Sixty Years of a Brutal, Vindictive, and Pointless US Embargo
Join fellow progressive Nation readers in Cuba as we travel in support of the Cuban people. This is a very unique departure: Along with The Nation’s Cuba expert, Peter Kornbluh, editorial director and publisher Katrina vanden Heuvel and editor Don Guttenplan will be joining us on the tour.

We will follow strict Covid-19 safety protocols throughout the program and will require that all travelers and tour staff be vaccinated and boosted.

100% of the proceeds from our travel programs support The Nation’s journalism.

For more information, visit TheNation.com/HAVANA-VINALES, e-mail us at travels@thenation.com, or call 212-209-5401.

The Nation purchases carbon offsets for all emissions generated by our tours.
FEATURES

14 Cuba: Sixty Years of a Cruel US Embargo
PETER KORNBLUH
A chronicle of The Nation’s opposition to a vindictive and pointless policy.

18 The Land of Impunity
JOHN NICHOLS
To understand the shameful handling of Covid-19, start long before Trump.

22 The Philosopher-Politician
SERENA CHO
Danielle Allen hopes to put her theories into practice in Massachusetts.

28 The Art of Confronting Evil
LINDA MANNHEIM
An irreverent German collective gets in the face of the far right.

EDITORIAL

4 The Showdown
JOAN WALSH

COMMENT

5 The Covid Parent Trap
Families with young children are in a bind.
REGINA MAHONE

THE DEBATE

11 Should Environmental Activists Sabotage Fossil Fuel Infrastructure?
ANDREAS MALM AND DANIEL SHERRED

COLUMN

7 Subject to Debate
“Pro-life” assistance for pregnant women always has strings attached.
KATHA POLLIT

8 Objection!
Chief Justice Roberts ignores the federal judiciary’s scandals.
ELIE MYSTAL

DEADLINE POET

13 Republicans Replace Local Election Officials...
CALVIN TRILIN

Q&A

42 Ayleen Serrano and Nikayla Dean
EDIN HIGGINS

“Like a subprime mortgage, The Lehman Trilogy’s shiny seductions obscure the dangers within the play.”

The Nation (ISSN 0027-8378) is printed 26 times a year (two issues in January, February, March, April, June, July, August, September, November and December; and three issues in May and October) by The Nation Company, LLC © 2022 in the USA by The Nation Company, LLC, 520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018; (212) 209-5400. Washington Bureau: Suite 308, 110 Maryland Avenue NE, Washington, DC 20002; (202) 546-2239. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Subscription orders, changes of address, and all subscription inquiries: The Nation, PO Box 8505, Big Sandy, TX 75755-8505; or call 1-800-333-8536. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to Bleuchip International, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2. Canada Post: Publications Mail Agreement No. 40642608. When ordering a subscription, please allow four to six weeks for receipt of first issue and for all subscription transactions. Back issues available online for $6.99 plus S&H from: shop.thenation.com. If the post office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. The Nation is available on microfilm from: University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Nation, PO Box 8505, Big Sandy, TX 75755-8505. Printed in the USA.
The Showdown

Pundits depicted it as a textbook example of their favorite storyline, “Democrats in Disarray.” But the tension between Georgia voting rights groups and Joe Biden’s administration over the president’s belated trip to Atlanta on January 11 to tout federal voting rights legislation was a case study in the synergy of an inside/outside political strategy. Though it’s all but certain that the bills will ultimately fail, Democratic leaders’ decision to force a vote represents progress nonetheless.

The move by four prominent Georgia groups—the Black Voters Matter Fund, the Asian American Advocacy Fund, the New Georgia Project Action Fund, and the GALEO Impact Action Fund, which organizes Latinos—to skip the visit by Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris threatened to overshadow their trip to Atlanta. And while Georgia voting rights titan Stacey Abrams, running again for governor this year, endorsed the Biden-Harris visit, she also skipped it, citing a “scheduling conflict.”

The mainstream media pounced. MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough told his viewers that it meant Abrams “obviously doesn’t want to be on the same stage as Joe Biden.” Politico headlined its “Playbook” newsletter that morning: “Biden Gets a Rude Welcome to Georgia.”

I took the story seriously myself—because I actually know the excellent work of the groups who stayed away from the event, from covering Abrams’s 2018 gubernatorial campaign and the Senate runoffs won by Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff. I’d venture that most of the reporters using, say, New Georgia Project director Nsé Ufot to bludgeon Biden couldn’t spell her name before this. And few got the complexity of her message.

“I feel like ‘boycott’ is a little strong for what’s happening today,” she told me when I called her. “We’re not telling people not to go. What we’re doing is sustaining the demand for swift action on voting rights. We’re asking, ‘What is the path for passing voting rights?’ Period.” Instead of attending the Biden-Harris event, Ufot spent the day organizing in Lincoln County, where election officials are trying to close seven of the eight polling stations. “It’s 30 percent Black, and the lone polling place is on the white side of town,” she added.

Whether or not the pressure worked, Biden gave his most fiery speech on voting rights, ever. For the first time publicly, he thoroughly denounced the Senate’s filibuster rules. “Today I’m making it clear to protect our democracy, I support changing the Senate rules—whichever way they need to be changed—to prevent a minority of senators from blocking action on voting rights.” And while he didn’t mention by name the two Democratic senators who resist changing those rules, he subtly shamed West Virginia’s Joe Manchin and Arizona’s Kyrsten Sinema nonetheless. “Every senator—Democrat, Republican, and independent—will have to declare where they stand,” he said, adding later: “Do you want to be on the side of Dr. King or George Wallace? The side of John Lewis or Bull Connor? The side of Abraham Lincoln or Jefferson Davis?” Ouch.

Biden also made clear he wanted to see a Senate floor vote on the bills. Immediately after the speech, Abrams sent out a statement praising it. A few minutes later came a statement from all of the groups who’d decried the visit, along with the Abrams-founded Fair Fight Action Fund (which did not), likewise praising the speech. It was remarkable cooperation by Abrams and her allies.

Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer used an arcane congressional move to force debate on the bills (normally a GOP filibuster could block not only passage but even debate). At press time, however, it seemed a foregone conclusion that the bills would fail to get the 60 votes needed to pass under current Senate rules and that any possible changes to those rules would fail as well, thanks to Manchin and Sinema. Nevertheless, the votes themselves are progress. Georgia activists put themselves on record dissenting from Biden’s 2020 voting rights strategy. Biden forced the Republicans (and two Democrats) to go on record saying voting rights don’t matter—or, in the case of Manchin and Sinema, matter less than preserving the filibuster. Now the Democratic base, threatened by GOP voter suppression and election subversion laws in red states, knows where it stands.
The Covid Parent Trap

All parents are struggling during the pandemic, but those with kids too young to be vaccinated are barely holding on.

Parents are not OK, no caregivers are, really. But parents of children who are too young to be vaccinated against Covid-19 are most certainly not OK at this point in the pandemic.

Back in December 2020, when we were all 20 years younger, the Annie E. Casey Foundation reported that “one in five people in households with children (21%) have reported feeling down, depressed or hopeless in the previous week.” Today, I’d imagine that number is closer to five in five.

It has always been a struggle for parents in this country. There is no safety net, no national standards for what constitutes quality (and affordable) child care, and, at a most basic level, no paid leave. Pile on a global health crisis, and it’s no wonder so many of us are reaching a breaking point or experiencing parental burnout—particularly new parents, who are figuring it all out for the first time, without any of the support systems we had planned on.

Navigating the mental hula-hoops of exposure is exhausting on its own. My partner and I have rarely brought our 2-year-old son into a grocery store, and when we do, we’ve put the stroller rain cover to good use. And seeing people is generally off the table.

Some weeks we make plans but eventually have to cancel them, because someone was exposed or tested positive—in the case of our son’s birthday, for the second year in a row, because the risks outweigh the benefits.

Even after we both got vaccinated against Covid, we knew our pandemic lives wouldn’t change all that much. Sure, many have suggested that infected children typically do not become as severely ill as adults.

But one child being hospitalized or dying from Covid is too many when that one child could be your own. And now, with the Omicron variant, which “may affect the youngest children in unforeseen ways,” according to a January 7 New York Times report, and a rise in the number of hospitalized children 4 and under, what options do we really have?

Between January 4, 2020, and January 8, 2022, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that at least 259 infants (0-4 years old) have died from Covid—with the rates for Black and brown infants disproportionate to their population sizes. Immunocompromised children have been uniquely affected.

Our son is not immunocompromised. But since his birth, when he spent five days in the NICU, to today, when he is experiencing global development delays, we have been in full protection mode, because at this point it’s the only thing we feel we have some control over.

There are a few other factors that have contributed to our lockdown mentality. Our son was born on January 1, 2020, so it is quite literally all we’ve known, since we kept most loved ones away early on because of the mix of cold and flu season (and the NICU visit really freaked me out). And then, at 7 months, he had a major surgery, an experience traumatizing enough that if we can avoid the hospital again during the pandemic, we’d like to do so. The other factor is that our son receives services through New York state’s Early Intervention program, and with in-person provider visits (when we are able to do them, depending on the local Covid case count), we want to avoid putting these wonderful people (or the other families they work with) in harm’s way.

But this isolation doesn’t impact only us, the adults. It’s not an ideal situation for our toddler either. The lack of opportunities to socialize with other kids has consequences.

For a brief period he was in daycare, but we were told by the facility that he could no longer attend if he didn’t start walking by 21 months (and as of this writing, he is not yet walking). The result is that what our son needs is beyond what we can provide him, which is torturous. If our son could be around other children regularly, he could watch how they move or play and perhaps learn to mimic their behavior, but that’s not possible.

News reporting over the past year suggests that developmental delays like the ones our son is experiencing may be exacerbated by pandemic isolation. A local news station in Tampa, Fla., reported that experts are seeing “delays with motor function, speech, play, and social skills, and it may be even more difficult for children who were already having issues with these things.”

Jessie Willis, a speech language pathologist in Atlanta, told local news in August of last year, “We have seen an increase in speech and language delays since Covid hit, and it’s a very complicated issue.” Willis added, “Before the pandemic, parents were going to their well checks. They were going to daycares. They were socializing with other families. And then when everything shut down, well check visits were delayed, which means early intervention services were delayed. Families stopped socializing and daycares shut down.”

This time is hard for parents, period. But parents of children who are too young for the Covid vaccine: I see you.
mom's, who are working from home. My husband and I take turns making sure our son doesn't miss any of his doctors’ appointments, including weekly appointments with a physical therapist, a speech therapist, and an occupational therapist. His providers are amazing, but much of that care during peak Covid is via telehealth, which is not optimal. We do the best we can—moving his hips this way and his shoulders that way during physical therapy, for example—and hope it will all work out.

After losing his full-time job in 2020, my husband became the stay-at-home parent, taking on gigs in between as they come up (and only when it's safe to do so). But I am incapable of ignoring my toddler saying “Mama” throughout the workday from the other room. So my focus time can be limited to when he's napping or sleeping some days, particularly on the days when he sees his providers.

I wish I could say I take comfort in knowing we're not alone. But I don't take comfort in others' pain. I don't take comfort in knowing other parents have it the same or worse, particularly single parents. My partner and I are so lucky to have each other, a roof over our heads, heat, food, and a safe and comfortable place to sleep at night. We have it good, but we're barely hanging on as the pandemic enters its third year without a clear timeline for when our son will be able to get vaccinated against Covid. It shouldn't be like this.

Still, as much as I want to agree with those who place all the blame on people who are not getting vaccinated and boosted to help protect the most vulnerable, the stressors that parents of young children are navigating reflect the fundamental failure of US systems to support working families. When child care is out of reach or temporarily paused, not every family can afford to have one adult (or the only adult, in the case of single-parent households) take on caregiving responsibilities full time. The pandemic has made it so that, no matter our circumstance, we have had to accept that everything is not OK, that we’re not going to get it right or be able to keep up most of the time, and that maintaining hope for our children's future is the best we can do.

Now that our son is 2 and developing some “big emotions,” I try to make him laugh—a big laugh—at least once a day. He likes to dance while I hold him, so we have dance parties as often as we can. Or I'll blow raspberries on his belly, or wave my arms around high, which for some reason always makes him smile. If those silly moments are his only memories of this period, I'll be grateful.

We've managed to keep him safe, healthy, and happy. On the good days, I know it's enough.

---

**New parents have to figure it all out for the first time without any of the support systems we had planned on.**

---

**The Nation.TRAVELS**

Singular Journeys for Progressives

As we hope and plan for a better future, we have a full calendar of departures scheduled for 2022. We will follow strict Covid-19 safety protocols in all of our programs and will require vaccination for all of our tour participants and tour staff. We are also offering flexible cancellation terms.

**Register now to hold your place in one our popular programs and you can cancel with a 100% refund up to 60 days prior to departure on spring and summer tours.**

We continue to believe in the power of travel to change lives and to enhance dialogue and understanding between people and nations. As always, the proceeds from Nation Travels support The Nation’s journalism.

We hope to see you on a Nation tour in the coming months!

**US CIVIL RIGHTS: ON THE ROAD TO FREEDOM**
March 20–27, 2022

**CUBA: HAVANA TO VIÑALES**
March 26–April 2, 2022

**CALIFORNIA: FOOD AND A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE**
March 27–April 4, 2022

**NATIVE AMERICAN VOICES**
May 8–16, 2022
May 15–23, 2022

**SOUTH KOREA: CULTURE AND POLITICS OF THE PENINSULA**
May 13–24, 2022

**COLOMBIA: LOOKING FORWARD/LOOKING BACK**
August 11–22, 2022

For more information on these and other destinations, go to TheNation.com/TRAVELS, e-mail travels@thenation.com, or call 212-209-5401.
Friends Like These

Pro-life organizations claim they’ll provide help to pregnant women in a post-Roe world. Where have they been?

Round 25 years ago, a young friend of mine had an accidental pregnancy. What should she do? This was New York City, so abortion, with state Medicaid funding, was readily available. Adoption, private or through an agency, was another possibility—lots of people would want a healthy white newborn. But what if she wanted to have the baby and keep it? She had very little money, and her housing situation was untenable. Among many other fruitless queries, I tried the office of our local top Catholic, Cardinal John O’Connor, then in the news for his strong anti-abortion views. Did they know of a place where my friend could live while awaiting the birth? Sorry, I was told, all eight beds were filled.

Eight beds? The Catholic Church is a fantastically wealthy institution, owner of vast amounts of New York City real estate. It opposes abortion under any circumstance. And the best it could do for pregnant women in a jam was eight beds? (The cardinal’s office didn’t tell me, but I’ve since found out the church also has a program called Good Counsel Homes that serves a few hundred women per year. At the time, about 100,000 abortions were performed per year in New York City.)

I thought of my friend while reading the latest round of promises from abortion opponents about all the great things they’ll do for women who will be forced to go through with unwanted pregnancies, now that the Supreme Court seems ready to overturn Roe v. Wade or at least permit greater restrictions on the right to choose. On the New York Times opinion page, Erika Bachiochi writes, “If Roe goes, the pro-life movement can begin where it left off in 1973, working to convince fellow citizens (especially in blue states like mine) that we owe dependent and vulnerable unborn children what every human being is due: hospitality, respect and care.”

Excuse me, but couldn’t the pro-life movement have been doing that all along? There are already plenty of women unable to get the abortions they want because of anti-abortion victories. The Hyde Amendment, which bans federal Medicaid funding for abortions, has been in place since 1976. Hundreds of clinics have closed in the past 10 years; six states have only one at the time of this writing. And what about the women who end pregnancies they’d keep if they had a helping hand?

Bachiochi, a conservative Catholic activist, links to some help: a network of crisis pregnancy centers and Mary’s Shelter, a Catholic home for pregnant and new mothers in Fredericksburg, Va. I’m not demeaning the work of these organizations or the good intentions of those who work there—many CPCs are deceptive and coercive, but some do offer useful services. Indeed, some women who use them have no intention of getting an abortion; they just want some diapers and a stroller. There is just no way, however, that private charities can function on the scale necessary, any more than food pantries can feed all the hungry. And here’s the thing: Food pantries don’t say, “Wow, when the government abolishes food stamps, we’ll really swing into action.” Real charities don’t spend their lives trying to make a situation worse with a promise to remedy it later.

