URGENT CLIMATE ACTIVISM

The Sunrise Movement

According to Bill McKibben, “The Sunrise Movement is the most supple and smart political crew in the country,” and these young activists proved him right in 2021, demanding that Democrats make climate justice a priority. When Biden moved in the right direction, Sunrise activists urged him on. When the administration wavered, or when West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin undermined efforts to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, they answered with protests and hunger strikes. The historic commitments to fund climate-sustaining projects in the bipartisan infrastructure bill and the Build Back Better plan illustrate Sunrise’s effectiveness. This movement won’t bend to compromising Democrats or slow down until it wins approval of the Green New Deal, which New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey have reintroduced.

GLOBAL CLIMATE TRUTH-TELLER

Greta Thunberg

The unignorable voice on planetary climate catastrophe, Greta Thunberg, started early and has kept up her commitment. With statements as clear as they are persistent, she has returned us again to the facts when we avert our eyes. We don’t have another world to live in if we lose this one, and for many the loss has already begun. “We don’t just need goals for 2030 or 2050,” Thunberg said in a speech last year. We need them for every month of every year, starting now. David Bromwich

CAUCUS CHAIR WHO KEPT THE PRESSURE ON

Pramila Jayapal

Holding up the progressive cause while negotiating with centrist Democrats became crucial in 2021 as the Build Back Better Act wound its way through Congress, and that task fell to Washington Representative Jayapal. Some concessions to corporate-aligned centrists were inevitable, but progressives needed to hold the line long enough to make clear that their votes counted. Jayapal combined a moral vision—especially in advocating for immigrant rights—with astuteness and dealmaking skills. While the Build Back Better Act was stalled in the Senate by Manchin, its progress through the House remains a major achievement. Jayapal deserves credit for that as much as anybody. Jeet Heer

DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

The Brennan Center for Justice

From revealing the anti-democratic impact of gerrymandering and voter suppression to identifying new threats to election integrity, Brennan Center staffers such as Wendy Weisner, Wilfred Codrington III, and Michael Li have been essential advocates for democracy during a year when it was under threat in states nationwide. Especially vital in 2021 was their exposure of how “legislation enabling partisan interference in election administration is part of a broader ‘election sabotage’ or ‘election subversion’ campaign, a national push to enable partisans to distort democratic outcomes,” as they described in a groundbreaking report. As usual, the Brennan Center is anticipating the next fight, even as it wages the current one.

CONSTITUTIONALIST

Jamie Raskin

The Maryland representative led the charge to impeach and convict Trump for high crimes against the republic, with a depth of knowledge that extended from...
his decades as a professor of constitutional law, and with a righteous passion grounded in his faith that no one is above the law. The tally of Senate votes for conviction was the highest in a modern-day presidential impeachment trial—with seven Republicans joining all of the Democrats. Do not doubt for a moment that this level of support for accountability reflected the legal and moral power that Raskin and his team brought to the prosecution of Donald Trump.

**BEST IDEA FOR DESEMPowering TRUMP**

**Free Speech For People**

Although the Senate failed to remove Trump from office for inciting the January 6 insurrection, that doesn’t change the fact that the former president violated Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, which disqualifies from public office any individual who swore an oath to uphold the Constitution and then engaged in insurrection. Free Speech For People has launched a national “14point3” campaign demanding that secretaries of state and other election officials bar Trump and his fellow insurrectionists from appearing on state ballots in 2022, ’24, and beyond. Constitutional lawyer John Bonifaz, FSFP’s president, promises, “If [Trump] runs in 2024, we will go into court and argue that he has disqualified himself.”

**EMPOWERED ANTI-MONOPOLIST**

**Lina Khan**

Of all Joe Biden’s best appointments, the most electrifying was that of legal scholar Khan, who has taken over as chair of the Federal Trade Commission. Her groundbreaking 2017 paper “Amazon’s Anti-trust Paradox”—which The New York Times described as having “reframed decades of monopoly law”—and her academic advocacy for taking bold steps to address the emergence of new monopolies in the 21st century influenced Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren and spurred a revival of interest in antitrust enforcement. Now, Khan is in a position to turn theory into practice.  

**THE UAW WORKERS WHO STRUCK JOHN DEERE**

The pandemic and its disruption of the economy are sparking the biggest surge in labor activism in decades. This welcome resurgence of labor power is essential for redressing the core problem of American democracy: economic inequality. In a five-week strike, UAW workers from John Deere showed fortitude and solidarity and won major concessions, including cost-of-living increases.  

**ACTIVIST INSIDE (AND OUTSIDE) THE CAPITOL**

**Cori Bush**

Too many members of Congress are satisfied to say the right thing and then bemoan the barriers to actually getting the job done. Not Bush, the first-term Democratic representative from St. Louis. In July, she was fighting inside the Capitol to extend the federal moratorium on evictions that was established in September 2020 and previously extended four times. When Congress failed to act, Bush joined activists who slept overnight on the steps of the Capitol in order to convince the Biden administration to extend the protections. The White House responded, temporarily saving millions of Americans from the threat of losing shelter during a pandemic. When the Supreme Court overturned the moratorium, Bush teamed up with Elizabeth Warren to write legislation that would give the Department of Health and Human Services permanent authority to enact eviction bans during public health crises. “We didn’t sleep on those steps just to give up now,” Bush said.

**NEWEST DELEGATE SHOWING UP FOR THE PEOPLE**

**Nadarius Clark**

When Clark beat three-term conservative Democrat Steve Heretick in Virginia’s House of Delegates primary this past June, his victory in November’s general election seemed preordained, given the heavy Democratic tilt to his district, which encompasses parts of Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Chesapeake. Endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America, Clark ran on a thoroughgoing platform of health care, education, and police reform. But then came the red tide, which swept away even the few incumbents perceived to hold safe seats. Clark won nonetheless, 56 to 44 percent. At 26, he is the youngest Democratic delegate in Virginia’s history and the first African American to serve the 79th District. He is also the opposite of the losing former Democratic governor, Terry McAuliffe—who is, of course, white, wealthy, and more than twice Clark’s age. Clark won’t criticize McAuliffe or other Democrats. Still, his message carries an implicit critique of campaigns conducted from on high. “Being deep in your community, you can combat lies,” he told me. “We don’t teach ‘critical race theory’ in our schools.” Education was nonetheless his top issue, he added. “We did something our district hasn’t seen,” including knocking on more than 40,000 doors between the primary and the general election. “You have to show up,” Clark stated.

**SONG EVERY AMERICAN SHOULD HEAR**

“The Rise of Dreama Caldwell,” by Joe Troop

A banjo-wielding social justice activist, Troop writes songs in the tradition of Woody Guthrie. As the Grammy-nominated leader of the folk ensemble Che Apalache, which includes players from Argentina and Mexico, Troop has always written songs that are musically and intellectually compelling. That was surely the case with his 2021 single “The Rise of Dreama Caldwell,” a searing indictment of the cash bail system told through the eyes of a real-life Alamance County, N.C., woman who could not afford to pay bail and ended up in jail. Caldwell eventually became a criminal justice reformer, an activist with the Down Home NC rural organizing project, and a county commission candidate, as Troop recounts in this story of how “she stared a sick system point blank in the eye, / And vowed come hell or high water, one day she’d watch it die.”
When Whiny, Incompetent Nazis Lost
The civil trial of the white supremacists who planned the deadly Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017 brought some measure of justice. But the threat of violence still looms large.

BY JOAN WALSH

Charlottesville, Va.

There is a through line from the violent white supremacist Unite the Right rally that took place here in August 2017 to the January 6 Capitol insurrection that sought to overturn the valid election of Joe Biden in favor of the twice-impeached Donald Trump.

Sitting in a Charlottesville federal courtroom, waiting for the jury to come in with a verdict, I couldn’t miss it.

The civil trial of 14 men and 10 groups accused of conspiring to ignite racist violence at the two-day Charlottesville riots, which killed 32-year-old counterprotester Heather Heyer and injured at least 35 others, doesn’t offer an exact legal template for holding the 650-plus individuals (of an estimated 2,500 believed liable) charged in what was essentially an attempted coup accountable. But we can learn a lot from that recent four-week legal cavalcade of white supremacist preening, complaining, and, ultimately, defeat.

One obvious parallel: Trump helped inspire the Charlottesville goons, just as he (even more directly) inspired the January 6 insurrectionists. I met Charlottesville defendant Richard Spencer, the founder of the genteel racist movement known as the “alt-right,” at a party at the 2016 Republican National Convention that brought together every variety of racist and white nationalist for cocktails and canapés. As Spencer told me then: “What’s most important about Trump is the emotion. He’s awakened a sense of ‘us,’ a sense of nationalism among white people. He’s done more to awaken that nationalism than anyone in my lifetime. I love the man.” (Charged with plotting the Charlottesville violence, Spencer claimed he voted for Biden in 2020, but I don’t believe anything he says.)

It took four years, partly because of Covid, to bring the Charlottesville conspirators to trial. But ultimately a jury found them liable for injuries to counterprotesters and awarded the nine plaintiffs in the case $26 million from this group of white supremacists. I hope it doesn’t take that long to bring the January 6 ringleaders, from Trump through Mark Meadows, Roger Stone, and Steve Bannon to the most minor MAGA insurrectionists, to justice. But whatever the time line, to have any chance of preventing the next spasm of white supremacist violence, it’s critical to identify the threads that connect these apparently separate events. They are many, and they’ll make your skin crawl.

I must admit: During the trial, and waiting for the jury’s verdict in the Charlottesville federal courthouse, I got distracted by the defendants’ remarkable incompetence, vanity, and whininess. White supremacy, to paraphrase Trump, has not sent us “its best people.” They planned their violence on Discord, an Internet platform established to facilitate conversations among gamers, but one that allowed them to use private servers to share racial hate—and in this case, to plan the Unite the Right rally.
It’s terrifying that these barely competent poseurs could have the influence they had and inspire the violence they did.

Planning the rally, these men—babies worried about whether mayonnaise on their sandwiches might spoil in the summer sun. They used social media to shop for the cheapest tiki torches, which they used in their ghoulish flame-lit “Jews will not replace us” march on August 11. Some coordinated their outfits: white polos and khakis.

During the four-week trial, they bickered among themselves like schoolboys on a gaming site when it would have been much more effective to support one another’s defenses.

Some started out cocky, using the unique platform of a trial to promote their views. Michael Hill, founder of the League of the South, proudly told the jury he’s “a white supremacist, a racist, an anti-Semite, a homophobe, a xenophobe, an Islamophobe” from the witness stand. The infamous “Crying Nazi,” Christopher Cantwell, defending himself because his lawyer quit after Cantwell threatened a plaintiffs’ attorney, played coy, one minute using the N-word in opening arguments, the next insisting his persistent racism was merely a “spoken-word performance,” part of promoting his lame, cringey podcast Radical Agenda. (“Radical” mostly meaning racist.)

Preppy Nazi Spencer (one codefendant derided him as “bougie”) tried to insist that he wasn’t part of the conspiracy, in part because he wasn’t on the infamous Discord server used to plan the event. He joined the Unite the Right planning nonetheless, but texted Jason Kessler, one of the lead organizers of the rally, on August 12: “I’m sorry but I won’t attend the press conference today, you’re not listening to leadership.”

Kessler’s attorney asked at the trial, “Who is leadership?”

Spencer answered, “I’m referring to me. I’m the alt-right.” So much for getting out of the whole conspiracy charge.

The plaintiffs’ attorneys showcased the many calls for violence made by the disparate group of defendants, even as they tried to deny their connections to one another.

“I think we need to have a Battle of Berkeley situation in Charlottesville. Bring in the alt-right, Proud Boys [and other defendants] and fight this shit out. They bring everything they’ve got and we do too,” Kessler wrote in March 2017, after a violent rally in Berkeley, Calif., where Nazis fought some people vaguely termed “antifa.” He later wrote to Spencer, “We are raising an army my liege, for free speech but for the cracking of skulls if it comes to it.” In a June 2017 message on Discord, Kessler advised: “If you want a chance to crack some Antifa skulls in self-defense, don’t open carry [guns]. You will scare the shit out of them and they’ll just stand off to the side.”

“I’m willing to risk violence and incarceration…but I think it’s worth it for our cause,” Cantwell shared in a text with Spencer. The Preppy Nazi replied, “It’s worth it, at least for me.”

Spencer himself played a damning bit of audio that Kessler reportedly recorded after the Preppy Nazi was treated roughly by police at the rally. “Little fucking likes. They get ruled by people like me. They look up and see a face like mine looking down at them. That’s how the fucking world works. We are going to destroy this fucking town [of Charlottesville],” Spencer was recorded as saying.

This was evidence, Spencer said, not of his commitment to racist violence but of how de-raigned he was that weekend, totally “juvenile” and not himself, thus incapable of intention and planning. But nobody was convinced.

Meanwhile, Kessler had started a “Charlottesville 2.0” server that came to have 61 channels, according to Peter Simi, a Chapman University sociologist who was an expert witness at the trial, “organized in topics that ranged from event planning logistics (e.g., ‘carpool_available’ and ‘gear_and_attire’), to issues of violence and law (e.g., ‘medic_team’ and ‘virginia_laws’) and participating groups (e.g., ‘traditionalist_workershers_party’ and ‘league_of_the_south’).”

All of that seemed pretty damning to me. Which might be why the once-macho defendants turned so whiny. Early on, they were dropping the N-word, joking about race war, and apologizing when their supporters managed to break into a telephone livestream of the trial (listeners were supposed to be on mute) to yell “Make America Great Again” and racial epithets. But by the end, Cantwell was complaining about his courtroom computer problems, Spencer was irritated that Judge Norman Moon wouldn’t buy his comparing himself to Jesus, and Kessler was unhappy that the courtroom didn’t seem convinced that his efforts to provoke the rumored antifa into throwing the first punch, thus igniting violence, wasn’t accepted as nonviolence: “This is a tactic that even Martin Luther King would use!” There was an air of panic, not cockiness, in the defendants’ closing arguments.

What changed? I can’t be sure, but one thing I know: The plaintiffs’ attorneys, led by Karen Dunn and Roberta Kaplan, weren’t distracted by the preening and complaining of the defendants the way I was. They called two particularly effective expert witnesses: Simi, the white supremacist expert, and Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt.

Lipstadt traced the defendants “Jews will not replace us” chant at the violent tiki-torch rally to both modern and age-old notions that Jewish people, acting in concert with nonwhites, have been the drivers of white Christian erasure.

“There was a great deal of overt anti-Semitism and adulation of the Third Reich throughout the evidence I looked at,” Lipstadt testified. “Very few things surprise me, but I was taken aback.”

Acting as his own attorney, Cantwell asked Lipstadt if there were any appropriate Holo-
cruel jokes: “If somebody was going to make a joke about the Jewish people, would the Holocaust be an easy target?”

“I find it hard to imagine using a genocide which killed 6 million people, irrespective of their religion, their identity, their nationality, as a topic of jokes,” Lipstadt replied.

Simi produced a 63-page report, with researcher Kathleen Blee, that examined the defendants’ vast social media record, including the trove of Discord planning, against a backdrop of white supremacist violence going back to the post-Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan. On the witness stand, as in his report, Simi blew up the attempted defense, particularly the one offered by Cantwell: that the defendants’ brutal racism and anti-Semitism were just performances, satirical and not sincere.

That argument dominated an early, and discouraging, part of the trial. Cantwell and others argued that they’re the cool kids and that we’re all squares, taking them too seriously. The so-called “lulz” and “bantz” in their rhetoric and in their messages to one another—their Nazism, anti-Semitism, and white supremacism—those are all an ironic pose! Who knew “There was a subculture in which it was the coolest thing in the world to be as edgy as possible,” Spencer told the jury, calling it “very juvenile and silly.” When they say things like “Gas the kikes, race war now,” we’re supposed to believe it’s just a big joke.

That dodge ended when Simi took it apart from the witness stand, drawing on his authoritative report. He noted that the style guide of the neo-Nazi Daily Stormer website (its founder, Andrew Anglin, was a defendant) advises:

The unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not. There should also be a conscious awareness of mocking stereotypes of hateful racists. I usually think of this as self-deprecating humor—I am a racist making fun of stereotypes of racists, because I don’t take myself super-seriously.

This is obviously a ploy and I actually do want to gas kikes. But that’s neither here nor there.

Simi’s report also showed that the Unite the Right organizers deliberately recruited participants who had been involved in violence before. And the “Charlottesville 2.0” Discord channels featured multiple posts about using cars to run down protesters, just the way James Alex Fields killed Heather Heyer and injured so many others. “Is it legal to run over protesters blocking roadways?” one supporter asked. “I’m NOT just shitposting. I would like clarification.”

Fields himself—who murdered Heyer and injured others with his Dodge Challenger on the afternoon of August 12—posted a meme depicting a car running into protesters just weeks before he did it. Others on Discord and elsewhere suggested carrying flags, whose flagpoles could be used to beat counterprotesters, which they also did that weekend.

“In our opinion,” Simi testified at the trial, “readers of these posts would have understood that such use of humor was intended to ‘normalize,’ approve of, and encourage violence without explicitly promoting it.”

The jury seemed to agree.

It’s hugely encouraging that the jury found the Charlottesville sad sacks liable for $26 million in damages, which will be paid to the nine plaintiffs, who suffered severely that August day. But it’s terrifying that these barely competent poseurs could have the influence they had and inspire the violence they did. We have to face the fact that there’s an epidemic of (mostly male) violence on the right, and they’re learning from one another, sharing with one another, and thus amplifying their impact beyond their actual numbers—or apparent competence. Just before the Charlottesville verdict, Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted on charges of murder. Admittedly, it was hard for the prosecution to disprove his claim of self-defense. But that a 17-year-old felt he had the responsibility—more importantly, the right—to take to the streets of Kenosha, Wis., with an AR-15 to practice vigilante justice during the Black Lives Matter marches there is just another symptom of what’s grievously wrong with a lot of young white men in America.

The trial’s one disappointment was that the plaintiffs’ attempt to use the 1871 Ku Klux Klan Act, passed to punish Reconstruction-era violence against Black people, especially Black voters, didn’t carry the day. The jury based its verdict on a similar Virginia state statute that criminalized racial violence, but it deadlocked on the charges related to the Klan act. Several legal scholars I talked to suggested that the Klan act doesn’t necessarily draw a fine enough line between what’s considered free speech and what’s an obvious incitement to violence.

Right now, though, other lawsuits are trying to use the act. At least three go after Trump for fomenting violence in order to overturn election results—one relating to his efforts to reverse Michigan’s outcome, plus two by members of Congress involving his encouraging the Capitol insurrection. There are related two lawsuits in Texas, related to law enforcement in San Marcos refusing to protect a Biden bus from “Trump train” members in cars and SUVs who were trying to drive it off the road. (Police (continues on page 25)
workers began to wake up to their power.

In 2021

In 2022

they’ll need to use it to create the kind of crisis that can turn this country around.
In the first full year of the covid pandemic, Elon Musk’s wealth skyrocketed from $25 billion to $150 billion. Jeff Bezos became the first person on the planet to possess a fortune of more than $200 billion. The Financial Times has been fretting all of this past year about a crisis in super yacht production, and lately it’s been reporting on another crisis affecting the rich. Flexjet and Netjets, two of the most well-known private-jet charter companies operating in the United States, recently stopped accepting new clients because they simply can’t acquire enough jets to accommodate the explosive growth of the billionaire class. Not only is this eye-popping wealth not being hidden; it’s being flaunted. After being propelled by his Blue Origin rocket for fewer minutes than the lifetime of a female mayfly, Bezos enthusiastically thanked Amazon’s employees and customers for allowing him to act as if he’d joined the ranks of astronauts like John Glenn and Neil Armstrong. Our new Gilded Age of obscene wealth and arrogance stands in stark contrast to the everyday struggles faced by tens of millions of exhausted workers fighting just to stay healthy and alive, avoid eviction, make the next month’s rent payment, or find the kind of job that will leave enough free time to help their children with homework. In April, 3.8 million Americans quit their jobs, which prompted headlines about “the Great Resignation” and “the Big Quit.” By July, that number would climb to over 4 million in a single month, bested again in August (4.27 million) and then again in September (4.43 million). By October, pundits in the mainstream media began invoking a new trope, “Striketober,” as 10,000 workers walked off the job in the first strike against John Deere since 1986, with another 60,000 film production workers and 50,000 health care workers at Kaiser Health threatening to strike, along with dozens of small and medium strikes and work stoppages scattered across the country (including at Kellogg, Nabisco, and Catholic Health, in Buffalo). Although there’s no doubt that the abysmal treatment at the hands of absentee corporate bosses during the pandemic has led individual workers to resign in droves—and has caused a small uptick in strikes—anger at the elite and collective action by workers predate Covid.

In 2018, more than 485,000 workers waged 20 large strikes, with another 65,000 engaging in 123 smaller work stoppages that involved fewer than 1,000 workers. In 2021, through November, only 76,000 workers participated in large work stoppages during 39 disputes. While the number of smaller stoppages (involving fewer than 1,000 workers) that took place in 2021 is not yet known, it’s clear that worker anger at outrageous inequality didn’t suddenly bubble up in October. Although the increase in strikes involving more than 1,000 workers is notable, the number of workers acting collectively has yet to catch up to 2018’s total. Instead, labor’s discontent has been channeled into individual actions, like quitting. It’s also worth noting the key shift from public sector strikes in 2018 to increased walkouts in the so-called private sector today. But the seemingly random nature of the 2021 strikes—with workers pissed off at crappy and insulting offers by their employers—doesn’t come close to what is required to create the scale of crisis that will force the corporate elite to negotiate with the working class in significant ways that the nation hasn’t seen in decades.

Unfortunately, most national unions squandered 2021 by prioritizing behind-the-scenes jockeying for access to the Biden administration and crumbs from the bosses’ table—the kinds of actions easily overturned in a next administration—while the working class watched the president abandon one campaign pledge after another: free community college, cheaper prescription drugs, real relief for students and homeowners in debt, paid medical and family leave, and robust action on climate change that would shift subsidies toward unionized, high-paying jobs for a livable planet. Biden’s refusal to do away with the filibuster in 2021 vanquished many desperately needed structural changes—starting with the restoration of the Voting Rights Act and the passage of its workplace companion, the Protecting the Right to Organize, or PRO, Act. (Both aim to restore fundamental freedoms briefly enjoyed last century and essential to a functioning democracy.)