Given the massive scale required—we’re talking about tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of women a year, depending on how many can’t manage to travel to states with liberal abortion laws or procure illegal abortions—government assistance is essential. Yet for many decades now, the anti-abortion movement has allied itself with a party that has undermined the very notion of the public good and promoted harsh cuts in every program that would help low-income pregnant women, mothers, and children survive and thrive, from TANF and food stamps to the Affordable Care Act and the expansion of Medicaid it permits. It’s all very well to talk about modern-day versions of the “homes for unwed mothers” that were a staple of 1950s and ’60s life and to promise that this time round, they won’t be cruel and bully women into giving up their babies. Recently, The Washington Post profiled Aubrey Schlackman, an evangelical fundamentalist in Texas who hopes to start a “maternity ranch,” “a Christian haven where women could live stress-free during their newborn’s first year of life.”

Maybe the unfortunately named place—are women cattle?—will be a lovely refuge, as Schlackman hopes, filled with sisterhood and peace. But the plan calls for accommodations for up to just 20 women—a tiny drop in a swelling ocean of misery and desperation and exploitation.

“Pro-life” assistance, whether stingy or generous, tends to come with strings attached. That ranch will have Bible classes and prayer and will house parents who model “healthy relationships,” aka Christian female-subordinate marriage. “There’s always a quid pro quo,” Parker Dockray of All-Options in Bloomington, Ind., told...
me, referring to her local CPCs. To get five or 10 or 15 diapers, a woman has to sit through a class or listen to a lecture on the evils of abortion, sometimes with Christian proselytizing thrown in. Distributing diapers “should be a compassionate, basic response,” Dockray said. “It shouldn’t be tied to manipulating people into not having an abortion.”

All-Options is an unusual operation, a one-stop shop for reproductive needs. It has an abortion fund to help poor women pay for their procedure and a national phone line women can call to talk about their situation, whatever it is; it gives out menstrual products, condoms, and, yes, diapers—a month’s supply at a time. “We want to meet their needs holistically. Why should they go to different places for pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, baby needs? Those things are all connected.” It cannot be said often enough that most women who have abortions are mothers: The woman who needs an abortion and the woman who needs diapers are the same person.

“Helping people know that they have options helps people to make a decision they want,” Dockray told me. “Which might not be abortion.” As for my young friend, she chose to have her baby. It was the right decision for her, and “pro-life” preaching had nothing to do with it.

It cannot be said often enough that most women who have abortions are mothers.

**MORE ONLINE**
thenation.com/highlights

▶ Members of Congress Shouldn’t Be Getting Rich From Trading Stocks
AIDA CHAVEZ

▶ Workers Are Paying the Price for Kroger’s Profits
KIM KELLY

---

**Objection!**
Elie Mystal

Roberts Gets an F

*We can learn a lot from the chief justice’s year-end report on the judiciary, a document that is as crafty as it is dishonest.*

Every December, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States composes a “Year-End Report on the Federal Judiciary.” Despite the apparent ambition indicated by its title, it is meant to be boring. It is meant to be anodyne. It is not supposed to be the judicial version of the State of the Union so much as a trite message about how “great” things are going on the bench, usually with some boilerplate stats that show how hard judges are working.

On first read, John Roberts’s 2021 review does not disappoint. Opening with a history lesson about the Judicial Conference—an advisory body founded 100 years ago that oversees the administration of the courts—it has all the stylistic markings the media consistently praises Roberts for: It is good-natured, reassuring, and banal to the point of hokey. Never mind that things are far from OK within the judiciary—that the judicial branch has been captured by an army of conservative hacks and the Supreme Court has veered so sharply to the right that even the general public has noticed, dragging its poll numbers to record lows. Roberts’s nine-page report concerns itself with none of this. To the untrained eye, it reads as totally innocuous. I know better, however. Roberts’s annual review has all the charms of an old country goose: ordinary and unassuming from a distance, but an irritable, irascible beast that will peck your eyes out if you get too close.

Roberts fashions it as an earnest plea for the “institutional independence” of the judiciary—or “the Judiciary’s power to manage its internal affairs.” Toward this end, he extols the virtues of the Judicial Conference and the notion that the courts can and should police themselves. But like a child who agrees to be grounded before the full extent of their misdeeds can be revealed, Roberts isn’t making this suggestion for some aw-shucks innocent reason. He raises the issue of judicial independence because Congress is finally considering reining in the rampant corruption he himself refuses to stop and punishing the ethics violators he refuses to hold accountable. Of course Roberts wants people to think the judiciary should police itself, because that means judges will not be policed at all.

The issue that seems to have sparked Congress’s concern—and Roberts’s pushback—is a scandal that rocked the judiciary last year. In September, a Wall Street Journal investigation revealed that 131 federal judges improperly heard cases involving companies whose shares the judge or members of the judge’s family held. Since that initial article (which covered only cases heard between 2010 and 2018), the Journal has reported that 136 judges subsequently informed the parties in 777 lawsuits that they should have recused themselves and that the cases could now be reassigned to other judges or reopened. The corruption uncovered by the Journal is a violation
Stand Up Straight and Feel Better

Discover the Perfect Walker™, the better way to walk safely and more naturally

It’s a cruel fact of life, as we age, gravity takes over. Our muscles droop, our bodies sag and the weight of the world seems to be planted squarely on our shoulders. We dread taking a fall, so we find ourselves walking less and less—and that only makes matters worse.

Well, cheer up! There’s finally a product designed to enable us all to walk properly and stay on the go. It’s called the Perfect Walker, and it can truly change your life.

Traditional rollators and walkers simply aren’t designed well. They require you to hunch over and shuffle your feet when you walk. This puts pressure on your back, neck, wrists and hands. Over time, this makes walking uncomfortable and can result in a variety of health issues.

That’s all changed with the Perfect Walker. Its upright design and padded elbow rests enable you to distribute your weight across your arms and shoulders, not your hands and wrists, which helps reduce back, neck and wrist pain and discomfort. Its unique frame gives you plenty of room to step, and the oversized wheels help you glide across the floor. The height can be easily adjusted with the push of a button to fit anyone from 4’9” to over 6’2”. Once you’ve reached your destination you can use the hand brakes to gently slow down, and there’s even a handy seat with a storage compartment. Plus the Perfect Walker includes Stand Assist™ handles which make standing from a sitting position simple and easy. Its sleek, lightweight design makes it easy to use indoors and out and it folds up for portability and storage.

Why spend another day hunched over and shuffling along. Call now, and find out how you can try out a Perfect Walker for yourself . . . and start feeling better each and every day in your own home.

Free Utility Bag, Cane and Beverage Holders

• Stand-Assist Handles
• Folds Easily
• Optimized Center of Gravity

Plus, now you can choose between royal blue or rich bronze

• Comfortable Seat
• Adjustable Backrest
• Easy-Brake Wheels

Perfect Walker™

Call now Toll-Free
1-888-891-2070

Please mention promotion code 116420.
of a Watergate-era law that prohibits judges (or members of their family) from owning an interest, however small, in a company that is litigating in front of them. The violations are too numerous to be chalked up as one-off errors and speak to a pervasive disregard for the rules and a culture of impropriety.

Congress recognized this right away. The House held a hearing in October on making judges’ financial disclosure forms available to the public (as they are for elected officials), which would help interested parties identify judges who should not be hearing their cases instead of waiting for The Wall Street Journal (or the judges themselves) to do it. The Senate Judiciary Committee has proposed modernizing judicial ethics rules and disclosure requirements. And Senator Elizabeth Warren and Representative Pramila Jayapal have expressed interest in legislation that would impose civil sanctions on judges who fail to recuse themselves when they should.

Roberts refuses to brook any of this. In his year-end report, he hits back against the possibility of congressional interference by trying to make people believe the whole problem can be solved with more webinars. “Collectively,” he writes, “our ethics training programs need to be more rigorous. That means more classtime, webinars, and consultations. But it also requires greater attention to promoting a culture of compliance, even when busy dockets keep judicial calendars full.”

Roberts takes much the same approach to what he calls “inappropriate behavior in the judicial workplace” (which I can only assume refers to sexual harassment, though Roberts declines to name it). Despite consistent reports of sexual harassment and misconduct in the judicial branch, Roberts claims, not for the first time, that “inappropriate workplace conduct is not pervasive within the Judiciary.” He then goes on to suggest that expanded guidance and training should resolve the few cases he is willing to admit actually happen. What won’t be necessary is congressional interference. “I appreciate that Members of Congress have expressed ongoing concerns on this important matter,” he writes, before issuing a final brush-off.

Even the obviously hokey bits have troubling undertones. The report is framed by a discussion of William Howard Taft. Roberts presents Taft as a chief justice who, despite having been president, upheld the principles of judicial independence. But history remembers Taft’s time on the court as one that was terrible for workers: The man literally struck down a tax on companies that used child labor. Taft’s most famous case is one in which he upheld the president’s right to dismiss federal officials without Senate approval, and let’s not forget that, as president, Taft all but refused to appoint African Americans as federal officers and dismissed many of those who held office under his predecessor. That’s the man Roberts chose to highlight at the end of 2021.

I’d call Roberts’s year-end statement “brazen,” but he knows that most people in the media aren’t aware of Taft’s full history or the recusal scandal or the options for ethics reforms. And he knows that even if people did know these things, Democrats in Congress and the White House lack the strength or the vision to rein him and his cohorts in.

Roberts’s cries for judicial independence are actually demands that the judiciary be placed above accountability. I guess some branches of government get to be more equal than others.
ABORTING FOSSIL FUEL INFRASTRUCTURE is a form of self-defense, or perhaps humanitarian intervention. On the premises of climate science, fossil fuels should be classified as projectiles fired into humanity—primarily toward the Global South. The question is not whether we have a right to destroy them; it is why people haven’t yet acted on the imperative.

Fossil fuel property destruction is central to the plot of two recent big novels: *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue, in which an African village rises up against an oil company wrecking its lands and killing its children with pollution, and *The Ministry for the Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson, in which young Indians react to a hyper-lethal heat wave by attacking fossil fuel infrastructure worldwide. Both books seem to imagine that this would be a sensible thing to do. In relation to its actual practice, there has been a surplus of thinking about this form of resistance. The reasons are obvious: If governments cannot bring themselves to rein in fossil fuel producers, but rather keep abetting them, then people outside of state apparatus will eventually try and do it instead.

But if the moral case for such intervention is unassailable, the strategic one isn’t. Here objections crop up: Will it save us or expose us to dispersal? In December, The Guardian pronounced its verdict in an editorial: “Eco-sabotage could harden rather than soften climate-sceptic attitudes, making it easier for states to respond harshly.” Let us begin with the first part of the argument: It implies that if only climate activists proceed gently, “climate-sceptic”—that is, denialist—attitudes can be softened. But I fail to see on what grounds we should expect such a miracle. The past decades do not indicate that denialists are amenable to persuasion, either from the politeness of activists or from the blows of disasters themselves. The United States, the holy land of denialism, might be the strongest case in point. The movement will never convince the likes of Donald Trump, and so it should not design its tactics with that purpose in mind.

The aim of fossil fuel property destruction would not be to enlighten the denialists but to inflict costs on the enemy: fossil capital. It is here that the movement in the Global North has grievously failed. Marches of a million children, divestment campaigns, parliamentary initiatives, court cases, square occupations, and road blockades are all good, and they have taken us
It will get worse, which means that the public appetite for fossil fuel property destruction will rise.

Politics is chess: If you don’t anticipate the countermoves, you’re going to lose—badly.

The Debate

Andreas Malm is a scholar of human ecology at Lund University in Sweden and the author of How to Blow Up a Pipeline.

Daniel Sherrell is an organizer in the climate movement and the author of Warmth: Coming of Age at the End of the World.

to where we are in early 2022. But something more is needed.

What about the second part of the argument, that tactical diversification will bring the hammer of state repression down on us? To answer this, we must be attuned to the temporality of this crisis. It will keep getting worse, which should—if there is any rationality left in the world—mean that the public appetite for fossil fuel property destruction will rise. The absurdity would be for humanity to plunge headlong into these killing fields without anyone striking blows against the responsible party. Only by ratcheting up the struggle in a crisis hardwired to worsen do we stand a chance to remain relevant and, yes, win people over. Our task is to make the impassive part of the public realize that fossil fuel property is not something indestructible like the moon. Once people reach that insight—unlikely to happen as long as such property is treated as untouchable by the climate movement—the prospects for mass unrest open up.

Activists will, of course, end up in prison. It’s happening already, even before there has been a major shift toward militancy. This is part of every struggle against entrenched material interests. Here we are asked to be historically unique in accomplishing our goal—to abolish fossil capital in toto without a phase of intense confrontation with the state. What movement in history ever achieved something similar without cadres doing stints in jail?

That doesn’t mean we should be sanguine about repression. To the contrary, we must strive to minimize its damages. This begins with breaking the civil disobedience protocol that considers it a moral and strategic virtue to get arrested, recently pursued to new heights by Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain. Activists should stop throwing themselves into the arms of the police. Instead we should seek to break through their cordons, run from them, and elude them to the best of our ability.

None of this is to suggest that we should be reckless, indiscriminate, committed to proven errors, or closed to criticism, or that fossil fuel property destruction is a panacea. It should be one tactical component among many. Nor is it to say that property destruction must be carried out by secret cells. Imagine the headquarters of a fossil fuel corporation taken over by an enraged crowd and burned to the ground. Who could object to that? The same people who drove their cars into Black Lives Matter demonstrations, of course. As for many others, it could be tremendously inspiring. It would show that these forces can be taken down after all! It might seem that the climate struggle has been going on for so long that the cause is lost. But from another angle, including that of the history of social struggle, it looks rather like it has yet to start.

“Ecoterrorism!” and leverage those fears to accelerate their creeping fascism. Tucker Carlson would label all climate advocates “Green ISIS,” and the MAGA crowd would mobilize machine-gun-toting vigilantes to patrol their local pipelines. Most Democrats—sensing their constituents now associate climate action with instability, radicalism, and bombings—would back away from the issue, and policies like the Green New Deal would be pushed further out of reach. Even if the rest of the climate movement were to distance itself vocally and repeatedly from the saboteurs, it seems unlikely this could overcome the narrative gravity of an actual explosion, let alone the opportunistic efficacy of the right-wing propaganda machine.

Meanwhile, dozens of otherwise effective climate activists—most of them young, with a lifetime of organizing to do—would be imprisoned for decades. The resultant lawsuits could establish legal precedents that would render fossil fuel corporations even more insulated from public protest. And as for the acts of destruction, the state would clamp down immediately. Given the sophistication of the US intelligence apparatus, it seems highly improbable that a grassroots sabotage campaign would be allowed to reach a scale where it could dent overall emissions, or even affect the decisions of energy investors.

For the sabotage to succeed, it would need to ratchet up the political pressure. And for that to work, the saboteurs would need to be seen as heroes by large swaths of the public. Within the frame of our current Overton window, they’re more likely to be seen—however unfairly—as terrorists.

Some on the left argue that we shouldn’t choose our tactics based on our opponents’ likely response. But of course we should. Politics is chess: If you don’t anticipate the countermoves, you’re going to lose—badly.

When faced with this kind of strategic choice, it’s worth remembering that as recently as 2009, business-as-usual fossil fuel consumption had us on track for as much as 6 degrees Celsius of warming by 2100. Through a combination of movement muscle, government action, and technological development, we are now on a path to just under 3 degrees. That is still an unacceptable outcome, but the trend line doesn’t warrant fatalism. We should be pulling harder on the nonviolent levers, rather than risking it all on a long-shot tactic that could set the climate movement back a decade.

That said, I believe this is a worthwhile debate for the movement to have. The fact that the conversation has gone public could itself prove useful. Politicians should take it as a warning: If governments cannot protect their citizens from fossil fuel oligarchs, then those citizens will turn to other means of self-protection—regardless of their strategic merit.
School’s Out

A view of the ransacked library at the Mersa Elementary School in Mersa, Ethiopia, on January 12. In July 2021, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front invaded the Amhara and Afar regions. During the TPLF’s occupation of Mersa, the elementary school served as a makeshift camp for the group’s fighters, who removed all the computers and other electronics and shipped them to the Tigray region.

By the Numbers

5 Number of custom hunting rifles given away by West Virginia in a Covid-19 vaccine lottery

$1.4M Value of an apartment awarded in a lucky draw for vaccinated people in Hong Kong

2 Number of laps around Alabama’s Talladega Super-speedway people who got vaccinated could drive

500 Number of live chickens distributed to vaccinated seniors in Indonesia’s West Java province

1 Number of free joints that cannabis retailers can provide to those who get vaccinated in Washington state

2 Number of cartons of eggs some residents of Beijing could receive for getting a Covid vaccine

1 Number of times more likely a person will be to adhere to a vaccine regime if there are financial incentives

Republicans Replace Local Election Officials With Trump Loyalists

Is this, in fact, a type of coup?
Well, fears of that are mounting:
It’s not just who can vote that counts.
It’s who can do the counting.
Sixty Years of a Brutal, Vindictive, and Pointless US Embargo
In mid-December, some 114 members of Congress sent a forceful letter to President Joe Biden calling for “immediate humanitarian actions” to lift the economic sanctions “that prevent food, medicine, and other humanitarian assistance from reaching the Cuban people.” With Cuba struggling to emerge from a dire, Covid-generated economic crisis, the congressional representatives are pushing the White House to end the restrictions imposed by the Trump administration on remittances and travel and restore the Obama-era policy of engagement with the island nation. “Engagement,” the members concluded, “is more likely to enable the political, economic, and social openings that Cubans may desire, and to ease the hardships that Cubans face today.”