Legislation that’s good for workers passes only when workers create untenable crises that make that legislation a better option than profit-draining strikes.
The working class can still radically lift the floor on what’s considered acceptable corporate and shareholder behavior.

Everyone understands there are two intransigent senators who are the public faces blocking real progress. Precisely because of this, Biden needed to show up on these swing-state picket lines and drive home his message of fairness for workers. Sending the former governor of Iowa for a brief home state appearance sandwiched between his main events at the World Food Prize ceremony wasn’t enough. With January 6 and the elections of 2022 and ’24 in mind, the president needed to embrace the workers on the John Deere picket lines in person and conduct broad political education about who is really causing the pain in workers’ lives. Instead, the administration made a point of stating it would let those workers fend for themselves against a giant corporation engorged with billions in profits. We need to understand that Biden’s public actions toward workers on strike are every bit as important as—if not more important than—his appointments to government agencies, which are inside baseball.

In the coming year, more than 1,577 contracts, covering over 1 million unionized workers, are set to expire in the United States. But that figure includes only contracts that cover more than 1,000 workers; there are plenty of other workers in smaller unionized workplaces who also have contracts expiring in 2022, including nursing homes and small hotels. Two of the three states with the largest number of contracts expiring are the swing states of Pennsylvania and Ohio. If more than 1 million US workers—or even fewer in key labor markets—take collective action toward common demands to radically improve their quality of life on and off the job, the results will be far more powerful than those of the Great Resignation. If even a tiny fraction of the number of people who quit in August and September choose to unionize—forcing their employers to improve their working conditions by threatening a collective, rather than an individual, exit, or by withholding their labor in supermajority strikes—the working class could radically lift the floor on what is considered acceptable corporate and shareholder behavior. As the John Deere strikers did.

As we move into 2022, bright spots include the Teamsters electing a bold reform slate to lead the national union for the first time this century and a successful member-led referendum vote in November that changed how national leaders are chosen in the United Auto Workers. There’s a slew of upcoming contract expirations in swing states, where national leaders (the president, the vice president, congressional leaders, and governors, for starters) should flock to the picket lines and actually use the power of the state to settle strikes on terms favorable to workers. When you consider how comfortable these politicians were as candidates campaigning for labor votes—practically tripping over one another in photo ops during the 2019 General Motors strike, for example—it’s hard to accept their absence from the picket lines at John Deere and elsewhere. When Biden’s spokesperson stated at a press conference during the Deere strike that the president was going to remain neutral, it was the kind of missed opportunity that we can’t afford, given what’s at stake.
winning in 2022 and then Donald Trump or a Trumper winning in 2024. The best union organizing has long focused on coordinating contracts so that they are set to expire at the same time across industries, employers, and geographical locations—what’s known as “contract line-up”—during big political election seasons. Why? Because the majority of workers sit up and pay attention to collective action when their contracts are going to expire. And given the cynicism most people rightly have toward electoral politics, it takes contract and strike mobilizations to engage in meaningful political education about which set of politicians is connected to which set of corporate leaders.

Rather than surrender to gloom, we should keep in mind that workers who have contracts expiring stand the best chance of creating the conditions to fix our broken democracy (and to improve their lackluster unions). Unionized workers whose contracts are not set to expire in 2022 should immediately explore all opportunities to strike mid-contract, whether it’s over safety and health violations or demands to bargain over the impact of pandemic-era workplace changes. Workers who are not yet unionized should look to emulate the decisive actions taken by two different groups of workers in early December. A tiny but mighty group of Starbucks workers in Buffalo achieved what none before them had done when they defeated a ruthless union-busting campaign led by CEO and former presidential contender Howard Schultz and won their National Labor Relations Board election. Two thousand miles away and just one day earlier, the largest organizing win of the year was achieved using a different strategy to form a union under US labor law: 17,000 academic researchers in the 20th century than it is today, and its revival is urgent in a period when the increasingly obvious vulnerability of the just-in-time supply chain has opened up a major window of opportunity for workers to gain leverage over capital.

Now more than ever, as go unions, so goes democracy. (continued from page 21)

which brings us back to January 6. It’s easy to mock so many of the people charged, some of whom seem as ludicrous and incompetent as the Charlottesville boys. Not just the “QAnon Shaman,” Jacob Chansley, or James Beeks, who was touring with a production of Jesus Christ Superstar but took a time-out for violence (and who, by the way, is Black). Unlike the Charlottesville rioters, the January 6 insurrectionists charged included some women, like Dallas area realtor Jenna Ryan, who boasted on Instagram that she wouldn’t go to prison (but who, by the way, is Black). Unlike the Charlottesville rioters, the January 6 insurrectionists charged included some women, like Dallas area realtor Jenna Ryan, who boasted on Instagram that she wouldn’t go to prison (but who, by the way, is Black). Unlike the Charlottesville rioters, the January 6 insurrectionists charged included some women, like Dallas area realtor Jenna Ryan, who boasted on Instagram that she wouldn’t go to prison (but who, by the way, is Black). Unlike the Charlottesville rioters, the January 6 insurrectionists charged included some women, like Dallas area realtor Jenna Ryan, who boasted on Instagram that she wouldn’t go to prison (but who, by the way, is Black).

The worst of the January 6 protesters, especially those who entered the Capitol or tried to and those who assaulted police there, were ultimately more dangerous than the Charlottesville clan. At least 150 police officers were injured. So far those charged—that’s charged; many more participated—including more than 70 current or former members of the military and at least 15 current or former police officers. Dozens of suspected Oath Keepers, a paramilitary group with ties to both the military and police, have been charged, with more coming. Over 650 people have been charged so far; HuffPost estimates that’s about a quarter of those who ultimately could be.

Which means that on that day alone, up to 2,500 people broke the law trying to break our democracy—whether to “hang Mike Pence” or “get Nancy” (Pelosi) or grab the electoral votes that Congress was in the process of ratifying. Or to otherwise intimidate democratically elected lawmakers into overturning democracy.

So there’s no equating Charlottesville 2017 with the 2021 Capitol violence. But if there’s not a direct comparison in scale, there’s certainly an echo in ideology and tactics. At least one planner of the Unite the Right rally—Tim Gionet, the white supremacist Internet troll known as “Baked Alaska”—was arrested for storming the Capitol on January 6. The deadly flagpoles, the Confederate flags, the Trump worship, the rage, and the (mainly male) sense of entitlement; plus the disintermediated planning across multiple social media platforms, some of which, like Parler, didn’t exist in 2017, as well as old familiar spreaders of right-wing disinformation, like Facebook, which did—much of what we witnessed on January 6 we saw first in Charlottesville.

The Charlottesville verdict is much-needed evidence that justice can be done, even if it takes four years. “It’s a resounding victory,” Amy Spitalnick, the executive director of Integrity First for America, told me. But with so many of these failson defendants and their backing organizations already pretty far down on their luck, I wondered if the plaintiffs would ever see money from them. “Absolutely!” Spitalnick said. “You collect judgments in a lot of ways.” Some of the larger groups hit by this verdict have assets and operating funds, she added. Richard Spencer glumly told reporters he envisioned that the men might have their wages garnished or liens placed against their homes and property. “They could do all those things,” he said, adding that his alt-right movement “is dead and gone.” One can only hope.

But meanwhile, the great malefactors pushing white supremacy have yet to be anything close to punished: not a Trump sycophant like Steve Bannon or Roger Stone or Mark Meadows; certainly not Trump himself. The dangers posed by Charlottesville and the Capitol violence are still with us. After the trial, I called Susan Bro, Heather Heyer’s mother, to talk about how the trial ended. She did not endorse my use of the word “end.”

“This never comes to an end for me.”

I acknowledged my poor word choice, then realized: The greater nightmare hasn’t come to an end, for any of us.
Brothers Against the Bureau

Ted Hall, the Soviet Union’s youngest atomic spy, his rocket scientist brother Ed, and the untold story of how J. Edgar Hoover’s biggest Manhattan Project bust was shut down.

BY DAVE LINDORFF
In April 1950, three months before Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested as Soviet atomic spies, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover began chasing a bigger fish: the physics wunderkind Theodore Alvin Hall. Hired at 18 as a Harvard junior by the Manhattan Project, Hall arrived at Los Alamos on January 28, 1944, and learned he’d be helping to create an atomic bomb. Although the project was a response to fears that Germany might develop nuclear weapons, by that summer, with the German army in retreat, Hall grew concerned that the bomb’s real target would be the USSR, America’s wartime ally.

While still at Harvard and unaware what he was being recruited for, Hall and his friend and roommate Saville Sax (the only person he told about his new job) shared their concerns that the Soviet Union was being left out of what was clearly the development of some new weapon. When he learned that he was working on a bomb of unimaginable destructive power, Hall, like some other scientists on the project—notably Niels Bohr, Leo Szilard, and Joseph Rotblat—worried about what might happen if the United States ended up with a postwar monopoly on atomic bombs. Bohr urged President Franklin Roosevelt to share information about the project with the Soviets—and for his efforts had the FBI monitoring him. Rotblat, a Polish exile to Britain, quit the Manhattan Project over the issue of Soviet exclusion. Perhaps thanks to youthful impulsivity, Hall, in his discussions with Sax, arrived at a different and more treacherous solution: He would give the Soviets information about the implosion trigger he was working on, in the hope that the Soviets’ development of their own bomb would deter US use of the weapon.

By late October, on the pretext of joining his family for his 19th birthday, Hall went to New York City and met up with Sax to try and locate a Soviet agent. Each managed to find one, though the agents were skeptical until Hall showed them convincing information about the project. With Sax acting as courier, Hall immediately began providing crucial information. Code-named Mlad (Russian for “young one”), Hall, the youngest scientist on the Manhattan Project, was the first Los Alamos spy to be identified in 1949 by the US Army’s Signal Intelligence Service in the intercepted and decrypted transmissions—later known as the Venona cables—sent between Soviet agents in the US and Moscow. Sax, code-named Star (Russian for “old one”), was also among the first to be identified.

Assigning FBI agents across the country to the case, Hoover quickly learned that the young spy, a child of Russian Jewish immigrants in New York, had been working since the war’s end on a doctorate in biophysics at the University of Chicago and had married in 1947. He also learned that Hall’s older brother, Air Force Maj. Edward Nathaniel Hall, was designing rocket engines for nuclear-capable missiles at a top secret facility on Wright-Patterson Air Force Base outside Dayton, Ohio.

Most historians of atomic spying have little to say about the incongruous careers of these two brothers—the teenage prodigy physicist/spy who helped create the plutonium bomb for the US and the USSR, and his older brother, a brilliant rocket scientist who developed the intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that could deliver such bombs to the Soviet Union and other targets. Those who are aware of both men have long wondered how they remained at large during the 1950s Red Scare—a time when merely having relatives or friends in the Communist Party was enough to end a career—but have never found a compelling explanation. Now that story can finally be told, thanks to a 103-page FBI file on Ed Hall recently obtained by The Nation under the Freedom of Information Act.

After World War II, paranoia about Soviet espionage became rampant in the US, stoked by government propaganda and later by the USSR’s surprise explosion—years ahead of US predictions—of its own atom bomb on August 29, 1949. With communism seemingly on the march in China, Eastern Europe, Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere, it’s easy to imagine how badly Hoover, an obsessed anti-communist, must have wanted to nail this case.

By the end of 1950, at least one atomic spy—Klaus Fuchs, a fugitive Communist Niels Bohr, Leo Szilard, and Joseph Rotblat all worried about what might happen if the US had a monopoly on atomic weapons.

Dave Lindorff writes about the Cold War, climate change, and other issues. He won the Izzy Award for Outstanding Independent Journalism in 2019.
“This Bureau’s investigation has now progressed to the point where interview of Major Hall concerning his brother, Theodore, is desirable.”

—J. Edgar Hoover

investigator

Investigation has disclosed that Theodore Alvin Hall is a brother of Major Edward Nathaniel Hall, ASN 0-434506. Major Hall, as of September 27, 1950, was assigned to the Power Plant Laboratory, Engineering Division, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Dayton, Ohio, and was reportedly working on a highly secret and confidential project.

The file doesn’t include Carroll’s response to what was surely shocking news from his former boss.

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In response to a Freedom of Information Act request by The Nation, the Air Force’s OSI said it had no file on Ed Hall and no record of the correspondence of General Carroll, who in 1961 moved on to head the new Defense Intelligence Agency. (Carroll retired from the Air Force in 1969 and died in 1991.) Such files “may have existed,” I was told, but they “could have been destroyed as part of a routine records purge.”

There is, however, a second letter from Hoover to Carroll in the FBI’s Ed Hall file. In it, the director quotes from a letter of reply he received from Carroll. On March 27, 1951, Hoover (omitting any salutation this time) writes:

Reference is made to my letter dated Jan. 6, 1951...concerning Major Edward Nathaniel Hall...brother of Theodore Alvin Hall...the subject of a current espionage investigation by this Bureau. It is noted that in your letter dated January 18, 1951, concerning captioned individuals, you advised that a limited inquiry would be conducted by your Department to determine whether Major Hall engaged in activities inimical to the best interests of the United States.

Hoover writes that his agents had just interviewed Ted Hall, who “declared that he never furnished unauthorized information to anyone not entitled to receive it, and, furthermore, that he had never been approached by anyone, directly or indirectly, to furnish such information to unauthorized persons.” He also reports that the Chicago FBI office leading the Ted Hall investigation “has requested that Major Hall, a regular Air Force officer on duty at Wright-Patterson AFB, be interviewed re Theodore Hall, his younger brother.”
asked last April when Ed Hall learned about his younger brother's spying, Ted's widow, Joan (now 92 and still living in the family home in Newnham, England, just outside Cambridge), suddenly recalled an incident she'd forgotten to mention in our prior conversations. On March 17, 1951, the Saturday morning after Ted and Sax had been interrogated separately and aggressively for three hours in the FBI's Chicago office, she said, a man showed up at her and Ted's Chicago home claiming to be a repairman sent to "fix" the phone (which wasn't broken). Once he left, there was a second knock at the door; it was Ed, who, without calling ahead, had driven all night from Ohio. Checking the phone and signaling that he believed it was bugged, Ed indicated for Joan and Ted to join him outside. "OK, Ted, what kind of trouble did you get into this time?" he asked.

Joan recalled, "Ted sort of smiled and said he'd been questioned by the FBI about spying, and Ed responded that he'd also been questioned about Ted spying." She added, "He didn't ask Ted if it was true he was a Soviet spy. He just told him he'd been questioned and that he knew nothing about any spying."

Following that brief exchange, the two brothers walked off together. They returned almost an hour later, after which Ed returned to Dayton. Though the two families often visited each other, the brothers supposedly never discussed Ted's espionage again until 1995—after his role was revealed by the National Security Agency's declassification of the decrypted Venona cables.

The questioning Ed referred to during his surprise visit was clearly by OSI agents, not the FBI, because Hoover's letter to Carroll requesting permission to question the older Hall brother was dated March 27—10 days after Ed's surprise visit. FBI agents didn't interview Ed until nearly three months later.

According to his FBI file, Ed was interviewed four times by the OSI and once by the FBI. In his FBI interview, Ed explained that he hadn't seen his brother during the war years, as Ed had been stationed in the United Kingdom, and that after the war he'd seen him only a few times. Admitting that he'd been very close to Ted when they were young, Ed said that following his 1939 enlistment in the military he'd been posted far from New York, Boston, and Los Alamos—and that since the war, the two brothers had "not been particularly close."

That was simply a lie, Joan told me when I showed her the report. "They were always extremely close."

The FBI report also indicates that the agents, while assuring Ed they were "not associating [him] with any responsibility for Theodore's actions," did warn him that, given his plans for an Air Force career, his brother's refusal to cooperate with FBI investigators was "a matter in which he might have considerable concern."

Following this veiled threat, the agents refused to offer Ed any specific advice or instruction. "After some study," the report notes, he promised to make another trip to Chicago on June 22. What he actually advised Ted to do isn't known, but the agents' report says that Ed claimed he'd failed to persuade his brother to cooperate, adding that Ted complained that the agents wanted him to reveal the names of Progressive Party and leftist activists, something he wouldn't do.

That June interview concluded the FBI's efforts to interrogate not just Ed but Ted and Sax, too. Hoover likely still harbored suspicions about Ed, but General Carroll didn't. In what must have felt like a thumb in the eye to Carroll's former boss,
the Air Force promptly promoted Ed and made him deputy chief of the rockets and ramjets Power Plant Lab. By August 10, the agents’ report refers to Ed as “Lt. Col. Hall.” By October 25, the OSI had formally concluded its loyalty inquiry. The following February the FBI effectively dropped its investigation of Ted Hall and Sax entirely, moving both from its Special Section Security Index to the Regular Section, meaning that constant monitoring, mail interception, phone taps, etc., ended for both men. A memo in the file from the Chicago office announcing the closure of the active case involving Ted includes the letters “UACB” (for “unless advised to the contrary by the bureau”) after the term “Regular Section.”

In 1954—amid Senator Joseph McCarthy’s controversial televised hearings intended to expose Communist infiltration in the Armed Forces—Ed Hall was named director of the entire US ballistic missile development program, a position he held until his retirement from the Air Force in 1959. In 1957, he was promoted to full colonel. Recognized as the lead developer of engines for the Atlas and Titan ICBMs in his Air Force biography, perhaps more significantly, Ed created the Minuteman solid-fuel instant-launch ICBM concept, as well as the Minuteman I itself. In 1999, the year Ted died and seven years before his own death at 91, Ed Hall was inducted into the Air Force Space and Missile Hall of Fame.

The lead developer of the Atlas and Titan ballistic missiles, Ed Hall was inducted into the Air Force Space and Missile Hall of Fame in 1999.

Most historians of atomic spying have paid scant attention to Ted Hall. His Los Alamos ID photo—showing a pimply, stone-faced teenager—is often included in atomic spy lineups, but information about what he actually did is limited to a few lines or a footnote. The one exception is Bombshell, by Joseph Albright and Marcia Kunstel, which focuses on Ted’s story. Published in 1997 (before key FBI files were available), the book details how Ted’s information about the plutonium bomb’s implosion trigger filled critical gaps in the information provided by master spy Fuchs. Though unknown to each other, the two spies provided the Soviets complete (and, coming from two separate sources, more credible) plans for the bombs detonated at Alamogordo in New Mexico and at Nagasaki, advancing the USSR’s acquisition of its own bomb by two to five years, according to Albright and Kunstel.

“I find it baffling that there was no continued surveillance by the FBI of both Ted and Ed Hall through the 1950s,” said Peter Kuznick, a professor of history and the director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University. “Certainly the FBI could have continued to keep an eye on them.”

The explanations offered by FBI officials and some Cold War historians for why Ted escaped prosecution—that the FBI didn’t want to reveal that the US had broken the Soviets’ spy code, and that without such evidence or a confession, it would have been unable to convict or even indict him—aren’t convincing.

“Look how they handled that issue with Julius Rosenberg,” said Kuznick, noting that key evidence in the Rosenberg case came from the Venona decrypts—a fact that remained secret for decades after the couple’s execution. “They just indicted Ethel too, to try and get him to confess. It didn’t work in that case, but they could certainly have indicted Ted’s wife as a coconspirator to get a confession from him.” He added that prosecutors could also have piled other charges on Ted and Sax—such as lying to the FBI—avoiding the need to rely on the Venona material.

Besides, the Soviets already knew that their code had been cracked thanks to a spy named William Weisband, who worked as a translator inside Arlington Hall, the Virginia complex where the decryption process was carried out. By 1950, Weisband—who failed to respond to a summons to appear before a grand jury investigating Communist activity—had been convicted of contempt and sentenced to a year in prison.

A more likely explanation for Ted’s escape was the message sent indirectly by the Air Force in the form of the rank and job promotions his brother Ed received so soon after his June 12 Cincinnati FBI interview.

Ed clearly was considered vital to the US ballistic missile program (which at the time was seen as lagging behind the Soviet effort). And as Kuznick noted, “If Ed was viewed as critical to the missile program, certainly the FBI couldn’t have been allowed to arrest his brother as a Soviet spy because, especially in the 1950s, that would have made Ed radioactive no matter how credible plans for the bombs detonated at Alamogordo in New Mexico and at Nagasaki, advancing the USSR’s acquisition of its own bomb by two to five years, according to Albright and Kunstel.

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Ed and Ted Hall remain a fascinating pair—both brilliant and fiercely loyal to each other,
but with very different personalities. Ed, Ted’s senior by 11 years, told their parents (neither of whom were college-educated) when Ted was 4 that he was “taking over” his brother’s education. And he did, introducing his precocious charge to advanced algebra in grade school and enrolling him in his alma mater, Townsend Harris High School, a Brooklyn public school famed as an “incubator” of geniuses. Ed encouraged Ted to attend Queens College at 14, and later, writing from the UK, suggested that his brother transfer to Harvard (as a junior physics major) at 17 in 1943. Ed had earned a BS in engineering and a professional degree in chemical engineering from the City College of New York and then an MS in aeronautical engineering from the California Institute of Technology. Enlisting in the military in 1939, he spent his war years in the UK repairing damaged bombers. After Germany’s surrender, he joined the Army’s Special Forces as a rocket expert in a program whose mission was to grab whatever could be had of Germany’s V-2 and other advanced weapons.

While Ed may have helped round up Nazi rocket scientists as part of Operation Overcast (later Paperclip), it is documented that on one daring late-1945 foray deep into Soviet-occupied eastern Germany, he oversaw the destruction of a V-2 engine factory at Nordhausen. Throughout his military career Ed received a Bronze Star and at least four Legion of Merit awards.

His younger brother followed a different path. In 1962, both to escape the oppressive anti-communist political environment in the US and to avoid further FBI attention, Ted accepted a position in biophysics at Cambridge University’s Cavendish Lab, where he worked until his retirement in the mid-’80s.