Full engagement with Cuba, of course, would require lifting the US embargo—a demand the congressional letter conspicuously fails to make. As the embargo approaches its 60th anniversary, terminating it would require not only White House action but a vote in Congress that the Democratic leadership has neither the political capacity nor the moral courage to prioritize. Indeed, the humanitarian measures that these members of Congress are asking of President Biden are intended to soften an economic crisis that, for decades, the embargo has explicitly attempted to create.

Peter Kornbluh, a longtime contributor to The Nation on Cuba, is the coauthor, with William M. LeoGrande, of Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana.
Imposed by the proclamation of John F. Kennedy on February 3, 1962, and codified into law during the Clinton administration, the “embargo on all trade with Cuba” has evolved through many manifestations of punitive economic sanctions and commercial restrictions over the past 60 years. “The embargo is outdated and should be lifted,” Barack Obama declared during his dramatic but short-lived effort to normalize US-Cuba relations. Instead, this “mold-encrusted relic” of the Cold War, as The Nation once described it, remains in place—the framework of a protracted, and failed, US endeavor to promote regime change, as well as an enduring symbol of the perpetual hostility of US policy toward the Cuban revolution.

During the past six decades, The Nation has consistently opposed the US embargo against Cuba. The magazine has published editorial after editorial, story after story, with titles like “Endless Embargo,” “Tightening the Chokehold on Cuba,” “An Embargo That Serves No Purpose,” and “The Stupid Embargo.” The arguments for ending el bloqueo, as the Cubans refer to it, and adopting a sane, humanitarian, and normal US posture toward Cuba remain as relevant today as when they were published.

Cuba’s economy...depended on the United States for such essential items as trucks, buses, bulldozers, telephone and electrical equipment, industrial chemicals, medicine, raw cotton, detergents, lard, potatoes, poultry, butter, a large assortment of canned goods, and half of such staple items in the Cuban diet as rice and black beans. A nation which had been an economic appendage of the United States was suddenly cut adrift; it was as if Florida had been isolated from the rest of the country, unable to sell oranges and cattle or to bring in tourists, gasoline, automobile parts, or Cape Canaveral rockets.


We are antagonizing allies and enemies alike, and giving to others a market which geographically has been and should be ours. All this in the name of isolating Castro, but all we are doing is isolating ourselves.

—Editorial, “The Inertia of Folly,” March 2, 1964

At the heart of the United States policy toward Cuba is the economic embargo. It was laid on to make things hard for the Cuban people in the expectation that they would recognize Fidel Castro as the man responsible for their hardship and throw the rascal out. The scheme has not worked; such schemes rarely do. Instead, the Cubans identified the cause of their troubles as the government of the United States. They rallied to Castro and he, for more than a decade, has used us as a whipping boy.


For fifteen years we have tried to bring down the Cuban Government, by an airtight trade embargo, by diplomatic boycott, and even sordid efforts apparently organized by the CIA to assassinate Prime Minister Castro and other Cuban leaders. With both Mr. Nixon and Mr. Ford making highly publicized missions to Peking and Moscow...one wonders why we maintain our unyielding stand toward Cuba....

From the vantage point of common sense, economics and diplomacy, we should be moving to normalize our relations with Cuba—not because we are looking for a love affair but because it is the only reasonable course for two neighboring nations....

—“Common Sense and Cuba,” by Senator George McGovern, Feb. 6, 1976

Among its other efforts to dismantle the Cuban revolution, the United States has imposed one of the longest, most strictly enforced and extensive trade embargoes on record. That embargo, twenty years old this year, has produced endless bitterness but has failed to accomplish its original purpose: the economic isolation of Cuba.... Obviously the United States has everything to gain by lifting the trade ban and nothing perceptible to lose. The market is there, the currency is there, the desire is there. Ultimately, Washington will gain more influence not only in Cuba but throughout the hemisphere by re-establishing trade and diplomatic relations with the island than by perpetuating a retaliatory embargo that long ago lost its punch.

—“An Embargo That Serves No Purpose: Twenty Years of El Bloqueo,” by Maisie McAdoo, Dec. 4, 1982

Under the fashionable label of “promoting democracy,” Representative Robert Torricelli is propelling a new “punish Cuba” bill through Congress.... Torricelli’s missionary passion is directed toward tightening the already strict U.S. embargo on Cuba, so as to, in his words, “shorten the suffering of the Cuban people by isolating Castro and forcing him out.” Despite recent polls showing that a significant sector of Cuban-Americans oppose tightening the embargo, Torricelli claims to speak for that community. This presumption has led to some dramatic exchanges with those Cuban-Americans who call his bill a “new Platt Amendment,” referring to the 1901 act that said the United States had the right to intervene at will in Cuban affairs.

—“Tightening the Chokehold on Cuba,” by Saul Landau, June 15, 1992

In a 1992 letter to the Bush Administration, protesting the tightening of the Cuba embargo, the U.S. Catholic Conference noted that embargoes “are acts of force...morally unacceptable, generally in violation of the prin-
ciples of international law, and always contrary to the values of the Gospel."

The Cuba embargo is all of the above and worse. Put in place by President Kennedy’s executive order in 1962, it is a fossilized relic of an era that refuses to recede into cold war history. Since its inception, the trade embargo has become, as the Bay of Pigs invasion was once called, “a perfect failure” in all ethical, political and economic respects. It hurts the Cuban people but has failed to shake the government.

Still, the “wreak havoc” crowd [in Congress], financed by Miami’s hard-line exile community, has managed to keep opposition to the embargo at bay. The logic of their position—to squeeze Cuba until it implodes into civil war—runs directly counter to U.S. national interests in the Caribbean. More than one major Pentagon study has pointed out that destabilization of Cuba will generate hundreds of thousands of refugees and extreme political pressure for U.S. military intervention—a prospect the Southern Command, and presumably the U.S. public, would rather avoid.


The Administration frequently says that it wishes to see a “peaceful transitional process” in Cuba. And yet, if the objective is to get rid of Castro, then one cannot expect the process to be peaceful, for the hard fact is that Castro will not simply resign or fade away because the United States wants him to; rather if need be, he would fight, and many Cubans would fight with him. Thus, if one aims to remove the Castro government, then one must be ready for a bloody civil war—a war which would result in tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of Cuban refugees on our shores. Is that what the Administration wants?

—“Washington’s Costly Cuba Policy,” by Wayne S. Smith, July 3, 2000

Since the end of the cold war, the embargo has proved a serious embarrassment for Washington. Instituted as part of a broad set of punitive measures designed to isolate the Castro regime, the trade sanctions have succeeded only in isolating the United States. Every year for the past decade the United Nations has voted overwhelmingly to condemn the US blockade; the last vote, on November 27, was a 167-to-3 defeat for the United States, with only the Marshall Islands and Israel supporting Washington.

—“Cuban Embargo-Busters?” by Peter Kornbluh, Dec. 13, 2001

Imagine a country developing and producing its own Covid-19 vaccines, enough to cover its entire population, but being unable to inoculate everyone because of a syringe shortage....

Because of the 60-year US embargo, which punishes civilians during a pandemic, the country is facing a shortage of millions of syringes. This reality is a consequence of what amounts to US economic warfare, which makes it extremely difficult for Cuba to acquire medicine, equipment, and supplies from vendors or transportation companies that do business in or with the United States. Syringes are in short supply internationally, so no company wants to be bogged down navigating the complicated banking and licensing demands the US government places on transactions with Cuba...

If human rights are to be a core pillar of US policy, as a White House spokesperson recently declared, then the embargo must end. It is a policy that indiscriminately targets and harms civilians. It is a systematic violation of human rights on a massive scale.

—“Biden’s Failure to End Trump’s War on Cuba Is Threatening Lives,” by Danny Glover, June 29, 2021

“The embargo is outdated and should be lifted,”
Barack Obama declared during his dramatic but short-lived effort to normalize US-Cuba relations.

What do you call a US policy that...detains and fines a class of New York high school students for taking a study trip over spring break? A policy that has been repudiated at the United Nations by virtually every other country in the world? A policy that, after forty-eight years of abject failure, is still based on the false assumption that success—in the form of “regime change”—is just around the corner? Imperial? Illogical? Irrational? Insane? As Wayne Smith, former chief of the US Interest Section in Havana, has observed, Cuba seems to have “the same effect on American administrations that the full moon has on werewolves.”


ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ

ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ
The Land of Impunity

If you want to know how the US ended up in a pandemic with a swindler president who could not be bothered to take basic steps to save lives, don’t start with Trump.

T he United States is the product of an accountability movement that was never fully realized. Thomas Paine called the country into being with Common Sense, a pamphlet that invited the beleaguered residents of 13 British colonies on the eastern shore of North America to indulge their fury at the imperial abuses of King George III. He ridiculed the “men of passive tempers” who “look somewhat lightly over the offences of Great Britain, and, still hoping for the best, are apt to call out, ‘Come, come, we shall be friends again for all this.’” Rejecting the prospect of reconciliation with “the power that hath carried fire and sword into your land,” Paine encouraged Americans to ask themselves pointed questions:

Are your wife and children destitute of a bed to lie on, or bread to live on? Have you lost a parent or a child by their hands, and yourself the ruined and wretched survivor? If you have not, then are you not a judge of those who have. But if you have, and can still shake hands with the murderers, then are you unworthy the name of husband, father, friend or lover, and whatever may be your rank or title in life, you have the heart of a coward, and the spirit of a sycophant.

This was about more than refusing to shake hands with the murderers, however. It was, Paine recognized, about forging a new mentality that would see beyond the lie of reconciliation with those who abused positions of authority to the detriment of the people.

No excuses. No forgiveness. The stakes were too high for that. The American people needed to make a clean break with their imperial overlords, and with the foolishness that would suggest that a relationship so broken as that of Great Britain and the United States could be mended. A failure to do so would squander “the power to begin the world over again.” When that revolution prevailed, Paine entertained the hope the new nation might “form the noblest purest constitution on the face of the earth.”

Unfortunately, that never happened. George III and the petty royalists of Great Britain were repudiated. But then the petty royalists of the United States took over. Men in wigs, enslavers from the South and slave traders from the North, wrote a constitution that embraced the sin of human bondage, denied the franchise to the vast majority of Americans, and saddled the new republic with an economic system so crudely rapacious that it instantaneously made a lie of the founding premise that “all men are created equal.” As Gore Vidal observed, “Long before Darwin the American ethos was Darwinian.” The drafters of the Constitution, who excluded Paine and the truest revolutionaries from the process, set the United States on a course that would see genocide, civil war, systemic racism and sexism, economic inequality on a feudal scale, and social divisions so stark that they would be exploited, decade after decade, century after century, by charlatans who capitalized on a system that invited their villainy. The worst of their kind, a royalist who worshipped the queen of England, came to power in 2017 after losing the popular vote. Taking advantage of an Electoral College that permitted losers to become winners, Donald John Trump claimed a presidency for which he was wholly unfit, and proceeded on a ruinous course that would eventually see the country ravaged by disease, mass unemployment, and seemingly irreconcilable division.
TRUMP’S PRESIDENCY WAS THE UGLIEST MANIFESTATION OF A SYSTEM WHERE
the rot had grown so severe, so overwhelming, that after Covid-19 hit,
when hundreds of thousands were dying, when millions were sickened,
and when tens of millions were left jobless, the stock markets soared
to new highs. While nurses risked their lives with inadequate personal
protective equipment against a pandemic, while bus drivers fell ill because they were
required to work as the disease spread, while immigrant workers in meat processing
plants died because their employers failed to put adequate protections in place, bil-
lionaires retreated to second and third homes and monitored the steady increase in
their fortunes from federal “emergency relief packages” that literally redistributed
wealth upward. Trump’s malfeasance was jarring, as Democratic Representative Pra-
milia Jayapal of Washington noted in the midst of the crisis. “States have been sort of
left to play out The Hunger Games on procuring swabs,” she said. “I mean, literally,
we have governors, my governor included, calling random people in China to try
to get swabs off the back of a truck somewhere and get them here, only to find out
then that perhaps they’re not validated; they’re not good for use. Same thing with
PPE. I just think that the president has sort of come to this place where he’s willing
to sacrifice people’s lives.”

But it wasn’t just the president; it was cabinet members, senators, governors,
media personalities, and CEOs. The whole corrupt system was exposed. Yet it did not fall; it ran according to plan. In a moment
of crisis, the rich and the powerful peddled the fantasy that no one was immune to the threat—even as they boosted their own immunity with fresh infusions of the wealth and privilege
that had always protected them from the misery they imposed
upon others. As the pandemic was being declared, Naomi Klein
predicted how things would play out. “The Fed’s first move
was to pump $1.5 trillion into the financial markets, with more
undoubtedly on the way,” she explained. “But if you’re a worker,
especially a gig worker, there’s a very good chance you’re out of
luck…. And without comprehensive bailouts for workers, we
can expect more bankruptcies and more homelessness down the road.”

Donald John Trump claimed a presidency
for which he was wholly unfit, and proceeded on
a ruinous course.


The answer is summed up in a word:
impunity. The United Nations defines “impunity” as “the impossibility, de jure or de facto, of bringing the perpetrators of violations to account—whether in criminal, civil, administrative, or disciplinary proceedings—since they are not subject to any inquiry that might lead to their being accused, arrested, tried and, if found guilty, sentenced to appropriate penalties, and to making reparations to their victims.”

With only the rarest and most insufficient exceptions, economic and political elites in the United States have enjoyed a regal level of impunity for more than 230 years. The founders exempted themselves from their own promise that “all men are created equal” and reap the benefits of an economic system built on slavery, child labor, wage theft, and corruption. It took a civil war to undo the cruelest of their establishments: the institution of human bondage. When the war was over, former enslavers would, after a brief period of moral reconstruction, renew their fortunes by establishing a brutal system of Jim Crow segregation that was enforced by the night raids of the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, and chain-gang incarceration. So confident were they in their impunity that they erected statues
honoring traitors, which only now are being torn down by the brave champions of a new American revolution that begins with the basic premise that Black Lives Matter.

The cruelest compromises of our founding were written so deeply into the official record that well into the nation’s third century, schoolchildren were taught that the delegates who forgave the three-fifths compromise and counted African Americans as less than human were simply practical men who did what they had to do to get a country up and running. Those same children were taught that there was something “great” about the 19th-century compromises negotiated by Henry Clay, which doomed millions of men, women, and children to continue in a condition of chained and whipped servitude.

There has been no real accountability for sins against humanity in American history. What accountability did the slave sellers and slave buyers face in a post–Civil War era when the United States failed even to deliver on the promise of 40 acres and a mule? They undid democracy, claimed statehouses and congressional seats through rigged “white primary” elections, and ushered in a new age of American apartheid that enforced separate-but-equal racism, exploitation of sharecroppers, and right-to-work profiteering.

What accountability did Strom Thurmond of South Carolina face for filibustering in favor of racism as a young legislator? He served in the US Senate until he was 100 years old and was honored at the end of his tenure with a celebration during which the minority leader of the chamber warmly recalled a 1948 presidential campaign in which Thurmond declared, “All the laws of Washington and all the bayonets of the Army cannot force the Negro into our homes, our schools, our churches.” Not in 1952, or 1962 or 1972, but in 2002 did the top Republican in the Senate, Trent Lott of Mississippi, gleefully announce, “I want to say this about my state. When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We’re proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn’t have had all these problems over all these years, either.”

That’s impunity, and—while Lott was ultimately ejected out of his position—our political leaders continue to practice it with abandon. If you want to know how the United States ended up in the middle of a pandemic with a swindler president who could not be bothered to take the basic steps that were required to save lives, don’t start with Trump. Start, perhaps, with Richard Nixon, the Republican president who skipped town before the House of Representatives could impeach him for the high crimes and misdemeanors of the Watergate scandal. Nixon collected a presidential pardon and a pension and lived the rest of his life in luxury, writing books, commenting on foreign affairs, and trying to buff his reputation as an elder statesman. He could have been held to account with the completion of the House impeachment trial and conviction by the Senate. Instead, the Democrats who controlled those chambers conspired with the unelected Republican who succeeded Tricky Dick, Gerald Ford, to let Nixon off the hook with the cruelest lie of all: the promise of “healing.”

No one was healed. No lessons were learned. Barely six years after Nixon flew off to his beachside mansion at San Clemente, another charlatan from California assumed the presidency and began steering the country into a scandal that made Watergate look like filching a pack of gum from the grocery store. “The Iran-Contra Affair was a secret U.S. arms deal that traded missiles and other arms to free some Americans held hostage by terrorists in Lebanon, but also used funds from the arms deal to support armed conflict in Nicaragua,” the History Channel tells us. “The controversial deal—and the ensuing political scandal—threatened to bring down the presidency of Ronald Reagan.” But, of course, it didn’t. Even with clear evidence of explicit and extended lawbreaking by Reagan and those around him, the Democrats who controlled the House and the Senate again let a Republican president off the hook. No impeachment, no trial, no constitutional consequences.

Well, yes, of course Reagan broke laws. He violated his oath of office. He admitted as much: “Reagan himself acknowledged that selling arms to Iran was a ‘mistake’ during his testimony before Congress,” we are told at history.com. “However, his legacy, at least among his supporters, remains intact—and the Iran-Contra Affair has been relegated to an often-overlooked chapter in U.S. history.” Intact, indeed.

When even the authors of presidential legacies stop trying to set things right, impunity locks in. The misdemeanors are neglected, unless they are salacious enough to stir the imaginations of Ken Starr and Newt Gingrich. High crimes are charged, sometimes, but they are invariably dismissed by senators who embrace a political code of silence every bit as rigidly as characters in a Godfather movie. The Constitution is a shredded document. The courts are packed with partisan judicial activists who protect their benefactors in the legislative and executive branches. The media can rarely be bothered with anything more than gossip.

The dumbing down of political morality in the United States didn’t begin with Donald Trump; it ended with him. Not because the process was complete (rest assured that things can get worse) but because it seemed to have passed the point of no return. When a president presides over mass death and mass unemployment and remains politically viable enough to claim the nomination of a major party and to mount a reelection bid with even vaguely credible numbers, the rot in the system runs so deep that those who maintain it cannot be rehabilitated.
By Serena Cho

Can she convince Massachusetts voters to put her ideas into practice?
Danielle Allen, a prominent scholar of democracy and a political theorist at Harvard, has watched the American political system break down over time. For almost three decades, she has studied growing social and economic inequalities and declining trust among citizens in our political institutions. Yet when the pandemic hit, she was shocked anew by the realities it brought into sharp relief.

By March 2020, Allen and her colleagues had retreated to the safety of their homes, relying on service workers who delivered groceries to their doorsteps. Some of her students, many of whom were on spring break, attended massive parties against the advice of health authorities. As Allen observed the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on already disadvantaged communities, she found herself troubled by people’s willingness to forsake one another. “There was loose talk about [abandoning] older people…and we pushed essential workers back so fast without access to testing and PPE,” Allen recalled. “We couldn’t muster the will and resources to protect all of us together. Our institutions failed because, as a society, we don’t believe we are in it together.”

Now Allen, age 50, is making a bid to become the first woman elected as governor of Massachusetts. Her campaign is already groundbreaking: In addition to being the first Black woman to run for governor in the state’s history, she is attempting an unconventional transition from philosophy to elected office. Allen has spent nearly 30 years as a political theorist, has served as the director of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics, and is a University Professor, the highest accolade a Harvard professor can receive. But at her campaign launch in June, Allen declared, “Democracy isn’t something to be studied. Democracy is something to do. Democracy is a collective call to action.”

Allen brings to Massachusetts a “moral vision” that extends beyond any policy or issue. She wants to repair our broken social contract—a philosophical term for the implicit agreement among members of a society to carry out duties, surrender certain freedoms, and work together for the common good. “When people ask me what my first priority is, they expect me to say, ‘It’s this adjustment to Regulation 342,’” Allen told me. “No, my first priority is a moral priority, which is to see ourselves as a whole commonwealth and commit to work on behalf of all of us.”

While Allen has been rallying Massachusetts residents around this vision, political commentators say she faces an uphill battle to become the next governor. Though Allen has raised the most money of the declared candidates, state Senator Sonia Chang-Díaz, who has attracted many young progressive activists, has been campaigning for months. Republican incumbent Charlie Baker’s decision not to seek reelection also has many high-profile Democrats seriously considering a bid. If state Attorney General Maura Healey or US Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, the former mayor of Boston, enters the race, pundits say, either would be a top contender with statewide name recognition and a sizable campaign war chest.

Indeed, the incumbent’s exit makes Allen’s path to victory “much more difficult,” said Tatishe Nteta, a professor at UMass Amherst. Still, Steve Koczela, who leads a polling firm in Massachusetts, pointed out that candidates with low voter recognition and no experience as an elected official, such as former governors Deval Patrick and Mitt Romney, have won statewide campaigns in the past. “We have a storied history of electing the person we’re not supposed to elect,” he said.

Allen is hoping to establish a new social contract—a renewed compact based on the principle that our society abandons no one and provides everyone with a stable footing for flourishing. As the gubernatorial primary ramps up in Massachusetts, she must convince voters that, despite having no experience in public office, she can make this ambitious vision a reality.

IKE THE ABOLITIONISTS, THE suffragists at the Seneca Falls Convention, and the anti-war activists of the 1960s and ’70s, Allen announced her vision for a new society by appealing to the nation’s founding document: the Declaration of Independence.

In a video declaring her candidacy, Allen expands on the rights to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” in the original document, proclaiming that all people are entitled to “an empowered life, liberty to participate in their democracy, and the right to flourish.” According to Allen, educational inequalities, a massive racial wealth gap, and a lack of action on climate change demonstrate that the Massachusetts state government has failed to deliver. “It is the right and responsibility of the people to reimagine it and build a better government up to the existential challenge of creating the foundation of a fair and just society,” she argues.

For Allen, the Declaration is more than lofty rhetoric; it exemplifies how members of a polity can come together and initiate change in times of crisis. In her best-selling 2014 book Our Declaration, she traces how its authors laid out our principles of governance, presented evidence of the British crown’s failures, and invited spectators around the world to judge the righteousness of their rebellion. Just as the founders used this string of words to summon a new reality—a birth of a nation—Allen is looking to bring forth a fundamental shift in Massachusetts politics. “The Declaration is a license to practice self-government,” she explained in an interview. “And there is no better way to do that than to set [the Declaration] as an example and say, ‘Look, this is the kind of thinking it takes to name our challenges, to name our aspirations, and to build a shared commitment to transformation.”

When launching her campaign
and crafting her own version of the Declaration, Allen sought to emulate the founders’ collaborative process. The members of the Continental Congress published ads in newspapers and invited people to share their opinions of King George III. According to Allen, this democratic procedure embodied their belief in the fundamental feature of human equality: that each person is the best judge of their own happiness. To develop her vision for Massachusetts, Allen embarked on what she called “Commonwealth Conversations,” a tour in which she spoke with residents across the state about their hopes and concerns. Her declaration is a product of accumulated social knowledge, she argues, rooted in ordinary people’s assessments of how their state government influences their happiness. “Our campaign is building a grassroots movement, and there’s obviously a political purpose: to win votes,” she said. “But there’s also a more substantive purpose, which is that this is where the health of democracy comes from.”

At the end of her declaration, Allen proclaims that “we must knit ourselves into One Commonwealth.” When John Adams drafted the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution, the oldest functioning written constitution in history, he deliberately called the state a “commonwealth.” An organized political community founded on law, a commonwealth is built on the premise that its members work together for the commonweal, or the shared good. “The whole point of democracy is that, as it says at the end of the Declaration, you pool your lives, your fortunes, and your sacred honor,” Allen said. “That’s what the commonwealth is. You pool your life’s energies together, you draw on your resources together, and you put your honor at stake...[to deliver] solutions that are for the good of all.”

Restoring this vision is Allen’s foremost priority. She pointed out that the erosion of local news media has made the commonwealth’s residents invisible to one another. Statewide conversations rarely occur, and those who are wired into national political news often do not know what’s going on in their own neighborhoods. Consequently, towns facing similar crises, such as soaring housing prices, overlook opportunities to collaborate toward joint solutions. In addition, Allen notes that economic disparities across Massachusetts have further corroded solidarity and the sense of a shared future. “We first want to make ourselves visible to ourselves. Can we actually see the whole commonwealth?” she said. “Then the next question is: How do we take responsibility for all of us? How can we get a sense of mutual commitment to one another and work on behalf of all of us?”

For Allen, the project of knitting Massachussetts into a well-connected whole is a personal as well as a political enterprise. While she identifies as a progressive, Allen was raised in a conservative family; her dad, William, a professor of political science, served as chairman of the US Commission on Civil Rights during the Reagan administration. Growing up, she witnessed fiery debates at family gatherings between her father and her aunt, who ran for office in California on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket. Later, even as Allen navigated elite institutions, she watched members of her extended family struggle with addiction, homelessness, and incarceration. On the campaign trail, she often shares the tragic story of her cousin Michael, who spent 12 years in prison for attempting to steal a car at age 15. While serving as the youngest-ever humanities dean at the University of Chicago, Allen traveled frequently to Los Angeles to help her cousin start a new life.

“Because I’m from a big family, we’ve experienced the full range of challenges and opportunities in our society,” Allen recalled while speaking at a Revere Democratic Town Committee meeting in July. “Issues of addiction, homelessness, incarceration—I’ve wrestled through all of those things directly with my family members. We believe in linking arms and moving everybody forward together, connecting in order to empower.”

For the past seven years, the corner office in Beacon Hill has been occupied by someone with a vision that is vastly different from Allen’s: Charlie Baker, a moderate Republican in a deep blue state, who is considered one of the nation’s most popular governors. Baker has repeatedly said his goal is to deliver “a customer service oriented state government”—an efficient administration that swiftly serves residents’ needs. “State government must speak with one voice in its commitment to providing exceptional customer service for citizens, municipalities, businesses, nonprofit groups, health care providers, and educational institutions,” he said after assuming office in 2015. Baker’s website notes that he drastically cut down the average service time at the Registry of Motor Vehicles and streamlined the Department of Children and Families.

For Allen, Baker’s philosophy reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between citizens and government. “We probably do want customer-service-oriented government for the Registry of Motor Vehicles, but we are citizens, not customers,” Allen said. She contended that Baker’s philosophy on governance led to his failure to handle the pandemic effectively and reopen schools safely. “Schools aren’t customers, and in the absence of customers to be imagined, the Baker administration doesn’t actually have a way of knowing how to engage... They just do not see public goods and the tools that you use to deliver them.”

Despite being outside government, Allen was deeply involved in developing model policies in response to Covid-19. In the early months of the pandemic, she led a multidisciplinary response team that built the nation’s first comprehensive road map for preventing infection, reopening schools, and...
remobilizing the economy. The team’s work, which advocated for massively ramping up testing, contact tracing, and supported isolation, was endorsed by the US Conference of Mayors, disseminated by the National Governors Association, and eventually incorporated into policy by the Biden administration. Allen also advised the Covid-19 Health and Safety Committee of the Cambridge Public Schools, which her children attend. Cambridge Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui, who has endorsed Allen for governor, said the committee relied heavily on her and her team’s recommendations: “The leadership wasn’t coming from the state…. Danielle, at that moment, was that clearheaded voice.”

One of the team’s most critical findings, Allen said, was that the government must engage stakeholders to operate successfully, rather than merely inform or consult them. She watched several schools fail to reopen safely because they didn’t know how to involve their communities. Since infection control in schools requires building trust among students, parents, and educators, she said, those groups must all be incorporated into the decision-making process—naming the problems, identifying solutions, and figuring out how to implement them together.

Like the response team’s approach to school reopening, Allen’s scholarship emphasizes the importance of protecting people’s positive liberties, or the freedom to participate in governance. She worries about modern societies’ preoccupation with merely guaranteeing negative liberties—basic freedoms from interference in the service of personal autonomy. In Our Declaration, she disputes the characterization of the founding fathers as libertarians who primarily sought to minimize the restraints imposed by government. While there’s a common belief that equality and freedom are necessarily in contradiction, she argues that the founders understood that political equality is the bedrock of freedom. They recognized that, to be truly free, citizens must have equal opportunities to shape their own lives and communities.

This interpretation of freedom has led Allen to critique John Rawls, one of the most influential philosophers of the past century, for failing to fully appreciate the value of political equality. In Difference Without Domination, a book she coedited, she argues that Rawls’s theory of justice ultimately prioritized negative liberties over positive ones: Rawls focused on protecting personal autonomy—or the ability to live according to one’s understanding of the good without interference—rather than equipping citizens with equal means to participate in collective decision-making. In her most recent book, Democracy in the Time of Coronavirus, Allen invokes Cicero’s famous argument—Salus populi suprema lex esto, which translates to “The health of the people is the supreme law”—to point out that salus populi, or the health of the people, depends both on basic material security and on having opportunities for self-creation and self-governance.

“My picture of humanity is that human beings thrive at their highest level when they have the opportunity to be the authors of their own lives,” Allen explained. “And that means that you have rights and control in the private sphere, but it also means that you have meaningful opportunities to contribute in the public sphere [and] shape the decisions that set the constraints for your life.” While Allen laments America’s civic weakness in Democracy in the Time of Coronavirus, she later said in an interview that watching groups like the Barnstable County Health Commission and the Black Boston Covid Coalition deliver vaccines through get-out-the-vote drives has made her more hopeful than ever. “But…that growing capacity [and] appetite for civic engagement haven’t gotten translated into how our institutions of government operate. So that’s our next step, and that’s what we are trying to do.”

On the campaign trail, Allen frequently emphasizes how civic engagement can help the state navigate crises like the pandemic, and she brainsstorms with voters on how to inspire more people to get involved. As governor, she would expand voter registration options and establish a universal expectation of service for all young people. She also hopes to limit the influence of corporate money by encouraging the state to adopt the 28th Amendment and thereby countermand Citizens United v. FEC.

At a Needham Democratic Town Committee meeting in September, Rachel Crimlisk, a former customer service representative, told Allen that long work hours and financial difficulties have prevented her from taking part in her community. Crimlisk developed an interest in politics when she lost her job two years ago, but ongoing financial strains have limited her involvement. “If everyone had the time and space and wasn’t so on the rat wheel of life, we all would be able to be more engaged and [carry out] the things that Danielle wants to put into place,” Crimlisk later said in an interview.

Allen argues that people must have access to certain resources, such as good jobs, housing, education, and transportation, to become true authors of their own lives and communities. She has
also written that when social and economic differences lead to some people's domination over others, those dominated individuals may no longer have meaningful opportunities to participate in civic and political matters. In Difference Without Domination, Allen explains how basic liberties, such as the right to property and free association, naturally generate wealth disparities and social inequalities. While certain differences are inevitable and sometimes beneficial, she notes that misdirected protections of these basic liberties can also lead to drastic inequality and unjust domination—thereby undermining the very freedoms those protections sought to safeguard.

To address extreme inequalities, Allen has worked with a broad group of economists and political scientists to develop a new economic and social policy paradigm. In an op-ed for The Washington Post in December 2019, Allen wrote that her New Year's resolution was to help address "fundamental blind spots" in conventional economic theory with scholars who are pioneering a new curriculum, called CORE. Allen's campaign has also released a good-jobs agenda, in which she states, "For the last thirty years, economic policy has focused on increasing productivity without paying much attention to how our approaches to productivity have affected the health and well-being of workers. But no economy can be healthier than the people who power it…. [That's why] it's time to start thinking about economic productivity and labor prosperity as united—rather than competing—goals." In this agenda, Allen argues that overall GDP fails to measure the availability of good jobs in the state and promises to develop a new metric for evaluating her administration's performance on this front.

Allen's platform is broadly in line with those of other Democratic contenders. Both she and Chang-Díaz call for providing affordable early education by passing the Common Start Bill, though the state senator also hopes to establish a universal, single-payer preschool system. Allen and Ben Downing, who has since dropped out of the race, both pledged to accelerate decarbonization and to transition completely to renewable energy by 2040. While Chang-Díaz pledged to immediately remove fares on all MBTA and RTA buses, Allen has yet to release her transportation platform. So far, Allen has the most ambitious housing platform, which promises to overturn the state's ban on local rent stabilization ordinances. She also plans to strengthen tenant protections by establishing a right to legal counsel in eviction cases and passing legislation that would seal eviction records.