He didn’t entirely escape investigation, though. While renewing his work visa in 1963, Ted was contacted by an agent of MI5, who suggested he “ease his conscience” by confessing to spying. He spurned this “offer,” and MI5 interest evaporated. Unknown to Ted, in 1966 Boston FBI agents quizzed the Harvard physicist Roy Glauber. In 1944, Ted had told Glauber, a former classmate and roommate who was hired with him to work at Los Alamos, that he’d met with a Soviet agent. Protecting his old college friend, Glauber denied any knowledge of Ted’s spying. That ended Hoover’s last effort to nail Ted Hall.

Did the Air Force OSI shut Hoover down for over a decade? General Carroll’s son James, a former columnist at The Boston Globe, thinks that’s quite likely. “My dad revered Hoover,” he told The Nation, “but he was someone who wouldn’t have hesitated to stiff-arm him if he thought he was interfering with the prerogatives of the Air Force or OSI.”

Whatever Hoover’s reason for halting the pursuit, no word concerning the two brothers—or Ted’s spying—leaked to the media until 1995, when the NSA declassified the Venona cables.
In July 2016, Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign released an ad titled “Role Models.” It starts off with what appear to be exterior shots of a single-family home in the rural Midwest and then of an inner-city rowhouse. Next we see children, representing numerous target demographics, watching TV inside dimly lit living rooms as candidate Donald Trump’s voice emanates from a bright screen. Some of his greatest hits ensue: “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and not lose any voters, OK?
It’s like incredible!” and “Blood coming out of her… wherever.” As the children’s innocent faces are illuminated by the on-screen Trump mid-sound-bite, we are meant to be aghast, worried about their moral development (and maybe also their eyesight). However, by the time “You can tell them to go [bleep] themselves” rolled around, I remember thinking to myself, “This is a terrible commercial, at least if it’s meant as an attack ad. Everyone I know has someone they want to tell to go fuck themselves. What stops us? We need the job, the favor, the reference, the free babysitting from the in-laws.” Trump—encased by wealth and shamelessness—needed none of those things. He was bound by nothing. For some, a vote for Trump was a chance to inhabit that boundlessness, to tell the rest of the world to go fuck ourselves. In an essay for The New Inquiry published that same summer, the late scholar Lauren Berlant wrote about this sense of limitlessness that surrounds Trump and its undeniable infectiousness: “You watch him calculating, yet not seeming to care about the consequences of what he says, and you listen to his supporters enjoying the feel of his freedom.” So much so, in fact, the very word is now indelibly associated with Trump and his political ilk, starting with the Freedom Caucus, which buttressed his initial candidacy. How “freedom” became the purview of the right is one of the questions that drove the poet and critic Maggie Nelson to write On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint, the long-awaited follow-up to her experimental 2015 memoir The Argonauts. “In just a few brutal, neoliberal decades,” Nelson writes, “the rallying cry of freedom as epitomized in the Freedom Summer, Freedom Schools, Freedom Riders, Women’s Liberation, and Gay Liberation was overtaken by the likes of the American Freedom Party, Capitalism and Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom,” and so on. “That’s a white word,” Nelson’s friend says about freedom. How did we get to this point? Nelson asks. Yet for all the space she devotes in the book’s introduction to her worries over the right-wing co-optation of “liberation” (as a political slogan, if not an actual politics), the book’s essays tend to find Nelson chiding the left for what she considers its overcorrections and overreaches. In “Art Song,” she writes with alarm about the calls to remove offending works of art. In “The Ballad of Sexual Optimism,” she raises concerns over the handling of Title IX cases on college campuses. In “Riding the Blinds,” her essay on climate change, she worries that we are too preoccupied with shaming people over plastic straws and hamburgers. For Nelson, the left has not only watched helplessly as the right has claimed freedom as uniquely its own; it has eagerly handed over the baton. “Paranoia, despair, and po-

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n her 2011 book The Art of Cruelty, Nelson criticized the historical avant-garde for its tendency to adopt something that the art historian Grant Kester calls “the orthopedic aesthetic”: the idea that there is some hidden malaise within all of us that must be shocked out of place, sometimes violently so. She quotes André Breton’s maxim “The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd” as an example. Reflecting on The Art of Cruelty 10 years later, Nelson finds herself having to readjust her thesis as she now observes a growing body of artists and curators making “care” rather than cruelty a central facet of their practice. She cites an article in Artforum by the critic Helen Molesworth after the 2016 presidential election, in which Molesworth credited the Black Lives Matter movement with introducing a new aesthetics of healing and care into contemporary art practices, noting specifically “Simone Leigh’s therapeutic workshops with women in the movement at the New Museum in New York; the new lexicon of ‘self-care’; Karen Davis’s elegiac show ‘Pain Management’ at Wilding Cran Gallery in Los Angeles and Lauren Halsey’s spiritual funk fest ‘Kingdom Splurge (4)’ at Recess in New York; the eloquently reparative albums of Dev Hynes and Solange; and the emergence of the Rebuild Foundation in Chicago and the Underground Museum in Los Angeles (which offer yoga and meditation, respectively, as part of their programs).”

Though this new turn to care, often led by Black artists and curators, is hardly hegemonic, Nelson argues that it represents a paradigm shift within the avant-garde in which care is “displace[ing]—arguably for the first time in art history—a certain aggression or machismo from the notion of vanguardism (itself a military term).” At first glance, this is something Nelson feels she should want to celebrate, so she’s surprised when, in 2016, after being invited to speak on a museum panel devoted to “the aesthetics of care,” she finds herself repulsed: “Why, I wondered, was my first response to ‘an aesthetics of care’ as something that would extend beyond an animating principle for certain artists, yuck?” What most distressed her about this new development, she realizes, was not the notion of care itself or its appearance in art forms, but rather the potential for certain artists to be labeled “uncaring.” We should be gravelly wary, she contends, of “diagnosing some art (or artists) as ‘caring’ and some as not, with the latter treated as capable of wounding, traumatizing, or otherwise inflicting harm—harm for which the artist’s (or curator’s or publisher’s) freedom then becomes subject to blame.”

Here, Nelson has in mind the cases of Open Casket, Dana Schutz’s painting of Emmett Till’s...
body, at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, and Sam Durant’s Scaffold (2012), a sized-to-scale replica of a composite of seven historical gallows, including one used to execute 38 members of the Dakota tribe in 1862, at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Both works were met by calls for removal by Black and Native artists and activists, followed by accusations of censorship and then countless thought pieces on the controversy. Nelson comes down on the side that says these calls for the removal of art portend an unfree intellectual climate, one in which an ethos of “care” will reign and those labeled “uncaring” will be censured or even jailed. “Alleging that a work of art has such a singular purpose or effect,” she warns, “and that that effect poses a threat to individuals or society, is a classic prerequisite not only for censorship but also for the persecution of artists, up to and including their imprisonment.”

Reading these lines, I thought back to an article written by the art historian Aruna d’Souza for The Paris Review, in which she pointed out: “The same people who defended Schutz’s right to paint whatever she wanted—and the Biennial curators for giving her a platform to show the painting—had no problem signing petitions demanding the Guggenheim to remove a video of fighting dogs from their landmark show of Chinese contemporary art.” What d’Souza is picking up on here is a double standard that feels obvious to at least some of us: When calls for the removal of art are accompanied by accusations of racial insensitivity, the response tends to be, like Nelson’s, hyperbolic. To associate Black and Native art activists with agents of the state, Nelson turns to sex, or more accurately to recent feminist writings on sex. She perceives a “current mood” among feminists, a weariness over the broken promises of 1990s sex positivity that has descended, she fears, into full-on backlash. She quotes the feminist writer JoAnn Wypijewski, who in a 2018 article for The Nation remarked, “What remains [of liberation] is a simulacrum of freedom: at one end, the ultimate symbols of marketable feminine sexuality protesting objectification; at the other, legions of ordinary joes opening e-mails urging, ‘Get bigger, last longer, become the beast she always wanted.’” The capitalist co-optations of sexual liberation, from Cosmo to Beyoncé to the hyper-commercialization of Gay Pride parades, have left feminists feeling disen-chanted—and who can fault them, Nelson asks, at least at first?

Nelson is not unsympathetic to these concerns, and she cites the “outpouring of stories from the #MeToo movement testifying to widespread, ongoing sexual harassment and violence” as just cause for why some feminists today might be tempted to “rue the idiocy, however good-hearted, of those sex positives who thought they had changed things but for a variety of reasons, failed to deliver.” Yet this is largely where any sympathy ends, and in short order, Nelson becomes downright irate. She believes that much is lost by focusing on sex positivity’s co-optation, most notably the decades of activist work around queer sex positivity that was forged against the moralism that accompanied the AIDS crisis. “To presume their legacy dissolved into a fizzled-out, market-friendly version of empowerment is a startling impoverishment of what it still has to offer.”

What it still has to offer, Nelson believes, is a corrective to what she observes as a moralizing tendency within contemporary feminism, particularly as seen with the #MeToo movement. The impulse to purge sex of power dynamics, worries Nelson, can result in “kink shaming” (she excoriates one writer for taking issue with her boyfriend’s BDSM porn) and might turn us off from our own pleasures.

She says we are closing ourselves off from “a different kind of freedom drive—one that longs to be self-forgetful, incautious, overwhelmed.” Sometimes in sex, she adds, quoting Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman in Sex, or the Unbearable (2013), we “desire to be non-sovereign, and sometimes not-autonomous.”

As an example of how this thinking has, in her estimation, slipped away from us, she analyzes a 2018 article by Monica Lewinsky in Vanity Fair, in which Lewinsky revisited her relationship with Bill Clinton and the subsequent impeachment scandal from the vantage point of #MeToo. When the affair first came to light, Lewinsky refused to call their relationship anything other than consensual: “In 1998, we were living in times in which women’s sexuality was a marker of their agency—owning desire.” Looking back on it two decades later, amid the national conversations about power, sex, and consent, Lewinsky finds herself reevaluating: “I’m beginning to entertain the notion that in such a circumstance the idea of consent might well be rendered moot.” Yet she stops herself from fully ceding the label of “consensual” that she initially attached (and, to a certain extent, still does) to the affair. For Nelson, Lewinsky’s reluctance is an act of freedom, an “unwillingness to submit” to allegations of her insufficiency as a feminist and a centering of her own desire, irrespective of the circumstances that elicited it. “I can easily imagine,” Nelson writes, “someone cheering Lewinsky on—Hey, sister you’re almost there! You’ve almost entirely let go of the ruse of your agency and pleasure!”

I understand Nelson’s frustration with the obtuseness of certain corners of the Internet during the #MeToo movement, but I found myself wishing she had chosen to spar with interlocutors on a more even playing field as she makes her case here and elsewhere in this essay. She makes much of a short-form book review by Moira Donegan and one anonymously penned essay published nine years ago in a small online feminist magazine. When she does engage with scholarly works in feminist and queer studies, it is often in the form of one-off quotations that feel designed to add heft to her assertions. Together, it all has the effect of misrepresenting those who might meaningfully question Nelson’s thinking on this subject, which leaves you wondering: What is she so afraid of?
Another Name for America Is Time

*after Wanda Coleman*

June We die.