Allen's campaign "is driven by a moral vision, a loftier goal of civic engagement…but that's not all that Danielle is about," said Ed Klein, a Cape Cod resident who discussed his concerns about unreasonable housing costs with Allen at a March campaign event. "She also wants to give people a foundation and create a society for everyone."

While she has raised more than money than other candidates, Allen lacks long-standing connections with local leaders and groups. An a philosopher also be a good politician? While few political theorists engage in actual governance, Allen has long worked with politicians and policy developers in various advisory capacities. She was a regional field organizer for the 2008 Obama campaign and an adviser for the UK Labour Party's policy review. More recently, she led the Educating for American Democracy project, which designed civics curricula for K-12 students, and chaired the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship—a bipartisan group convened by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences that explored strategies for encouraging people to participate in democracy. Allen also chaired the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation board for four years.

Her cousin Michael's incarceration and death gave Allen a sense of urgency to tackle real-world injustices. While she tried to help her cousin start anew after his release, Michael was murdered by someone he met in prison in 2009. "For me, it was definitely my life's turning-point moment," Allen recalled at a meeting with the Berkshire Democratic Brigades in September. "I had a real sense of personal failure. But it was also a real moment for digging into the question of why it is that, as a society, we're doing such a bad job of helping young people transition to a healthy adulthood…. I realized that sometimes we have to change the world to move forward together."

Many philosophers have contrasted the work of a scholar, who unconditionally pursues truth, with that of a politician, who must persuade voters and cater to popular demands for support. Socrates, for example, denounced politicians’ rhetoric as a tool for manipulation. For her part, Allen says she holds herself to the scholarly standard of truthfulness even as she jumps into the political fray and rallies Massachusetts residents behind her vision. Allen Chen, her former campaign manager, told me that Allen at times resists the influence of political consultants in choosing how to communicate. Still, she does not comport herself with the authority of a professor. Allen explains complex philosophical ideas with remarkable ease, using analogies instead of relying on technical terms from her scholarship. At campaign events, she spends most of her time listening to people's concerns and brainstorming with them about how to mitigate their difficulties. And for some voters, Allen's unconventional background strengthens her appeal. At least a dozen Democrats, from Cambridge to Bridgewater, Springfield, and Cape Cod, said in interviews that her extensive scholarship on democracy might help her achieve something transformative. Cynthia Swan, who chairs the Women in the NAACP Committee in Springfield, noted that voters are looking for a candidate with the right vision and passion for justice, rather than someone who has
had a long political career. “Danielle has not held public office, but she’s obviously worked for a number of different Democratic efforts and is well-versed in what makes democracy run,” said Klein, the Cape Cod resident. “So I think she brings a good, fresh set of ideas.... It really has to be something dramatic to break through our problems.”

Without doubt, there are big obstacles in Allen’s path to the governorship. Some voters who are captivated by her ideas remain concerned about her lack of political experience. “I do find her vision inspiring, but it’s one thing to have a moral vision and another thing to translate your vision to action and get bills passed,” said Linda Levin-Scherz, who leads the Belmont Democratic Town Committee. And while Allen is well-known among academics, she has a low profile among voters. Like other first-time candidates, she “really [has] to go out and introduce [herself] to literally everybody,” said Chen. He reported that the campaign is in the process of recruiting and training hundreds of volunteers ahead of the February and March caucuses. But student activist Jacob Kemp pointed out that building a grassroots movement might be difficult for Allen. While she has received endorsements from national figures like the lawyer Van Jones, Allen lacks long-standing connections with local leaders and groups. In contrast, Kemp noted, Chang-Díaz is looped into a wide network of community organizers from her previous work as an organizer at MassEquality, an LGBTQ+ advocacy group based in Worcester. UMass Boston political science professor Maurice Cunningham added that unions like the AFL-CIO and the Massachusetts Nurses Association are more likely to endorse candidates they’ve previously worked with, such as Chang-Díaz and Healey. Chang-Díaz has already received dozens of endorsements from local public officials, including other state senators, state representatives, and city councilors.

Still, Cunningham and Nteta, the UMass Amherst professor, emphasized that support from unions and other local officials can be overcome. Both pointed to former governor Deval Patrick, who entered the race as a relative unknown and built a grassroots campaign by going ward-to-ward across the state. Like Patrick, Chen said, Allen is focusing on areas that have been overlooked by politicians, such as Cape Cod and parts of western Massachusetts. Allen’s vision has also drawn enthusiasm at town committee meetings and caucuses held in Boston suburbs like Cambridge and Needham.

“As a nonprofit leader with 20 years of public service under my belt, a longtime democracy advocate, and an early national leader on pandemic response, I believe I have the right tools and skills to meet the moment,” Allen said. “These are dark, hard times, and nothing could be more important than forging a path out to the green and healthy next-generation democracy we all deserve.”

(continued from page 21)

That’s what makes this moment so haunting. We know that without accountability for the coronavirus criminals, the past will repeat itself, with a more despicable president mishandling a more daunting pandemic, with more reckless jurists striking down more necessary health orders, with greedier CEOs cashing in on starker misery.

This is the point when we have to break the pattern. The guilty men and women have to be removed. Where appropriate—and necessary—they can be punished.

Nobody should be off the table in this country’s response to coronavirus criminals and pandemic profiteers: electoral humiliations, impeachments, investigations, indictments, seizures of assets, jail terms. But we should recognize in seeking all of these legitimate remedies that there is a point to the accountability process that has only a little to do with the present and quite a bit more to do with posterity. Winston Churchill was wrong about a lot of things, but he was right that “the use of recriminating about the past...is to enforce effective action at the present.” And it is effective action in the present that can transform the future.

People whose loved ones died in nursing homes ravaged by preventable outbreaks of the coronavirus can be forgiven for wanting to see officials penalized for their failure to place health and safety above politics and profits. Families who buried parents and grandparents who died because irresponsible leaders failed to lead in imposing mask mandates and social distancing, or because political hacks in judicial robes blocked responsible leaders from imposing those mandates, may well be inclined to demand specific punishments for the robbers who rejected science and human decency. And workers who have been exposed to illness and death by billionaires who built their fortunes during a pandemic will be excused for entertaining vengeful sentiments.

But that can’t be the end game. There is temporary satisfaction that comes when a powerful figure is subjected to transitory chastisement, and we need not apologize for seeking it. But we must also keep our eye on the prize of transformational justice.

The achievement of that justice requires us to stand at the intersection of punishment and policy. What we recognize when we are in this position is that accountability, done right, drives change.

Trump and his Republican associates should face all the legal and constitutional penalties that their crimes demand. So, too, should the Democrats who transgressed. And so, too, should the reckless billionaires and pharmaceutical extortionists. But we dare not stop there. The pandemic profiteers must be banished—forever ejected from the political and economic future of the nation they have so cruelly used and abused.

There are constitutional provisions and statutes that bar political wrongdoers from future service, and that can even bar corporate wrongdoers from future gain-taking. But far more vital is the social shaming that recognizes these evildoers must never again appear on our ballots, occupy positions of public trust, or be accepted as purveyors of sage wisdom on how best to govern. They can’t be rehabilitated, as Nixon almost was. Or remembered fondly, as Reagan was. They can’t be allowed to evolve into the “elder statesmen” that the miserable presidents of the turn of the last century—Bill Clinton and George W. Bush—aspire to become. They must carry the albatross of shame from this time forth and forevermore.
The Art of Confronting Evil

Germany’s Center for Political Beauty.

BY LINDA MANNHEIM
Jörn Höcke, a leader of Germany’s far-right party Alternative für Deutschland, or AfD, didn’t know who his new next-door neighbors were when they arrived in the rural village of Bornhagen in 2017. Höcke had had a busy year. At a rally in Dresden that January, he had claimed that Berlin’s Holocaust Memorial was “a monument of shame in the heart of the capital.” Germany spent too much time remembering and atoning for its Nazi past, he told his followers, and had to make a “180-degree turn” away from doing this.

Politicians and newspapers across the country condemned Höcke’s remarks. He was in the news and had people talking about a relatively small rally. It was the response, some would say, that he wanted. Back in Bornhagen, however, Höcke retreated from public life. He told people it was his “refuge.”

Then the new neighbors took down the large tent they had erected on their land, and Höcke discovered what had been underneath it: a replica of Berlin’s Holocaust Memorial, complete with scaled-down versions of the coffin-like slabs commemorating the murdered Jews of Europe.

Höcke’s new neighbors were members of the Center for Political Beauty, a Berlin-based art collective known for its audacious and confrontational work. The CPB had leased the property next to Höcke’s home and built the replica, using money raised through crowdfunding. Soon reporters arrived, and news about what had happened in the village of 309 people spread around the world.

Founded in 2009, the CPB creates performances and exhibits that are reported on and discussed in almost every German media outlet as well as internationally in Al Jazeera, The Guardian, The Washington Post, Haaretz, Hürrryzet, Le Monde, and Reuters—to name just a few. Its work is part of a tradition of politically engaged “action art” that involves the audience. But it is rare for the work of an arts collective to be this visible, to gain this much attention from both non-arts audiences and arts publications such as Art Net, Widewalls, and Artforum.

“With spectacular actions, the group works to bring art out of its symbolic comfort zone and harness it directly to left-wing progressive causes,” noted Frieze in 2016. The CPB’s “large-scale productions… pit society, politics, and the media against each other, without a permanent stage or ensemble,” explained Der Spiegel in 2015. “Breaking taboos and crossing borders are the CPB’s trademarks,” asserted Stern that same year.

In 2014, the CPB launched a website that invited Germans to provide temporary homes for Syrian children seeking asylum. Kindertransporthilfe des Bundes evoked the 1938 Kindertransport that helped 10,000 children escape from Nazi-occupied Europe to foster homes in the United Kingdom. The program the CPB was promoting didn’t exist. Syrian children, aware they were involved in a theater piece, helped make videos appealing to potential foster families in Germany. The 800 German families who volunteered to care for unaccompanied child asylum seekers phoned a hotline staffed by actors. But the piece attracted widespread attention, raising awareness of why Syrians were fleeing their country and demonstrating that many Germans were eager to welcome asylum seekers. When the volunteers found out the purpose of the fictional campaign, 70 percent became sustaining members of the CPB. I found this piece particularly moving; my father was one of the children who escaped from Germany on the Kindertransport.

Just after Germany’s elections in September 2021, the CPB revealed it had persuaded the Alternative für Deutschland to hire it to distribute its flyers by setting up a simple website and renting office space for Flyerservice Hahn—a fictional logistics service. It offered the AfD an excellent deal and, week after week, the party gave its campaign literature to Flyerservice Hahn to be distributed. The CPB, of course, did not distribute the flyers. You can view videos that the CPB has posted of AfD flyers being fed into shredders and see photos it has tweeted of people lying in waste bins filled with pro-AfD literature. When the AfD threatened it with legal action, the CPB crowdfunded legal support and exceeded its target of 100,000 euros within days. Then, on January 13, the apartments of CPB members in Berlin were searched under Section 269 of the Criminal Code—suspicion of falsifying evidence-relevant data. The CPB is not being investigated for fraud, however, because it never billed the AfD.

The CPB was founded by Philipp Ruch. Born in Dresden in 1981 to an East German mother and a Swiss father, Ruch was 8 years old when his family got permission to leave the GDR—about four months before the Wall fell. Ruch’s psychologist parents settled in Switzerland, where he grew up and eventually attended business school before working for a film promotion company. He wanted to write film scripts and thought he could find a quiet place to do so back in Germany. But when Ruch returned there, he said, he felt “profound alienation.” He began

Art is his weapon: CPB founder Philipp Ruch, who switched from studying political theory to practicing cultural guerrilla warfare.
work on a PhD in political philosophy at Berlin’s Humboldt University and wrote his dissertation on “Honor and Vengeance: A History of Emotions in Ancient Law.” After working at the Max Planck Institute’s History of Emotions Research Center, making short films, and considering a career in party politics, he told Süddeutsche Zeitung, “Then it was clear. My medium is art.”

The CPB collective lists more than 50 artists and support workers on its website, including a chief negotiator (Ruch), a chief escalation officer, a chief of staff, and a privy councillor, as well as more conventional roles like planning staff, art directors, and photographers. Some of its events have involved members of Berlin’s Maxim Gorki Theater, and others have involved volunteer participants; you can sign up to be a “Stand-by Humanist” on its website. “Anyone who calls the artists from the Center for Political Beauty ‘political activists’ is denying them their status as artists. Yet art is precisely about holding up a mirror to society,” said Shermin Langhoff, the Gorki Theater’s artistic director. The CPB’s art addresses both Germany’s brutal history and its failures to aid people in need in the present day. At events and TV appearances, CPB members appear with soot-streaked faces. “You inevitably get dirty when you operate with burnt things,” Ruch told a Taz reporter in 2015. “We’re digging through Germany’s burnt hopes.”

Ruch has said he does not want to bring attention to himself through the collective’s work, but he is its most visible member; it is his ethos and personal history that are the most widely known. His heroes include “Varian Fry, who helped thousands escape from the Vichy regime, Elie Wiesel, [and] Rupert Neudeck, who saved 37 refugees from the Mediterranean.” Group members have repeatedly referenced former German chancellor Willy Brandt’s spontaneous act of contrition on behalf of Germany when, during a visit to Poland in 1970, he dropped to his knees in front of a memorial commemorating the Warsaw Uprising. “Ethical action, the sight of people with a backbone, has always been incredibly beautiful,” Ruch said in 2015. “Take for example Willy Brandt’s genuflection in Warsaw. To want to separate ethics and aesthetics is ridiculous. To feel beauty, to want to feel it, scares people nowadays—that is clear. Beauty can shatter a life. Many try to flee from this and declare beauty to be a subjective thing. I disagree: political beauty is something objective. In retrospect, it can always be recognized.”

The CPB is able to take risks and perform acts that push propriety to the edge because of the German laws that uphold artistic freedom—and because it doesn’t rely on an official funding body or corporate sponsors. Its work is crowdfunded, and its website invites supporters to become “accomplices.” “As an accomplice you will make an invaluable contribution to inciting public unrest in the service of aggressive humanism…. Nowhere else will you receive more unrest and dissent for every donated Euro.”

It also, of course, has detractors. One of the CPB’s most heavily criticized works was 2019’s Search for Us!, a tall black urn placed near the Bundestag that the CPB said contained soil from former death camps and the ashes and bones of Holocaust victims. A number of Jewish groups and family members of Holocaust victims protested the disrespectful use of victims’ remains. The CPB apologized and gave the remains to the Orthodox Rabbinical Conference, but it did not take down the installation. Journalist Anna Prizkau has accused the collective of having “a real, absolute obsession with victims, with the dead, with people in danger, in wars.” Sarah J. Haldorf, interviewing the CPB’s André Leipold, summed up criticism of the group (but wasn’t making the criticism herself): “The right says that [the CPB’s] work is immoral, that it goes too far, so it’s disgraceful. The left says that the work uses refugees as props for the sake of art, so it’s disgraceful.”

The trouble with such criticism is that it suggests that the refugees involved with the CPB’s work have no agency. May Skaf, who played a leading role in the CPB’s Eating Refugees (2016), was a Lebanese Syrian actress who helped lead a revolt against the Assad regime. Are these critics (who are not themselves refugees) asserting that Skaf, or others who managed to escape from war zones, don’t have the capacity to assess the CPB’s motives and decide whether to work with it?

The day I heard about the unveiling of the replica in Bornhagen, I was giddy with joy. The outrage directed at Höcke and the AfD by pundits and politicians up to that point was a good thing—but it also treated Höcke with a level of seriousness he didn’t deserve. The thought of him waking up one day and discovering the Holocaust Memorial right outside—that was hilarious. It was the kind of revenge you see in a cartoon. It was exactly what the CPB had promised on its
Suffer the little children: The CPB’s project demonstrated that many Germans were eager to welcome Syrian refugees.

“First Fall of the European Wall”: This 2014 CPB action contrasted the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall with Europe’s rejection of refugees today.

website: “Forceful protest without violent force.”

What if the CPB’s actions created sympathy for Höcke? pundits asked. But they didn’t—except among the people who were already sympathetic to him. Höcke himself whined about the unfairness of the CPB’s actions, claiming it was a “terrorist organization.” The CPB promptly posted his statement on its website, along with other condemnations—both a boast about who dislikes it and a way of proclaiming, “Yeah, we know we’re gonna get grief for this.”