June Soon we die in March, April, May

June Mother may I? Yes you may.

June Mother, your back is turned. Ah, there's your face.

June We march.

June January Arbery March Taylor May

June August Remember October December

June We march. Everyone is a world to someone.

June If another person uses “knee on the neck” as a metaphor I will scream.


June I pay quarterly taxes to the government of the United States of America.

June Two friendsmiscarry. L's father succumbs to pancreatic cancer. J's mom is killed in a car crash.

June I turn off the news because I can turn the news off.

June I name the world. I name the time and its sands.

June Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh

June A neighbor loses his wife and daughter in one week. I remember standing across from the daughter. I can see her face. Years from now, on an astonished

June day, her son will confuse memory for photograph.

June The first snow.

June A world becomes a repetition, a cry.

June America

June This is your July freedom. This is your threshing floor.

June My mouth is lion wide. I reread

June Jordan: “My name is my own my own my own.” Lucille Clifton: “and the land is in ruins, / no magic, no anything.” Gwendolyn Brooks: “We are lost, must / Wizard a track through our own screaming weed.”

June We jazz. We

June I bite my fist.

June I cast my pathetic, triumphant ballot.

June Shucking corn, I find a worm.

June I look over my shoulder when I run. Walk. Lurk. Lurch.

June I pay quarterly taxes to the government of the United States of America—If another person says “a few bad apples” I'll—Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh—my mouth is roaring with a human head.

June Clifton: “the question for you is / what have you ever traveled toward / more than your own safety?”

June I

June I sing insufficiently.

June A word becomes incantation.

June One of many graces.

June I haven’t ever cried.

AMA CODJOE
n “Drug Fugue,” Nelson takes up the question of substance abuse, the desire to feel free, and how the two come together messily given the brutal realities of addiction and the racialized War on Drugs. “Part of the desire to feel high,” she tells us, “is the desire to feel free, however briefly, from the burdens of agency, subjectivity, sovereignty, autonomy, relationality, even humanity,” though we know that substance abuse is at the center of many individual unfreedoms.

Describing her own relationship to alcohol and her choice to become sober, “Drug Fugue” finds Nelson inching closer to the intimate and hybrid style that made The Argonauts compelling and readable. Drawing on personal experience, Nelson resists any narrative that might glamorize the experience of substance abuse or reframe it as the “embodied practices of freedom.” Nelson asks us to sit uneasily with the twin truths that transgression, in all forms, has a political potency tied up inexorably with freedom and that, for some people, this very freedom becomes their cage. “People take drugs,” she writes, “because they want to escape their heavy and painful conditions, but sadly find themselves reburdened and enslaved by addiction (addictus = ‘to give over, to surrender; also, to be made a slave’).”

“Drug Fugue” is also a critical study of the literature about drug use and addiction, with an emphasis on how our narratives about each are shaped by the categories of race and gender. Nelson revisits Norman Mailer’s 1957 essay “The White Negro,” his much-derided study of the beatniks as seekers of Black “hip”-ness, as part of a legacy of “white folks making audible their apprehension that the systems that have given them dominance have also drained something vital from them,” something that can be reinvigorated through drugs, ideally sourced from “a kif den in Tangier, a jazz club in lower Manhattan, or a shamanistic ceremony in Mexico.”

Nelson also writes about the complicated legacy that women authors have in relation to drug literature, which has been largely dominated by male writers like William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Hunter Thompson. Nelson observes, “One of the reasons that male drug use and/or addiction can so easily mesh with the ‘hero’s journey’—that ancient narrative structure characterized by quest, trial, transformation, and triumphant homecoming—is that the hero’s journey is, by definition, a sojourn away from domestic sociality.” When women abscend in the night, leaving the baby at home, Nelson notes, the reactions tend to be very different.

I would be remiss not to mention that Nelson spends a great deal of this chapter discussing her intellectual indebtedness to the scholar Avital Ronell and her book Crack Wars: Literature Addiction Mania (2004). Despite its title, Crack Wars is not about the crack epidemic of the 1980s or the War on Drugs, but about Emma Bovary and her addiction to romance novels, as well as what Nelson calls her “toxic maternity, food issues, trashy reading habits, [and] overspending.” Placing Flaubert’s heroine at the center of her study of addiction, Nelson argues, is “a sly feminist gesture” on Ronell’s part, an insertion of women into a canon of freedom writing that they have been excised from.

That Ronell has influenced Nelson’s views on gender, drugs, and disorderliness is nothing concerning, but she also uses these passages to weigh in on the sexual harassment allegations levied against Ronell, to such an extent that one begins to wonder whether Ronell is being cited or rather used to incite. In 2018, Ronell, a professor of comparative literature at New York University, was found responsible for sexually harassing a former graduate student in a widely publicized Title IX case. Nelson addresses the matter head-on, and while she admits that Ronell’s “professional misdeeds seemed to me real,” she characterizes the outcry that followed in ungenerous terms and accuses Ronell’s critics of sexism: “The voracious appetite for her public humiliation was instructive, insofar as it demonstrated how quickly the celebration of female thinkers and artists who explore extremity and transgression can turn into sanctimonious repulsion if and when their relationship to such things turns out to be contaminated.” Recalling Nelson’s professed concerns about the left, you start to wonder whether she thinks the pendulum has swung too far because it hit some of her heroes along the way.

If “Drug Fugue” departs from the book’s first two chapters by introducing a certain degree of skepticism about the promises of liberation, by the time we come to “Riding the Blinds,” Nelson has completed the task and now asks us to relinquish certain freedoms altogether, or rather to see giving them
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up as an act of self-liberation. “Riding the Blinds” is about the climate crisis, or rather how we talk about the climate crisis, which Nelson believes is not immaterial to how we might address it and stem its impact. She finds that debates over conservation and environmental protection are too often framed as “a struggle between those who value freedom” and “those who value obligation,” between people “who want to drill, baby, drill, and those who want urgent action on the climate.” Nelson makes strong points here about the everyday language of environmental awareness and asks why restraint is never thought of as a “choice,” as an exercise in freedom.

Who On Freedom’s intended audience is becomes especially confusing in this chapter. Nelson spends considerable time in “Riding the Blinds” critiquing academics in feminist studies and queer theory. Specifically, she writes about the discourse of “reproductive futurism” as articulated in books like Lee Edelman’s No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, Jack Halberstam’s In a Queer Time and Place, and Donna Haraway’s Staying With the Trouble. Queer critiques of “reproductive futurity” argue against making children the center of our political language around enacting change. In critiquing heteronormative time scales, queer theorists argue for radical action in the here and now. Though this work “has been crucial,” Nelson notes, “to recognizing, and sometimes enacting, forms of kinship and temporality not based in the heterosexual, privatized, white, nuclear, or even human family,” she feels their ideas have put many in her intellectual community at odds with the cause of climate change activism. “As often happens in academia,” she continues, “such critiques have at times slid into a knee-jerk dismissal of anything perceived to be contaminated with reproductive futurism.”

Nelson also takes issue with Haraway’s well-known slogan “Make Kin Not Babies!” and her appeals to, as Nelson explains, “fuse the queer capacity for nonbiological kinship with ecological concerns about overpopulation and anthropocentrism.” I share Nelson’s anxieties about Haraway’s anti-natalist arguments in Staying With the Trouble, as efforts to address the climate crisis centered on population control have found happy bedfellows with xenophobic and white supremacist ideologies. Yet I am not convinced that an overdependence on feminist technoscience and queer theory is getting in the way of governments’ and corporations’ acting on climate change.

Here, Nelson returns to another theme central to her earlier essays: She asks her readers about the political utility, or lack thereof, in shaming. To “mock those who find freedom in air-conditioning, solitary driving, disposable wrapping, plastic straws, hamburgers, or frequent airline travel,” she insists, will not achieve the desired effect or entice skeptics to join the struggle. What instead should be our goal “is to invent new norms that feel palatable—desirable, even—to people, not to shame them for their cathexis to comforts and ways of living in which we share.”

Yet Nelson's digs about straws and wrapping paper also feel like a form of mockery, making it unclear what differentiates counterproductive shaming from constructive criticism, other than the perspective of the person doling it out. This is not to say that legitimate critiques of shaming do not exist. One could argue that to focus on individual behavior rather than policy is a distraction at best, complicity at worst. Yet the structure of On Freedom does not allow Nelson to do much more than redirect heat back to its source. In the introduction, she says that when she sat down to write the book, she “began to amass my piles,” and On Freedom—even more than Nelson's previous nonfiction works—is very much an assemblage of quotations, lines extracted by a poet seeking language rather than argument. The effect is a lot of minor squabbles with individual writers and texts, short points followed by shorter counterpoints, the shaming of shamers, a feedback loop one longs to be freed from.

There is a passage in The Argonauts where Nelson says to her partner, the artist Harry Dodge: “I told you I wanted to live in a world in which the antidote to shame is not honor, but honesty.” Thinking back on this line, it becomes clearer to me what makes On Freedom so impenetrable as a text. One wants to see Nelson be more honest, to be less impenetrable as a text. One wants to see Nelson be more honest, to admit to the very human fear of being disliked or declared uncaring by people whose opinions matter to her. Instead, we meet a brick wall, a defensive crouch, whatever the opposite of vulnerability is. No one loves being criticized; it makes you feel exposed, fearful, misunderstood, ashamed, confused about who you are. And yet these are also the raw emotions that feed great art. One would think that a poet would want to feast on them.
Haters
The world according to Mark Levin
BY MICHAEL KAZIN

Authors on the left are prevalent in academia, while liberals and centrists are dominant in much of the national media—apart from Fox News and its imitators, of course. But conservatives have long been adept at producing best-selling books that shape public opinion and even galvanize movements. Friedrich Hayek’s The Road to Serfdom, published in 1944, educated two generations on the alleged virtues of untrammeled capitalism; the Austrian-born economist’s disciples included the likes of Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, and Margaret Thatcher. Goldwater did not actually write The Conscience of a Conservative, the slim paperback issued under his name in 1960 (it was ghost-written by L. Brent Bozell Jr.). But the manifesto, which made the Arizona senator’s fervent case against the moderate liberalism then prevailing in both parties, quickly sold over 3 million copies and propelled him to the GOP presidential nomination four years later. In his 1987 book The Closing of the American Mind, the classicist Allan Bloom assailed university curricula and student mores with a blend of outraged hauteur and nostalgia for an anti-relativist past. And while subsequent politicians and pundits may not have replicated Bloom’s high-minded, erudite style, echoes of his arguments can be found in many of the culture war screeds against academia that have been issued over the past three decades.

Mark R. Levin’s American Marxism, a polemic against all manner of progressive ideas and movements, may rival its predecessors in popularity. Published this past summer, it spent weeks perched at or near the top of the best-seller list. But American Marxism represents a distinct dumbing-down of the kind of book-length attacks on the left that have appeared over the past century. Hayek and Bloom produced rigorous critiques of the liberal ideology and left policies they abhorred, which required them to take the time to learn about them. Levin just slaps the label of “Marxism” on the various political phenomena he detests—from critical race theory and “genderism” to environmental justice, teachers unions, and the bias of the liberal media. He also accuses the Democratic Party of embracing these ideas and institutions and “adopting Marx’s language of class warfare” in order to put its own “interests...before those of the country,” thereby destroying what makes (or made), in his view, America so great. American Marxism is a virtual digest of familiar attacks on all the favorite targets of the contemporary right, and it suggests the depths of the right’s commitment to depicting its opponents not just as wrongheaded but as sworn enemies of the nation itself. Of course, liberals and leftists revile conservatives, too. But most of us refrain from accusing the entire Republican Party of harboring treasonous thoughts or wanting to overthrow the republic (the January 6 insurrectionists notwithstanding).