Höcke’s followers threatened the CPB on Facebook and in real life, at the replica Holocaust Memorial; police had to guard the site. In 2017, the CPB was found to be one of the organizations on a “death list” kept by a career soldier in the German Army who was exposed as a right-wing extremist. Ruch himself was investigated by a state prosecutor “on suspicion of forming a criminal association”—a provision of German law that has previously been used only to investigate serious crimes. The investigation, initiated by a prosecutor with right-wing sympathies, was ultimately shut down. “The success of our actions is not measured in pats on the back but in the blows we get for it,” the CPB has noted. Its website counts 30 court cases it has been involved in “in the name of artistic freedom”—none of which it lost.

Recently, on Deutschlandfunk radio, Ruch talked about whether the CPB has actually changed anything. “You know,” he said, “if you look at how we fought for three, four years against the federal government’s anti-refugee policy from 2014, we didn’t change one millimeter. This policy is still in place today and people are drowning in the Mediterranean. And right-wing extremism in Germany, which historically has been responsible for the Holocaust in this country, is now back in parliament, now in its second legislative period. And so they could always accuse us of having achieved little…. We can also say that this is not the question. We have to do it anyway.”

The CPB’s actions, in addition to putting discussions about refugee policy in the news, shift the way we talk about these subjects. A common way that refugee stories are told in the media is: Terrible things are happening that we can’t do anything about. The CPB’s narrative is: Actually, you can do something about this. You can allow refugees to fly into Europe without visas. You can stop racist and xenophobic groups from sending out flyers to recruit others. And you can help children in danger find safety by finding foster homes for them, just as the organizers of the Kindertransport in Britain did in the 1930s.

This kind of encouragement, along with the message that propriety isn’t useful when people’s lives are at stake, does bring change—even change that doesn’t translate easily into policy. And the sense that you can counter the far right through playful means is a powerful antidote to the cynicism and complacency that allows injustice to grow. The CPB isn’t proposing any easy answers, and work like theirs risks going wrong sometimes. But it is presenting possibilities and providing heartening examples during a perilous era. Over the long haul, that matters.
Driving down International Boulevard, East Oakland’s main inner-city thoroughfare, it’s hard to miss the Intertribal Friendship House. With its mural-rimmed courtyard featuring larger-than-life portraits of Natives, both famous and unknown, the community center, which some call the “urban rez,” stands apart from its surroundings in Oakland’s Little Saigon. And like pretty much everything involving Indigenous Americans, it’s been here a while.

Founded in 1955, the Intertribal Friendship House is one of the oldest urban Indigenous community organizations in the United States. You’d think that in a city and region that gave birth to the Black Panther Party, the Free Speech Movement, and the United Farmworkers, people would know about institutions
like this. The Oakland-born Cheyenne and Arapaho writer Tommy Orange, after all, set a whole chapter of his novel *There There*, which was excerpted in *The New Yorker*, at an Indian center no doubt inspired by Intertribal. But I can’t tell you how many Oaklanders I’ve met who are shocked to learn that their city has one of the oldest and most significant urban Indian populations in the United States, that there’s a whole Native community center just a few blocks from the city’s downtown, and that the 19-month occupation of Alcatraz, which began in 1969—more or less the Indigenous rights movement’s equivalent of the Montgomery bus boycott—was organized in Oakland and the Bay Area.

After visiting her childhood home in the East Bay, which she found so completely transformed that it was unrecognizable to her, Gertrude Stein famously wrote that “there is no there there.” That turn of phrase is so overused that its origin sometimes get lost. But what Stein was commenting on in 1933—the transformation of one’s home place until it’s gone—is an apt description of how settler colonialism uprooted and remade Indigenous lands throughout North America and, in particular, California. I’m not a “California Indian”—the imperfect term for Indigenous peoples from what is now called the Golden State—but I grew up in a very Indian California, and it was under almost constant siege by a society habituated to extraction, displacement, and dispossession. I remember running around the Intertribal Friendship House with a bunch of other snot-nosed Native kids back when the nonprofit was borderline insolvent and the community garden was little more than a sandbox and jungle gym waiting to give you tetanus. The Native Bay Area and California that raised me was pocked with these invisible enclaves of Indian community: filled with love and holding on by a thread. When we moved to Oakland, my dad, an artist, used to show his work at a friend’s contemporary Native art gallery in San Francisco. (It closed decades ago.) In the spring and summer, I spent most weekends at powwows: intertribal celebrations of song and dance, held across the state in high school gymnasiums and blingy Vegas-size casinos. In the fall, there were Big Times, California Indian ceremonies held in semi-subterranean roundhouses that went on all night, celebrating the harvest, the change of seasons, and the persistence of once-outlawed cultures on tiny reservations and rancherias, like that of our Miwok friends in the Sierra Nevada foothills of Tuolumne. In the winter, we would drive back up to Tuolumne and hit the slopes with those same Miwoks at a family ski hill in the Stanislaus National Forest, a low-budget alt–Lake Tahoe called Dodge Ridge. A good fraction of the ski patrol and ski team there was Miwok.

The struggles that protected, threatened, and animated these enclaves were almost always apparent. At the Intertribal Friendship House, gray-haired elders swapped stories about the days of their radical youth spent fighting for our rights on Alcatraz Island. After drum and dance practice on Thursday nights, we would gather around the All Nations drum and sing the American Indian Movement’s song (“Way-ha-way-hi-ya-ho-way-oh-way-ya-hey-oh-oh…”). Homeless Natives, whom we all knew by name and by relation as uncles, nieces, grandparents, and great-grandfathers—in an Indian way more often than a biological one—were always welcome, greeted with a handshake or a hug, a pot of coffee, a warm meal, and some walking-around money. At local powwows we started with gourd society protocols from Oklahoma, Aztec dances from south of the border, victory songs from when the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho kicked Custer’s ass at the Little Bighorn, and prayers in languages that the government and church tried to yank from our grandparents’ tongues. At Tuolumne, there were uncles haunted by nightmares of Vietnamese jungles and Gold Rush massacres who still carried on the old arts and ways. Long before the historians became revisionists and liberal politicians took an interest in social justice, we honored and carried forward what had come before—what “California” was designed to dislodge from our minds and the land. There may not have been a there there. But we were still here.

Scholars and schools are shedding new light on some of the darkest and most easily forgotten parts of California’s colonial past. In 2016, Benjamin Madley, a historian at the University of California, Los Angeles, published *An American Genocide*, which showed that California’s treatment of Indigenous peoples in the first few decades of US rule constituted an attempted final solution to settler colonialism’s pesky wild Indian problem. The book won multiple awards, pushing a long-simmering debate in California and American history toward a conclusion that had always been maintained by California Indians but was eschewed by the academy. In 2017, the California Department of Education removed from its curriculum the requirement for all fourth graders to build a model mission. (When they had me do mine, I made a not-so-subtle statement by building the crosses in the graveyard taller than the church.) In 2019, California Governor Gavin Newsom issued an official apology to Native people for the state’s history of wrongdoing and established a Truth and Healing Council that aims to reconcile the state with its tribes. “It’s called a genocide,” Newsom said at a ceremony to consecrate the council. “That’s what it was: a genocide. No other way to describe it. And that’s the way it needs to be described in the history books. I’m sorry on behalf of the State of California. I’m sorry that we’ve had generations—your kids and grandkids, your ancestors—that...
had to suffer through the indignities, lack of capacity and empathy and understanding, their lives lost, their lives diminished, and the incapacity of the rest of us to fully grasp the magnitude of what we in the state did to your ancestors.” In some parts of California, local people, organizations, and governments have tried to make things right by returning land, with parts of Big Sur, Inyo County, and Eureka going back to the tribes from whom they were taken.

We Are the Land, a new history of California by Damon Akins and William Bauer Jr., aims to continue this project of decolonization, self-determination, and repair, chronicling the centuries-long efforts of Indigenous peoples to hold on to the places their Creators made and their forebears toiled and fought to protect against waves of Spanish, Russian, Mexican, and American colonization that created in genocide. Across 10 chronological chapters, Akins and Bauer narrate the Indigenous history of the state through various contested spaces: sites of creation, shores and waterways where California Indians discovered European explorers, Catholic missions where they worked and were baptized, the extractive frontiers of competing imperial powers, the blood-drenched goldfields, the casinos that transformed some of these communities into power players in state politics, and the hardscrabble reservations, rancherias, allotments, ghettos, universities, and bars where California Indians and relocated American Indian activists forged the modern Native rights movement. Each chapter is separated by a short place study, interpreting locations like San Diego, Sacramento, Ukiah, the Ishi Wilderness, Los Angeles, the East Bay, as well as Yuma, Ariz., and Rome, Italy, through the histories of the Indigenous. But ultimately many of these stories, bridging spiritual and physical worlds, were accompanied by song, dance, and ceremony. In what is now the southeastern part of the state, Chumehuevís walked the 1,000-mile-long Salt Song Trail, measuring its distance, recounting their history, and marking the stars, Earth Maker created a tree on which 12 kinds of acorns grew. Many, like the Esselen on the central coast, told stories about the trickster Coyote, who gave the people nets, bows, and arrows and taught them how to live off the fat of the land and sea: the seaweed, abalone, mussels, rabbits, deer, elk, and, of course, acorns (there are 15 species that grow in the state, and the nut was a staple for many tribes). The Pohonič Miwok and many others also honor Coyote, who in their narration stole fire from Turtle and gave it to humanity.

Many of these stories, bridging spiritual and physical worlds, were accompanied by song, dance, and ceremony. In what is now the southeastern part of the state, Chumehuevís walked the 1,000-mile-long Salt Song Trail, measuring its distance, recounting their history, and marking their ties to the Mojave Desert through rhythm and lyric. In the Siskiyu Mountains in the northwest, Yuroks, Karuks, and Tolowa danced as part of their various World Renewal ceremonies every year. And when they fought, they sang and told stories about that, too. The Kumeyaay, from the area that is now San Diego, sang “bad” songs about their enemies, naming their dead, mocking their looks, and generally talking shit about their hunting, gathering, and fishing game. (North America’s first rap beefs may have actually been West Coast.)

When Indigenous peoples discovered European southerners like the Spaniard Hernando de Alarcón and the English pirate Sir Francis Drake on their shores in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, their encounters were often sporadic and awkward. In 1540, for example, Alarcón foolishly decided to ascend the Colorado River from its mouth in the Gulf of California. The Colorado, which rushed red with sediment, was almost impassable for his little worm-infested ships. As the Spanish fought the current upriver, they came upon Cocopah villages. Each meeting offered an opportunity for the Indigenous and the interlopers to apprehend—and misapprehend—each other. At the first village, the Cocopah and the Spanish exchanged gifts. A Cocopah shapai axany (or leader) gave Alarcón a staff adorned with shells, which Alarcón reciprocated with “beads and other things,” according to his log. At the second encounter, Alarcón gave the Cocopah “some trifles” and fired off his harquebus, a primitive gun, startling his hosts and leading to his swift dismissal. Further upriver, Cocopahs prepared ceremonial arbors for Alarcón’s arrival, which the Spaniard misinterpreted as traps set for an ambush. While some of these greetings ended in misunderstanding, others included moments of genuine exchange. The Cocopah greeted Alarcón with blessings of cornmeal, cornbread, and corn cakes—sacred foods and gifts—and he in turn gave them Christian crosses, some made from sticks and paper so that the Cocopah could wear them around their necks. At one village, Alarcón built a big crucifix from timber, which the local Cocopah planted at the center of their town. Alarcón continued as far upriver as the Cocopahs would guide him until his broken ships forced him to turn around. A few months later, Alarcón’s countryman Capt. Melchior Diaz marched into Cocopah lands with about 80 men, a herd of sheep, and an itchy trigger finger. When a dog chased after his herd, Diaz went after the animal on horseback with a lance. He chopped his weapon, missed the pooch, failed to rein in his horse, and wound up impaling himself in the groin, dying a few days later.

Although the Europeans’ first acts in the Indigenous world were often impotent, their return in the 18th century stirred up big trouble. Beginning with the
establishment of Mission San Diego de Alcalá in Kumeyaay territory in 1769, European settlements—and especially Spanish missions—disrupted the balance of power between various tribes and empires as well as between the human and other-than-human world in California. This rupture began at the missions and rippled out across entire regions. In 1769, for example, Fathers Francisco Palou and Pedro Benito Cambón led a group of Indigenous peoples, a herd of cattle, and a train of mules onto the peninsula homelands of the Yelamu to build a chapel and shelter that became Mission San Francisco de Asís. Their presence, which offered new military allies and trading partners for the Yelamu, threatened more distant Ohlone speakers like the Esselen to the south. The Esselen promptly raided Yelamu villages, forcing the first San Franciscans to flee across the Golden Gate in tule rafts. Once established, missions became focal points of Spanish colonization and, in particular, the policy of reducción, whereby Indigenous peoples were separated from their communities and families and coerced through what the historian James Sandos has described as “spiritual debt peonage” into various forms of dirty, hard, and unfree labor.

Between 1769 and 1800, these missions played a leading role in cutting the Indigenous population on California’s coast in half. In 1806, for example, a measles outbreak infected some 800 Indigenous people in San Francisco, killing 337. With such high death rates at the missions, the Spanish raided inland Indigenous communities to sustain the workforce and population of their settlements. Missionaries in San Francisco, for example, looked across the Bay, attacking and kidnapping members of the Huchiun villages in what is now Berkeley, Oakland, and Pleasanton. While the missions were deadly, brutal, and authoritarian places, they also offered new forms of work and faith for the Natives. At Mission San Francisco, some women expressed interest in becoming monjas (nuns). And as in other Spanish Catholic colonial institutions, the missions did not wholly stamp out Indigenous practices. In 1816, the German Russian artist Louis Choris visited San Francisco and painted scenes of Ohlone people—some in Spanish dress, others in traditional regalia, and still others in a mix of the two—participating in Indigenous gambling games and dances in courtyards shaded by crosses and mission walls. Across the Golden Gate, the Indigenous combined Pomo, Miwok, and Catholic rituals near a shoreline shell mound that, in the 1880s, would be occupied by Chinese shrimp fishermen from Canton. (It’s now a state park called China Camp.) What they could not procure from the missions via trade, Native populations sometimes took by force. South and east of what became China Camp, Miwoks and Yokuts raided Spanish settlements for horses and other livestock, which they used as mounts, food sources, and trade goods. As Spanish power waned and the Mexican period began in the early 1800s, Indigenous horse thieves, cattle rustlers, and fugitives took advantage of provincial, poorly funded, and weakly guarded settlements. Akins and Bauer share the tale of one Esselen outlaw, a man named Gonzalo, who ran away from Mission Soledad and was eventually captured and sentenced to die. Shackled and waiting for execution, he cut off his own heels without even a whimper and fled inland, where he joined a group of Indigenous insurgents led by the Coast Miwok warrior Lupugeyun. At the height of their spree, Lupugeyun, Gonzalo, and their crew could have given Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid, and the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang a run for their money. They stuck up Bay Area missionaries and rancheros for five years until fate and the Mexican authorities caught up with them in 1824.

A

mericans typically date the beginning of their reign in California to January 24, 1848, when John Sutter struck gold on the American River. But this story of migration and sudden fortune, like so many other tales of the United States’ pioneering origins, directs attention away from the actions that actually yoked the Golden State to the Union, namely an expansionary war against Mexico and a genocide of Indigenous peoples.

Akins and Bauer put the Indigenous side of this history back at the center of these events. After his discovery, Sutter claimed to have legally leased several miles of goldfields from a group of Nisenan. As it turned out, the Nisenan with whom Sutter made a contract didn’t actually live in the immediate area of the find, and in any event, the lease was illegal because according to the Supreme Court’s 1823 ruling in Johnson v. McIntosh, only the federal government—not private citizens—could acquire land from Native Americans. Nonetheless, when miners first descended on Sutter’s find along the American River in 1848, about half were Indigenous. And many were women, who repurposed their traditional baskets to pan for gold. (The coil and weave of the fibers were apparently well suited for snagging gold flakes.) Others, like the Yokuts ruffian José Jesús, abandoned lives as horse thieves for more lucrative extractive vocations.

Indigenous miners—and especially the women—were vulnerable to the violence, exploitation, outright enslavement, and bitter racism of the goldfields. In primary documents, Akins and Bauer come across American settlers bragging about the ways they took advantage of Indians: trading cheap goods like handkerchiefs for tin cups full of gold, exchanging various goods for gold of equal weight, using lead slugs called “digger’s ounces” to cheat Native miners when they went to cash in on their work. (The term “digger” was a racial slur that referred to Indigenous root-digging practices and intentionally rhymed with another epithet.)

Dehumanization wrought mass violence almost immediately. In 1849, a group of prospectors from Oregon arrived at the site of Sutter’s gold strike and tried to rape some Nisenan women. After the Nisenan exacted retribution by murdering seven Oregonians, the miners went on a killing spree, slaughtering more than 100 Nisenans in around a month. Other California Indians soon began to fear the goldfields and fight back against their exploitation. When, in 1850, American ranchers Andrew Kelsey and Charles Stone threatened to ship a group of Eastern Pomo slaves off to Sutter’s Mill, the workers turned on and killed their captors. The US military responded swiftly. Brevet Maj. Gen. Persifor F. Smith ordered 75 soldiers to, in the words of Capt. John B. Frisbie, “exterminate if possible” the rebels. When, at a place now known as Bloody Island on Clear Lake, the Pomo leader Ge-Wi-Lih attempted to negotiate peace, the soldiers opened fire. The Pomos who survived the first hail of bullets jumped in the lake and attempted to swim to safety. Ashore, another group of soldiers shot everyone they could. In what remains the largest massacre in US history, the Army killed as many as 800 Indians.

California lawmakers soon formalized these acts of ethnic cleansing into what the histori-
an Benjamin Madley has described as a “killing machine.” In 1850, the California Legislature passed the Indian Act, which effectively legalized Indigenous slavery by allowing settlers to take Indigenous vagrants, fugitives, and debtors captive. In the first decade of US rule, Californians subjugated as many as 20,000 Indians, including 4,000 children, as farmhands, domestic servants, and sex slaves. State-sponsored militias received more than $1 million from the state in the 1850s and ’60s, and between 1846 and 1873, they murdered 9,492 to 16,094 Indigenous peoples, according to Madley. Elected officials praised these murders as a “pedagogic killing” that taught the Natives a lesson. In one such slaughter in 1853, between 450 and 500 Tolowa men were murdered in cold blood in the middle of the night at a Smith River village called Yontocket, which means “Center of the World” in the Tolowa language. The Tolowa had gathered there to celebrate their biannual World Renewal ceremony. Two Tolowa men escaped by jumping into a slough and swimming to safety. The next day, I imagine, they would have seen or at least smelled the Americans burning the bodies of their kin. Between 1848 and 1860, the California Indian population collapsed, falling from an estimated 150,000 to just 30,000.

While the state of California set in motion policies to extirpate the Natives, the US Senate dispatched Oliver Wozencraft, George Barbour, and Redick McKee to negotiate treaties with tribes primarily residing along mining frontiers from northwestern California through the Cascades and Sierra Nevada. (Coastal tribes, whose territories were claimed via land grants from Spanish and Mexican rancherias, were largely ignored.) Negotiations loosely followed Indigenous protocols not unlike the Big Time celebrations still held by many California Indians today: Feasts were prepared, gifts exchanged, speeches made, songs and dances performed, and sovereign parties to the treaties were often addressed as though they were entering into kin-based relationships. When the political theater didn’t meet cultural expectations, tribes sometimes called off the meetings. Upon learning that the Americans had brought jackets only for their chiefs and no clothes or blankets for anyone else, the Maidu picked up and left on the spot. With violent militias preying on Indigenous communities, many tribes and leaders were reluctant even to meet with the treaty party. Some, like the Miwok leader Cipriano, served as go-betweens, connecting skeptical and fearful Miwoks with US officials, translating between Miwok and English, and selecting safe meeting places where Miwok leaders faced minimal risk of ambush or capture.

Cipriano and other Miwok leaders met with federal representatives at Horr’s Ferry on the Tuolumne River on February 14, 1851. “After much persuasion and promises of reward,” according to the source Akins and Bauer cite, Cipriano spent the better part of the next month persuading Miwok holdouts to meet with Wozencraft, Barbour, and McKee to negotiate a treaty. Indigenous figures like Cipriano played pivotal roles in the negotiation of 18 treaties that would have reserved 7.5 million acres of land for interior tribes. But in a secret session in 1852, the US Senate rejected the treaties, buried the documents in legislative archives, and prohibited their publication. In a new plan modeled on the mission system, the United States attempted to round up and confine all California Indians to just five reservations. During the Civil War, this number was cut to three. After the war, it became four.

As California Indians were displaced and dispossessed in the late 1800s and early 1900s—the decades roughly coinciding with Gertrude Stein’s life—settlers and industrialists transformed their homelands. Dams erected in mountains and foothills altered the flow of rivers; irrigation networks drained delta and wetlands. In 1858, armed citizens relocated Yokuts from Tulare Lake, the largest freshwater lake west of the Great Lakes, on which the tribe had relied for water and food for more than 10,000 years. By the 1870s agriculture had turned the lake putrid and salty. It was gone—wiped off the map entirely from a few small wetlands and occasional flooding—by 1900. That year, the California Indian population would reach its nadir, numbering fewer than 16,000 in the US Census.

California was one of the most hostile states for Indigenous peoples.

In a political, cultural, and even environmental sense, California was perhaps the most hostile state in the union for Indigenous peoples. And yet at many turns in the 20th century, colonial systems unwittingly laid the groundwork for their own undoing. In the early years of the 1900s, Charles Kelsey, a San Jose attorney hired by the Northern California Indian Association, found references to the secret treaties signed by California Indians. During Theodore Roosevelt’s 1903 visit to San Jose, the NCIA presented the president with these documents and pressed him on the issue of California Indian land rights. Working with California Senator Thomas Bard, the NCIA and the Indian Rights Association found the treaties in the Senate archives and introduced a motion to print them. Kelsey was appointed to investigate. Across the state, Indians organized themselves. It took them more than two decades to get their day in court, but in 1928 Congress passed an act enabling the “Indians of California”—a new legal term defined as all Indigenous peoples residing in the state in 1852—to sue the federal government for lost treaty lands.

In 1928, California Indians won their case. But the government did not give these lands back, nor did it significantly compensate tribes for their losses. After the deduction of “offsets” for government expenditures incurred in the provision of services for tribes, the total awarded in the case was just slightly more than $5 million. A new lawsuit that focused on dispossessed Indigenous lands not covered by the treaties was launched in 1946. California Indians eventually won that case as well, and in 1972 California Indians received a paltry $700 each for their losses.

By the time that case was settled, California Indians had new in-state Indigenous allies: Native Americans who had relocated from reservations across the country to cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland. In 1969, a diverse coalition of urban Indians, Native student activists, and Indians who came from outside the state occupied the former federal prison of Alcatraz Island, bringing national attention to Native treaty rights and pressuring the federal government to embrace a new era of Indian policy based on self-determination rather than termination. Since Ronald
CoQ10’s Failure Leaves Millions Wanting

Use this pill to supercharge your brain and think better than ever.

Millions of Americans take the supplement CoQ10. It’s the “jet fuel” that supercharges your cells’ power generators, known as mitochondria.

As you age, your mitochondria begin to die. In fact, by age 67, you lose 80% of the mitochondria you had at age 25. But if you’re taking CoQ10, there’s something important you should know.

As powerful as CoQ10 is, there is a critical thing it fails to do. It can’t create new mitochondria in your cells.

Taking CoQ10 is not enough

“There’s a little-known NASA nutrient that multiplies the number of new power generators in your cells by up to 55%,” says Dr. Al Sears, owner of the Sears Institute for Anti-Aging Medicine in Royal Palm Beach, Florida. “Science once thought this was impossible. But now you can make your heart, brain and body young again.”

“I tell my patients the most important thing I can do is increase their ‘health span.’ This is the length of time you can live free of disease and with all your youthful abilities and faculties intact.”

Medical first: Multiply the “power generators” in your cells

Al Sears, M.D., recently released an energy-boosting supplement based on this NASA nutrient that has become so popular, he’s having trouble keeping it in stock.

Dr. Sears is the author of over 500 scientific papers on anti-aging and recently spoke at the WPBF 25 Health & Wellness Festival featuring Dr. Oz and special guest Suzanne Somers. Thousands of people listened to Dr. Sears speak on his anti-aging breakthroughs and attended his book signing at the event.

Now, Dr. Sears has come up with what his peers consider his greatest contribution to anti-aging medicine yet — a newly discovered nutrient that multiplies the number of tiny, energy-producing “engines” located inside the body’s cells, shattering the limitations of traditional CoQ10 supplements.

Why mitochondria matter

A single cell in your body can contain between 200 to 2,000 mitochondria, with the largest number found in the most metabolically active cells, like those in your brain, heart and skeletal muscles.

But because of changes in cells, stress and poor diet, most people’s power generators begin to malfunction and die off as they age. In fact, the Mitochondria Research Society reports 50 million U.S. adults are suffering from health problems because of mitochondrial dysfunction.

Common ailments often associated with aging — such as memory problems, heart issues, blood sugar concerns and vision and hearing difficulties — can all be connected to a decrease in mitochondria.

Birth of new mitochondria

Dr. Sears and his researchers combined the most powerful form of CoQ10 available — called ubiquinol — with a unique, newly discovered natural compound called PQQ that has the remarkable ability to grow new mitochondria. Together, the two powerhouses are now available in a supplement called Ultra Accel II.

Discovered by a NASA probe in space dust, PQQ (Pyrroloquinoline quinone) stimulates something called “mitochondrial biogenesis” — a unique process that actually boosts the number of healthy mitochondria in your cells.

In a study published in the Journal of Nutrition, mice fed PQQ grew a staggering number of new mitochondria, showing an increase of more than 55% in just eight weeks.

The mice with the strongest mitochondria showed no signs of aging — even when they were the equivalent of 80 years old.

Science stands behind the power of PQQ

Biochemical Pharmacology reports that PQQ is up to 5,000 times more efficient in sustaining energy production than common antioxidants.

“Imagine 5,000 times more efficient energy,” says Dr. Sears. “PQQ has been a game changer for my patients.”

“With the PQQ in Ultra Accel II, I have energy I never thought possible,” says Colleen R., one of Dr. Sears’ patients. “I am in my 70s but feel 40 again. I think clearer, move with real energy and sleep like a baby.”

It works right away

Along with an abundance of newfound energy, users also report a sharper, more focused mind and memory, and even younger-looking skin and hair. Jerry M. from Wellington, Florida, used Ultra Accel II and was amazed at the effect.

Millions Wanting NASA-discovered nutrient is stunning the medical world by activating more youthful energy, vitality and health than CoQ10.

“I noticed a difference within a few days,” says Jerry. “My endurance almost doubled. But it’s not just in your body. You can feel it mentally, too,” says Jerry. “Not only do I feel a difference, but the way it protects my cells is great insurance against a health disaster as I get older.”

Increase your health span today

The demand for this supplement is so high, Dr. Sears is having trouble keeping it in stock. “My patients tell me they feel better than they have in years. This is ideal for people who are feeling or looking older than their age... or for those who are tired or growing more forgetful.”

“My favorite part of practicing anti-aging medicine is watching my patients get the joy back in their lives. Ultra Accel II sends a wake-up call to every cell in their bodies... and they actually feel young again.”

Where to find Ultra Accel II

Right now, the only way to get this potent combination of PQQ and super-powered CoQ10 is with Dr. Sears’ breakthrough Ultra Accel II formula.

To secure bottles of this hot, new supplement, buyers should contact the Sears Health Hotline at 1-800-846-7008 within the next 48 hours. “It takes time to get bottles shipped out to drug stores,” said Dr. Sears. “The Hotline allows us to ship the product directly to the customer.”

Dr. Sears feels so strongly about this product, he offers a 100%, money-back guarantee on every order. “Just send me back the bottle and any unused product within 90 days, and I’ll send you your money back,” said Dr. Sears.

The Hotline will be taking orders for the next 48 hours. After that, the phone number will be shut down to allow them to restock.

Call 1-800-846-7008 to secure your limited supply of Ultra Accel II. You don’t need a prescription, and those who call in the first 24 hours qualify for a significant discount. To take advantage of this great offer use Promo Code NATUA0122 when you call in.
Reagan signed the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act in 1988, California Indians have been among the biggest winners of this sea change. (Here, Akins and Bauer miss a notable irony: The Alcatraz occupation began, in part, because a developer wanted to build a casino on the island.) Today, the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians employ more than 50,000 people in Southern California. In 2006, each Pechanga citizen received $40,000 in gaming revenue every month. Some California Indians—a small minority of the state’s Indigenous population, to be sure—are getting the better end of the bargain in this new gold rush.

Akins and Bauer end their survey in 2019, when the City of Eureka returned just over 200 acres on Indian Island to the Wiyot Tribe, the third in a series of repatriations that have brought 95 percent of the island back into tribal ownership, marking a remarkable turnaround for the Wiyot and the city. In 1860, settlers murdered hundreds of Wiyots, mostly women and children, with hatchets, axes, and clubs at Indian Island. After the massacre, Wiyots on the mainland came to the island to search for survivors. They found an old woman stuck in the mud singing her mourning song and an infant crying in his dead mother’s arms. The baby, Jerry James, survived. He founded the War Paint Club (later the Indian Actors Association), which pushed for more accurate portrayals of Native Americans. Around the time Standing Bear first appeared onscreen, the Indigenous sport of surfing, invented by Native Hawaiians, arrived on the sandy beaches of Southern California. And if you'll indulge me: I even think Indians influenced California’s best NBA team—not the Los Angeles Lakers but the Golden State Warriors, who play a fast-paced game reminiscent of “rez ball”—the run-and-gun style favored on Indian reservations. After all, the Warriors’ coach, Steve Kerr, is a student of Phil Jackson, who grew up in Montana and has spoken about the influence of the nearby Fort Peck Reservation.

Indian California’s most lasting legacies, however, are political, social, and environmental, found in traditions of place-based resistance and in the proud and enduring spirit of Indigenous empowerment. These currents have not only carried First Peoples through the genocidal abyss but also continue to shape Indigenous, anti-colonial, and progressive politics. Akins and Bauer’s research reinstates many forgotten moments to the rich historical record of this intergenerational struggle. They write of Ipai defending their fisheries and exacting tribute from Spanish sailors in San Diego Bay in the 1500s and 1600s; of the coordinated Chumash and Yokuts revolt in 1824, when the Natives burned Mission Santa Inés to the ground, forced the garrison at Mission La Purisima to surrender, and captured Mission Santa Barbara; of the cunning guerrilla war waged by Kientpoos and 150 Modoc against the US military in 1872 and ’73; of the Luiseños and Cutenios, who went on strike at Pala in 1913 to regain control of their land; of the La Jolla and Rincon Indians, who sued the Southern Sierras Power Company for trespassing in 1925; of the basket maker Mabel McKay, the last Dreamer of the Pomo people, who, when asked in 1934 by a Sacramento Union journalist what Pemos do, responded wryly, “Just live”; of the Native activists at San Francisco State and UC Berkeley who joined with other students of color in the Third World Strikes in 1968, helping found the first ethnic studies departments in the country; of the Ohlone activist Corrina Gould and the land protectors who lit a sacred fire and camped out for months in 2011 until they won protection of a burial site called Sogorea Te; and of much else. “If you live in the San Francisco Bay Area, you have to know that this place is full of magic,” Gould explained at a panel I organized at the San Francisco Library in 2019. “There’s movements that have come out of the Bay Area, like the takeover of Alcatraz, the American Indian Movement, Indians of All Tribes, the Brown Berets, the Black Panthers—all kinds of technology and ideas have come out of here.”

In the broadest sense, Native California has played an outsized role in the ongoing fight for a more pluralistic and egalitarian society, a role it is already reprising in the era of climate change. As record-breaking wildfires continue to ravage California and the West, more and more policy makers are considering reinstating long-outlawed Indigenous land management practices like controlled burns. Whether Californians realize it or not, they will likely embrace more, not less, of the governance systems and lifeways of Indigenous peoples in the coming years as they adapt to a rapidly warming world.

“It’s our responsibility to take care of this place in such a way,” Gould said back in 1999. “But taking care of this place is not just for us to do. There are thousands of people that live in our lands now, and so now that you live in our lands, it is also your responsibility. Because this land also takes care of you. Those prayers that our ancestors put down for thousands of years also take care of you and your family.”
LAME THE COMIC BOOK, CHEAP AND TRANSPORTABLE, A trove of infantile fantasy and psychosexual Pop Art, often spiced with egregious stereotypes and nativist aggression, this humble medium was for a time the United States’ most ubiquitous cultural ambassador. Such is the thesis of Paul S. Hirsch’s *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*, an engaging account of the ways in which comics variously served or confounded official interests.