Levin devotes most of the chapters in his book to a particular head of the “Marxist” hydra he aims to slay with his invective. He moves from Black Lives Matter to “Hate America, Inc.” (radical educators) and from “Climate Change” Fanaticism” to “Propaganda, Censorship, and Subversion” (the liberal media). Marx makes an occasional appearance, but contemporary left-wing professors (including The Nation’s Jon Wiener) get the lion’s share of references, whether or not they identify as Marxist. Levin’s point is obvious: The bearded author who spent far more time in the British Library than he did fermenting rebellion wrote the bible of anti-capitalism and obedience...
to the state. Americans who “cloak themselves in phrases” and names like “ progressives,” “Democratic Socialists,” “Antifa,” and “The Squad” are just adapting his evil gospel to our own time.

When it comes to the old Rhinelander himself, Levin appears to have no genuine understanding of what Marx wrote and believed. How else could he accuse the “de-growth movement,” a rather obscure group of climate activists who supposedly long for “a pre-industrialized environment where progress comes to an end,” of being in thrall to a theorist who viewed capitalism as a necessary stage in economic development? Marx, after all, was a pointed critic of the “utopian” socialists of his own time, who endeavored, he and Engels wrote, “by small experiments” on the land “necessarily doomed to failure…to pave the way for the new social Gospel.”

To expect Levin to wrestle as seriously with Marx as Bloom grappled with Nietzsche, or Hayek with Harold Laski and other social democrats, would be to mistake today’s right-wing agitators for yesterday’s neocommunist men and women of ideas. Instead, Levin deploys “Marxism” as a collective zombie: Garbed in the bloody rags of failed tyrannies abroad, it’s meant to frighten his readers (“who love their country, freedom, and family”) into taking action against the “haters” who “pursue a destructive and diabolical course for our nation, undermining and sabotaging virtually every institution in our society.”

Such rants, of course, are standard fare on talk radio and on TV shows hosted by the likes of Fox News’ Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson and their feverish emulators on other right-wing cable channels. Levin himself has a sizable audience on both; his daily radio show alone claims 8 million listeners. I suspect most of the people who bought this volume or one of his six previous New York Times best sellers did so more out of fan loyalty than because they expected to learn anything new.

One consequence of such low expectations is that the author can get away with prose that often resembles the raw contents of an oppo research file more than an earnest attempt to make a persuasive argument. Paragraph-long quotes from leftists he despises and conservatives he admires fill most of the pages. Levin is also fond of quoting lengthy passages from his other books, and he repeats the same arguments so often and in such similar terms that even enthusiasts might be tempted to skim through the text, nodding on occasion in jaded affirmation.

Few of his faithful readers may pause to wonder why the author identifies Herbert Marcuse, a pillar of the Frankfurt School whose writings were a hit with the 1960s New Left, as a member of something he calls the “Franklin School.” Others will conclude that he just didn’t bother to do the reading.

Portraying himself as a rational exponent of individual liberty, Levin disdains social movements as havens for unhappy people who flock together to build an unhappier world. His list of misfits bizarrely includes George Soros, LeBron James, and Colin Kaepernick—none of whom are normally considered to be “impervious to the uncertainties, surprises and the unpleasant realities of the world around” them. Levin lifts those lines from Eric Hoffer, a popular conservative skeptic during the Cold War period, who scorned mass movements for attracting the “fanatic,” who “sees in [them] the source of all virtue and strength” and “cannot be weaned away from his cause by an appeal to his reason or moral sense.”

That Levin cites Hoffer admiringly is an act of blatant irony, whether intentional or not. The shock jock is, after all, a leading voice on the Trumpian right, whose adherents believe the 2020 election was stolen and that vaccine mandates are a form of tyranny. And he goes on to devote a long section of his final chapter, “We Choose Liberty!,” to detailed recommendations on how to wage a mass struggle against the intersecting forms of the “Marxism” he loathes. For example, Levin urges citizens to bring lawsuits against state or private “entities that tortuously interfere with your use of your property” in the name of curbing climate change. In a backhanded tribute to the activists protesting the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land through boycotts, divestment, and sanctions, he calls for a BDS offensive by “American patriots” to pressure corporations and governments to cease all financial backing for “Marxist movements.” Levin thus indulges in the tactical repertoire of the collective movements whose very existence he abhors.

Y et the shoddiness of Levin’s presentation and arguments should not obscure the power of his message. American Marxism belongs to an influential tradition of right-wing rhetoric that the economist-philosopher Albert O. Hirschman called the “jeopardy thesis.” The opponents of mass suffrage in the 19th century and of the welfare state in the 20th both argued, according to Hirschman, that “progress in human societies is so problematic that any newly proposed ‘forward move’ will cause serious injury to one or several previous accomplishments.” For Levin, the glory of the United States resides in the capitalist republic that the founding fathers established. All his “Marxists,” whatever their superficial differences, burn with the ambition “to destroy American society and impose autocratic rule.” They are engaged in nothing less than a “counterrevolution to the American Revolution.”

The jeopardy thesis is not the only way conservatives, past and present, have sought to counter the appeal of the left’s embrace of social progress, whether of the reformist or radical kind. Hirschman identified “perversity” and “futility” as other types of rhetorical attacks commonly used by the right over the centuries: Changes that radicals and liberals view as necessary will, their ideological adversaries contend, either produce the opposite of what they desire or simply fail to achieve their lofty objectives, such as the equality of opportunity or outcomes.

But sounding an urgent alarm has an advantage that other modes of right-wing

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rethinking America’s past

Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States
in the Classroom and Beyond

Robert Cohen and Sonia E. Murrow

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The jeopardy thesis has repeatedly demonstrated the ability to fire up a backlash among liberals themselves against people and groups further to the left. The fear of socialism, at home and abroad, convinced some liberals as well as most conservatives to ally with state authorities to repress the speech of radicals and get them fired from their jobs during the red scares that followed both world wars. In the 1970s and ’80s, the Eagle Forum, led by Phyllis Schlafly, defeated the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment by accusing feminists of seeking to destroy the nuclear family, outlaw alimony, and force women in the military to undergo the perils of combat.

Levin accuses Black Lives Matter of being the latest iteration of what Schlafly and her ilk opposed: “violent Marxist-anarchist movements of the past.” Here he’s also echoing Ronald Reagan, the premier icon of the modern right. “One of the foremost authorities in the world today has said we have ten years,” Reagan declared in 1959, when he was merely a B movie star turned corporate spokesman. “Not ten years to make up our minds, but ten years to win or lose—by 1970 the world will be all slave or all free.” Seven years later, Reagan used absurd alarums like that one to get elected governor of California by a landslide.

To debunk American Marxism is a simple pleasure, but its popularity does point to an absence on the intellectual left. Our clan has rarely produced books that appeal to as large an audience and with an analogous intent—to make plain, in passionate but accurate detail, the danger the mass right poses to the nation and the world. For better or worse, that is not the kind of political book most intellectuals or activists on our side seem comfortable writing.

Authors on the left have a long and rich tradition of creating protest literature. But what stands out tends to be acute reportage, not sweeping explanations of why the other side is so wrong morally and practically—and of how to defeat it. From Ida B. Wells’s Southern Horrors and Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle to Michael Harrington’s The Other America and Barbara Ehrenreich’s Nickel and Dimed, left authors have specialized in exposing particular outrages, not in making sustained attacks on large and systemic bulwarks of malevolence. Jane Mayer’s Dark Money, which tells the nasty tale of how plutocrats like the Kochs funded the contemporary right, belongs to this honorable genre.

But lacking precise, eloquent take-downs of every big thing the GOP and the reactionaries who rule it stand for, the left has had difficulty making gains outside its ideological bubble in the big cities and deep blue states and among people with college degrees. The result is that many Americans probably have no clear idea of why the left vehemently opposes not just Trump and his minions but the whole range of policies that conservatives espouse—or why those initiatives have turned the United States into a meaner, more grossly unequal, and perilously undemocratic nation.

“Howard Zinn is a national treasure. His life and work are political and intellectual landmarks. Historian, author, mentor, and relentless activist for democracy, Howard Zinn taught us how to rethink the making of America from a people’s point-of-view. This book by Robert Cohen and Sonia E. Murrow is just the volume we need in troubled times like these.”

—Ira Shor, author of When Students Have Power
Showbiz!

Paul Thomas Anderson’s Licorice Pizza

BY VIKRAM MURTHI

In December 1999, the Los Angeles Times profiled director Paul Thomas Anderson ahead of his third feature, Magnolia, under the headline “The New New Wave.” The article placed Anderson among an ascendant peer group of youngish white male directors like David O. Russell, Spike Jonze, and Darren Aronofsky, most of whom had recently released films. Crucially, however, it also positioned Anderson as the leader of this pack, someone whose talent was so widely recognized that he had the ear of Francis Ford Coppola and dined with Warren Beatty. The profile characterized him as a classic ’70s New Hollywood auteur, à la Robert Altman or Martin Scorsese, someone with complete creative freedom and an exacting level of control over every aspect of the production and release of his films, down to editing the trailer himself.

The article’s writer, Patrick Goldstein, goes to some lengths to depict Anderson as a brash kid caught up in the Hollywood scene that he had always orbited, having grown up in the San Fernando Valley with a showbiz father. The young director wants people to see him at dinner with his famous friends. He’s slightly jealous that everyone recognizes Quentin Tarantino when they walk down the street together but not him. However, at age 29, he is self-aware enough to be wary of “the spotlight,” despite wanting attention and acclaim. The piece ends with Anderson asking rhetorically, “Is it possible that when you get older you get a little more clarity on these things?”

That the answer to that question is yes has been borne out by his post-Magnolia output, as each of Anderson’s subsequent films evince greater emotional maturity and formal control. They trade in the influence-laden hyperactivity of his ’90s work for an understated spontaneity, and Anderson has slowly settled into a more confident, less needy register, which allows him to explore unfamiliar territory. His latest film, Licorice Pizza, returns to the San Fernando Valley setting of his youth and his early films: Boogie Nights,
Magnolia, and Punch-Drunk Love. Yet despite the youth of the film’s protagonists, Licorice Pizza doesn’t display any juvenile tendencies. It’s the work of a 51-year-old former wunderkind, now established as an American auteur, who might indeed have gained a little more clarity in the intervening decades.

Set in 1973, Licorice Pizza follows the extended flirtation between wayward twenty-something Alana Kane (Alana Haim, of the pop-rock group Haim) and 15-year-old Gary Valentine (Cooper Hoffman, son of the late Philip Seymour Hoffman), a child actor and hustling entrepreneur whose slick confidence affords him professional opportunities and the trust of many adults far beyond his years. Alana and Gary’s passionate yet unconsummated romance makes up the spine of Licorice Pizza, but Anderson uses it to explore various liminal states of being, especially the trying, unpredictable period between childhood and adulthood. Gary uses his preternatural charm to move through adult spaces with a transparent desire to rid himself of his boyhood limitations. Alana, however, lives in the world that Gary desperately wants to conquer and sees how unfulfilling and dissatisfying it can be. Both are impulsive and reckless in their own ways, but they share an intriguingly lopsided attraction for each other. Gary falls for Alana because he sees a “mature” woman who can facilitate his entry into adulthood, whereas Alana falls for Gary because she envies his naive view of the grown-up world. The irony, of course, is that Alana is far less mature than she appears, and Gary (despite his relative inexperience) has savant-like street smarts that will inevitably take him far. The swooning romanticism, the twisted relationship dynamics, and the celluloid vision of Anderson’s hometown during a time he never experienced all make for a syncretic and career-spanning work. In a way, it’s a culmination of the director’s interests and his most personal film yet.

Anderson structures Licorice Pizza as a series of anecdotes from Gary and Alana’s lives, with each sequence resembling a story told second- or thirdhand. The pair meet when Alana, a photographer’s assistant, shows up at Gary’s high school for class picture day; he asks her out to dinner, an invitation she uneasily accepts. Sometime later, Alana accompanies Holden on a risky motorcycle stunt at a local golf course. It’s unclear how much time passes between any of these episodes. Licorice Pizza plays like a slideshow of memories, with each moment seamlessly progressing into the next.

Since Gary and Alana reside on the edges of Hollywood, their adventures are mostly rooted in actual showbiz tall tales that Anderson exaggerates for comedic or dramatic effect. Hoffman’s character is based on the formative experiences of Gary Goetzman, a former child actor who became a music supervisor and producer for Tom Hanks and director Jonathan Demme, a hero and mentor of Anderson’s. Goetzman really did start a waterbed company (and later an arcade) and actually delivered one to Jon Peters (Peters was reportedly much nicer in real life). Many of the characters in Licorice Pizza have real-life counterparts: The canankerous Lucy Doolittle is a stand-in for Lucille Ball, with whom Goetzman acted in the film Yours, Mine and Ours; Jack Holden is William Holden, and the film Alana auditions for is Clint Eastwood’s Breezy, about a romance between a middle-aged divorcé and a younger woman; the motorcycle stunt is based on a similar legend featuring a drunken Evel Knievel.

With Licorice Pizza, Anderson mines the space between fiction and reality to unearth an ineffable authenticity. Licorice Pizza sports a wistful yet energetic soundtrack, contrasting cuts from well-known artists like Paul McCartney, David Bowie, and the Doors with tracks from more off-the-beaten-path artists, including Clarence Carter and Taj Mahal.

Of course, the film’s most winning element, the one most easily perceived on the surface, is the chemistry between Haim and Hoffman, which feels natural and unaffected from the first moment they share the screen together. It helps tremendously that the two look and sound like real people instead of spotless models, but crucially, neither actor reaches for the big emotions and gestures most associated with on-screen romances. Instead, their relaxed rapport communicates bountiful, unexpressed desire. Much hay has been made on social media and in the entertainment press out of the characters’ age disparity, and while Anderson recognizes...
that teenagers have sexual desires for adults ill-suited to them, the relationship here remains fairly chaste. (It's worth noting that the film acknowledges the discomfitting nature of Gary and Alana's relationship, along with the importance of consent and the historically lecherous behavior of older men toward younger women.) Yet Anderson conveys the obvious: These two have made an indelible impression on each other, and even if they're not meant to be together, they're still bonded for life.

Though its earnest appreciation for its early-'70s period setting might suggest otherwise, *Licorice Pizza* is hardly a hollow exercise in nostalgia. The film's affectionate tone and Gary and Alana's various high jinks thinly disguise an air of sexual menace that pervades a Hollywood environment crowded with creeps. *Licorice Pizza* opens with an innocent meet-cute between Gary and Alana, but it's punctuated by a photographer slapping Alana on the ass; she barely registers it, indicating its frequency. During her audition, Holden leers at Alana with the practice of a veteran, insisting on referring to her as “Breezy” rather than her real name. Later, when he liquors her up, Holden feeds her “war stories” from his life about the dangers of the jungle, but they're really just taken from his on-set experiences. Bradley Cooper's hilarious, show-stopping performance as the explosive Peters aside, the character is a walking sexual harassment lawsuit, such as the one filed against the real-life Peters in 2011, which resulted in a judge ordering him to pay $3.3 million to a former assistant. There is no moral editorializing from Anderson in these scenes; this behavior is simply expected in a culture of unchecked fame and considerable wealth.

Anderson depicts the Hollywood of *Licorice Pizza* as one in a state of flux: a time when the American film industry firmly moved out of the confines of the Production Code era into unmarked territory. But the scene still filled with old-timers like Holden and director Rex Blau (Tom Waits, playing some kind of John Huston figure) who throw their weight around. A child actor with show business aspirations, Gary speaks the industry language and knows he still has to pay respect to the old guard. While he can move through their thicket of codes and traditions with ease, he also knows his verve will outlast the numerous aging authorities blocking his path.

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**Forever Homeless**

Before my long travel, I pack

my suitcases, stuff them with

some sand from our land,

some scent from my mother's kitchen and

sounds of birds in the morning.

And in my pockets, I put the four
directions. My hands are the compass.

At the airport, I beg the officer
not to open the suitcases
and, if needed, to touch my clothes
gently. Otherwise,
I would be standing
on a worn-out map.

I would be weightless
in the air.

MOSAB ABU TOHA
Letters

Russiagate Redux?

Re “The ‘Havana Syndrome’ Versus the Secrecy System,” by Peter Kornbluh [Nov. 29/Dec. 6]: Coming so close upon the debunking of the Steele dossier and the Russiagate narrative, one would expect a greater degree of skepticism on the part of Kornbluh and his editors. But no, Kornbluh even suggests that the most likely culprit in this case is (you guessed it) Russia. And what solid evidence does he present to support that hypothesis? Unsurprisingly, he presents none whatsoever. We are still in the Russia-bashing fun house of journalism.

Robert Goldstein

Hope for Defund

It was heartening to read Bryce Covert’s “Defund Isn’t Dead” [Nov. 29/Dec. 6] and learn that the movement to defund the police is indeed not dead around the country. However, as a New York City advocate actively fighting to remove police from mental health crisis responses, I must point out that things here are far less rosy than the article suggests.

The focus on one social worker’s experience with New York City’s B-HEARD pilot program does not tell the full story. As the article notes, the city’s supposed nonpolice program still involves police as first responders well over 80 percent of the time. And even once all the kinks of the new program are worked out, the city projects eliminating police as first responders only 50 percent of the time. Moreover, the city’s “non-police” program continues to co-run by the NYPD and continues to involve the police-run 911 dispatchers. It must also be noted that the B-“HEARD” program has not heard the call of the advocates, many of whom have lived experience with mental health crises, despite our active endorsement of truly nonpolice models with excellent and decades-long track records, such as the CAHOOTS program in Oregon.

New Yorkers with experience of mental health crisis interventions strongly oppose a police response, according to a recent poll, and advocates propose a truly nonpolice response whose time has more than come. We cannot allow the police to kill, maim, or confine more individuals who experience mental health crises.

Ruth Lowenfrohn, Esq.
New york city

The twirler is the director of the Disability Justice Program of New York Lawyers for the Public Interest and a member of Correct Crisis Intervention Today—NYC.

Occupy’s Lessons

Re “Occupy Wall Street: 10 Years Later” [Special Section, October 4/11]: The question has come up what the youth-organized climate strike Fridays for Future can borrow from Occupy Wall Street. The anthropologist Janet Roitman has characterized Occupy as a global conversation about who will bear the burden of fadin prosperity. Perhaps a healthy ecosystem can be defined as a new measure of prosperity.

The relevance of Occupy now is the climate movement. That is where our ability to catalyze and stick with good change will be tested.

James Crary

Comment drawn from our website letters@thenation.com

Please do not send attachments.
There Was No Union. There Was No Plan.

A tornado hit an Amazon warehouse in Illinois and killed six workers. Would a union have made a difference?

Although questions remain about the deaths of six workers at the Amazon warehouse in Edwardsville, Ill., we do know one thing: While extreme weather events are rare (although becoming increasingly less so), safety problems at Amazon are terribly common. Its facilities are massive, the pace of the order fulfillment process is punishing, and many buildings are not climate-controlled. Turnover and injury rates are high. According to OSHA data from 2020, for every 200,000 hours worked at an Amazon warehouse in the United States, there were 5.9 serious accidents, which is close to double the rate of non-Amazon warehouses—higher than construction, coal mining, and most manufacturing. A 2020 study by Reveal, based on three years of weekly data, found that the Edwardsville warehouse had an injury rate of 9.5 in 2018 and 6.6 in 2019.

Amazon’s introduction of one-day shipping created an unprecedented demand for workers. Two years ago, its global workforce numbered approximately 650,000; now it’s 1.2 million—and that doesn’t count the half-million delivery drivers in the US who are contractors but really should be considered employees. Beginning in July 2020, Amazon has hired an estimated 2,800 workers a day. Labor historians say that the closest comparisons are the hiring in the shipbuilding sector during the early years of World War II and in the postwar home building industry.

When tornado warnings flashed across people’s screens on December 10, most Amazon warehouse workers likely didn’t see them. Many believed that the company prohibited cell phones on the warehouse floor, so many people in the Edwardsville facility couldn’t monitor the weather, reach their families, or contact emergency responders. Supervisors ordered some workers not to leave. Workers were left to shelter in the bathrooms. And when the tornado hit, the roof and two walls collapsed, gas leaked into the building, and six people died. It appears there was no emergency plan.

Minimizing workplace injuries, particularly in warehouses with such high turnover, requires rigorous safety protocols, contingency planning, frequent trainings offered by organizations that workers trust, and whistleblower protections. And multiple studies show that unionization and workplace health and safety committees improve worker safety. Unions educate workers about workplace hazards and protect their members from retaliation if they speak up about dangerous conditions. But Amazon has gone to extreme lengths to keep unions out. Since 2020, there have been at least 37 charges filed with the National Labor Relations Board against Amazon in 20 cities. In cases of extreme asymmetries of power between workers and their employers, unions have made an enormous difference to worker safety. Might a union in the Edwardsville facility have led to a different outcome when disaster hit?

Janice Fine is a professor at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations and the Workplace Justice Lab@RU as well as the author of Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream.
Discover the real meaning of “farm-to-table” on our inaugural journey through California. From the precious waters of the Delta, through the fields where Cesar Chavez fought for farmworkers, to John Steinbeck’s storied valleys and the urban farming innovations of Los Angeles, we’ll explore the politics, culture, and environmental impact of the food we eat.

Joining us throughout the tour is Mark Arax, an award-winning author whose books on California have been compared to William Saroyan’s and Joan Didion’s “great social portraits” and to the work of former Nation editor Carey McWilliams. Arax’s most recent book is The Dreamt Land, an evocative and incisive look at the history of agriculture in California and the people who transformed the state.

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