Vividly illustrated and enjoyably hyperbolic, *Pulp Empire* tells its tale as a kind of horror comic. Recounting the emergence of comic books during the Depression, Hirsch details how the medium was drafted during World War II to play its own modest part in defeating the Axis, then cues the scary music: Having discharged their patriotic chore and more popular than ever, comic books “showed the world that American society was racist, gruesomely violent, and soaked in sex,” creating what, in 1952, the *Daily Worker* excoriated as a “Billion Dollar Industry Glorifying Brutality.” That industry would go through many iterations but only truly recovered from the ensuing moral panic and backlash in the 1960s, when Marvel Comics reshaped its product into a more sophisticated form, with a relatively mature readership that was solidified by the dark superhero “graphic novels” of the 1980s to provide the template for the movie blockbusters of the 21st century.

Hirsch ends his history with the rise of Marvel. The saga has continued into the present day, however, with the superheroes invented by Marvel and its rival, DC Comics, dominating Hollywood, once again offering the world a questionable image of the United States and perhaps the way our culture views itself. *Pulp Empire* does not elaborate on this latest chapter. Rather, its alternately admiring and adversarial—not to mention obsessive—comic book history documents, with passion and disappointment, one fan’s discovery that his idol has two faces and feet of clay.

Magazine-like compilations of newspaper comic strips first appeared in the early 1930s, around the time that newspaper strips increasingly became vehicles for action and adventure tales. The mid-’30s saw the emergence of original comic books with titles like *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. These began to flourish, and the year 1938 brought their apotheosis with the creation of Superman. Soon, each monthly installment of his adventures, published in National Periodical’s *Action Comics*, was selling nearly 1 million copies.

Located in New York City, the comic book industry was a sort of sweatshop Hollywood. Overhead was low, piecework was the norm, and business was good, albeit exploitative. If some of the bosses had crossed over from the garment industry, so too had many of their employees. A significant number of comic book artists and writers were the children of Jewish and Italian cutters and pressers, excluded from the tonier precincts of Madison Avenue.

Early comic books resembled B movies focused on the adventures of cowboys and detectives. Those featuring superheroes sought the bigger picture. Even before the United States entered World War II, Superman and Captain America, both invented by young Jewish artists, as well as Daredevil, created by the communist and entrepreneur Lev...
Gleason, beat up on Hitler. A comic prepared for Look magazine had Superman apprehending both Hitler and Stalin. The cover of the March 1941 issue of Captain America showed the eponymous superhero punching out der Führer; the July 1941 premiere issue of Gleason’s Daredevil featured the story “Daredevil Battles Hitler.”

The prewar audience for comic books was mainly teenage boys. After Pearl Harbor, the comics’ use value—like that of the movies—was officially recognized, and the industry, like Hollywood, reported for duty. The Writers War Board, a volunteer entity established by the mystery novelist Rex Stout at the behest of the Treasury Department, saw comic books as a way to reach and teach GIs, not only honing their technical skills but inculcating democratic attitudes that included a hatred of fascism, an understanding of the need for international cooperation, and progressive perceptions of race. Thus the WWB began to commission comics. The first were instructional manuals like Army Motors explaining preventive maintenance; others promoted the purchase of war bonds. Army hospitals requested additional copies of Picture Stories From the Bible, prompting the publisher to seek an exemption from paper rationing.

Still, propaganda has its own logic, as does the comic book, and inevitably the WWB came to appreciate the degree to which the medium lent itself to explosive violence and gross caricatures—which is to say, it saw comic books as way to fuel the racial and ethnic hatred of America’s enemies. Initially a distinction was made between Germans and Nazis, but as US casualties mounted, all Germans were identified as irredeemably cruel. The Japanese, who had no analogue to the Good German, were already portrayed as evil subhumans. Indeed, as Hirsch points out, Daredevil’s usual nemesis, the Claw, was a grotesque Asian stereotype well before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Even when depicted as helpful, America’s Chinese and Filipino allies were visually indistinguishable from the Japanese enemy. As the US Army was still segregated, African American soldiers were subject to the same demeaning representations as had existed before the war or simply whitewashed out of the picture.

Hirsch argues that, given the progressive politics of their creators, comic books could have gone in a different direction. But the industry acquiesced to the wishes of the WWB, which specifically warned publishers against using members of “minority groups” as protagonists. Hirsch describes a 1944 story in Captain Marvel Jr. that concerns the attempted lynching of an innocent white man (and apparently not in the South). The pilot protagonist of a 1945 Comic Cavalcade story about an all-Black regiment, the 99th Army Air Corps, was also white.

Throughout the war, comics could be seen as good—if excessively zealous—soldiers against the threat posed by the Axis. It was only afterward that, even as a small group of comics developed the medium further, the plague, in Hirsch’s view, took hold.

Post-V-J Day, the government withdrew from the comic book business; the industry, however, did not contract. On the contrary: Thanks to the war, the audience for comic books was no longer confined to or even primarily composed of children. Moreover, the world that comic books addressed was less innocent. Superheroes were now passé: “After Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” Hirsch notes, “it was no longer so simple to pull readers into a system populated by kind heroes, accommodating police officers, and right-thinking governments.” New sorts of comic books—romance, crime, and horror—began to appear, written for adults. These were grim and “real,” not to mention cynical, sadistic, and, at times, borderline pornographic.

Comic book violence had nothing to do with battlefield glory but, reduced to an intimate scale, was shown as part of everyday American life. Created in 1942, Lev Gleason’s Crime Does Not Pay used the careers of actual convicted criminals to implicitly, if intermittently, critique oppressive social conditions and unbridled capitalism. Crime Does Not Pay wasn’t originally a top seller; it found an audience and inspired imitators in the war’s disillusioned aftermath. By 1947, the comic was selling over 2 million copies a month, more than those featuring Superman or Captain Marvel.

There is a sense in which this development paralleled the postwar proliferation of the relatively naturalistic, strikingly pessimistic Hollywood movies that French critics dubbed film noir. Hollywood, however, was strictly self-regulated; by comparison, comics books were the Wild West in their depiction of quotidian brutality and disdain for authority.

This contempt for the forces of law and order attracted the attention of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. In 1947, the year the House Committee on Un-American Activities investigated the movie industry, the first horror comic, Eerie, and the first issue of Young Romance appeared. The latter carried a cautionary notice that it was specifically intended for adult readers. However, writing an article about responsible parenting for the Los Angeles Times, Hoover linked comic books to juvenile delinquency. His admonitions were followed by those of the socially minded child psychologist Fredric Wertham and the bohemian sexologist Gershon Legman (writing, respectively, in the middlebrow Saturday Review of Literature and the proto-Beat little magazine Neorotica) on the baleful effect of comic books on children. Soon, high school students in some American cities were collecting comics and consigning them to public bonfires.

For the FBI, Gleason presented a dual threat as a purveyor of sensational comic books who was also or had been a Red and who produced comic books that were often anti-capitalist in nature and theme. He was a problem for the State Department as well. “Thanks to the movement of Cold War plague carriers—soldiers, tourists, diplomats, and American corporations—Gleason’s crime comic books and their offspring mingled with cultures around the world,” Hirsch writes.

Not that comic books weren’t also useful for those in power. Lt. Gen. Leslie Groves, erstwhile director of the Manhattan Project, recruited the comic strip characters Blondie and Dagwood, along with Mandrake the Magician, Popeye, and the warring couple Maggie and Jiggs, 7. Hoberman’s most recent book places the Marx Brothers movie Duck Soup in the context of the 1930s, the ’60s, and the present.
to explain the mysteries of atomic fission in a King Features comic, *Splitting the Atom—Starring Dagwood and Blondie*. Millions of copies were distributed. Some even made light of the situation: *Donald Duck’s Atom Bomb*, created by the Disney studio as a promotional item for a Cheerios breakfast cereal, has Donald unleash a home-made bomb (whose recipe includes “mashed meteors,” “the juice of one lightning bolt,” and “ten cat hairs”) on Duckburg, then recoup the disaster by selling the irradiated citizens his “Atomic Hair Grower.”

With regard to nuclear weapons, comics expressed the full range of popular ambivalence. Ironically, thanks to the relative lack of censorship, horror comics were particularly well-suited to the job of contemplating the fearsome nature of the bomb. Depictions of the Atomic Age ran the gamut from witless japery and cheery denial to fantasies of radioactive superheroes and dreams of one-world government to apocalyptic visions of Earth laid waste. Weirdly triumphal, the cover of the 1953 Ace comic *Atomic War!* depicted an American jet bomber flying low over a burning Moscow, a speech balloon exulting, “We’ll plant this H-bomb right in the Kremlin and avenge what the Reds did to New York, Chicago and Detroit…. Bombs away!”

As Hirsch notes, EC Comics titles like *Weird Science* and *Weird Fantasy* referred to the bomb in just about every issue, characteristically portraying it “as something too huge and too powerful for humans to manage.” Indeed, EC—which, with Bernard Krigstein’s 1955 “Master Race,” published at least one story explicitly dealing with the Holocaust—including aspects of radical politics and dissident culture. Appearing at the height of the Korean War, EC’s *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat*, both edited by future Mad creator Harvey Kurtzman, acknowledged the futility of war and, more radically, the humanity of the enemy. These comics were not only unpatriotic but, as they might well have turned up in military barracks, even subversive.

The comic book’s disruptive potential ran parallel to its popularity. Comic book circulation had been 17 million in 1940; by 1953, there were 650 titles with a combined circulation of 70 million. Before television saturated American society in the mid-1950s, comic books were the key cultural form consumed by kids and, despite their numerous adult readers, were still considered a form of juvenile entertainment. Hence the moral panic precipitated by the crime and horror comics.

Progressives, too, had reason to question some comic book content. Blatantly racist “jungle” comics like Fiction House’s *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle* and ME’s *Thun’da, King of the Congo* were mostly ignored at home. But abroad, these exotic adventure stories became the face of the Ugly American. To protest comics was also to protest the arrogance of US military might and economic power. Both the Soviets and the Chinese singled out comics as proof of American depravity. So did the French left. Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Les Temps Modernes* published Legman’s “The Psychopathology of the Comics” and excerpts from Wertham’s exposé, *Seduction of the Innocent*. The British Parliament passed a law restricting comic books that had the backing of both the Communist Party and the Church of England.

In the United States, comic books were still viewed more as objects of a subversive culture. Under government pressure, comic book publishers created a self-censorship organization in late 1954. Bland superheroes made a comeback, and the most successful publisher was Dell, which specialized in Disney and Warner Bros. cartoon characters. However, comic books were still considered to have a propaganda use value. Using Freedom of Information Act requests as well as the Library of Congress, Hirsch uncovered a 19-page document prepared by the CIA for use in the 1954 overthrow of Guatemalan reformer Jacobo Arbenz, complete with storyboards illustrating a mode of political assassination—“in essence, a crime comic book.” There were also official titles like *If an A-Bomb Falls* and *The H-Bomb and You*, made for government civil defense agencies by Commercial Comics, a firm founded by Malcolm Ater in 1946.

Originally, Commercial made political comic books. The first, prepared for the 1948 election, was *The Story of Harry S. Truman*. This was followed by a number of pro-segregation comic books made for Southern governors seeking reelection. At the same time, Ater produced comics for the State Department denouncing international communism. While the government discouraged foreign distribution of commercial comic books, some did occasionally serve official purposes. An issue of *T-Man: World Wide Crime Buster* anticipates the 1953 CIA-sponsored coup that deposed Iran’s democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh.

Then, in the early 1960s, after a half-dozen years of G-rated dullness, comic books had a resurgence. Developments at Marvel (formerly Timely Comics) created a new dialectic. *The Fantastic Four* and the characters that followed, like Spider-Man and the Hulk, revived the 1940s superhero, but with a difference: Marvel’s superheroes lived in an approximation of the real world and exhibited quasi-naturalistic psychologies. Among their issues, many of them even resented the fact that they had been transformed into superheroes (typically by atomic radiation).

For comics fans and historians of the medium, the first *Fantastic Four* comic books, drawn with remarkable panache by the veteran artist Jack Kirby, were nothing short of epochal. Hirsch, however, is less interested in Marvel’s innovations than in the ways in which its comics followed a Cold War playbook: “The story of the Fantastic Four is drenched in patriotism, paranoia, and the faith in military technology.” And he is not entirely wrong: The multimillionaire cyborg Iron Man (a veritable personification of the military-industrial complex) deployed himself to Vietnam. So did the Norse god Thor, who had also intervened in the Chinese-Indian war of 1966. Perhaps because so many of its superheroes were radiation mutants, Marvel also had a casual attitude toward nuclear weapons. Writing of one early *Fantastic Four* conflagration, Hirsch notes that “using a nuclear weapon to destroy a sea monster in the middle of Manhattan is not terribly different than Donald Duck detonating an atomic bomb in Duckburg.”
Having convincingly established Marvel’s anticommu-
nist bona fides, *Pulp Empire* rests its case. Hirsch notes
that gender roles and au-
thority figures reverted to wartime norms.
But he misses the cosmic camp quality and
general trippiness of Marvel’s comics and
how they were adjusting to the prevail-
ing anti-war, pro-civil-rights sentiments of
its student fan base, including an African
American superhero with the Black Pan-
ther. In a sense, Marvel was scrambling to
keep up: The counterculture had begun
producing its own outrageous and, in the
term of the day, “relevant” comic books.
But Marvel was keeping up nonetheless.

By the 1970s, comic books had shifted
in the pop culture firmament. As their
readership declined, old comics became
valuable collectibles while new ones (re-
branded as graphic novels)—notably *Maus*
and *Watchmen*—were recognized as a liter-
ary form. R. Crumb entered the high-art
pantheon; younger artists like Gary Panter
and Chris Ware were exhibited in art gal-
leries and museums. Hollywood also began
to recognize how comic books might serve
its interests, and in the post-*Star Wars* new-
order, the movie industry recruited super-
heroes as blockbuster protagonists. By the
late 1990s, in fact, superheroes appeared to
be taking over the movies: As in the mid-
decades of the 20th century, our new
superhero spectacles became the mask we
wear in front of the mirror, but also in front
of the rest of the world.

However monolithic, the Marvel/DC
universe has addressed some of the racism
and sexism of the past, with *Black Panther*
and *Wonder Woman* as well as last year’s
*Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*.
There is even room for a smidgen of critical
thinking: *V for Vendetta* was almost imme-
diately adapted as an oppositional film; *The
Joker* is a movie that turned superheroism
on its head; and far more than the original
comic, the TV version of *Watchmen* de-
mands a new reading of American history.
But how meaningful are these exceptions?

Hirsch correctly acknowledges that
comic books are now “secondary to the
products they spawn”—movie franchises,
video games, TV, and ancillary merchan-
dise, not to mention fan culture. Another
way to put it: The humble comic book
is our cultural DNA. Thus, *Pulp Empire*
ends more or less in medias res.
Like any self-respecting superhero
movie, it deserves a sequel.

**Boxed In**

The Lehman Trilogy’s theater of financial malfecasance

*BY ALISA SOLOMON*

HORTLY AFTER THE SPECTACULAR COLLAPSE OF LEHMAN
Brothers in 2008 and the global recession that came
tumbling after it, an Italian playwright named Stefano
Massini began working on a fictionalized account of
the men who’d founded the eponymous firm a centu-
ry and a half earlier. *I Capitoli del Crollo*, or *Chapters of
the Fall*, saw its first productions in 2010 on Italian stages, followed by
performances on national radio. And then the play took off in various
translations across Europe, drawing acclaim
throughout the 2010s in France, Germany,
Spain, and elsewhere. Despite its title, the
play is mostly about the rise of Lehman
Brothers; it follows three generations of
Lehman men to tell a giddy tale about the
growth of their bank and, by extension,
ravenous American capitalism. In 2016,
Massini published a 760-page expanded
version, *Qualcosa sui Lehman* (*Something
About the Lehmans*), which was billed as a
novel and, like the playscript, was written
in a sort of Homeric free verse befitting the
epic ambitions of the project.

No doubt, part of the appeal of Massi-
ni’s work for directors was the open-ended
nature of the play. Written in the third
person, with no lines assigned to partic-
ular characters, it left theater artists free
to shape their productions as they wished,
even as they hewed to Massini’s script.
Some European stagings used seven actors to play the Lehman men across the 164-year saga, as well as the dozens of other people they encountered; others used four or as many as 12.

The English adaptation by Ben Power—now called The Lehman Trilogy—uses three actors. Under the direction of Sam Mendes, it was a smash hit at London’s National Theater in 2018 and then in the West End. When it moved to the Park Avenue Armory in New York City the following year, tickets drew as much as $2,000 on the resale market—an almost too on-the-nose replication of the Lehmans’ own gleeful discovery in the play of the profitable manipulations of supply and demand.

The show was slated to move to Broadway in the spring of 2020. With the reopening of Broadway theaters after an 18-month shutdown, The Lehman Trilogy finally began performances this past October at the Nederlander, where it ran until January 2; it will begin a series of performances at the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles in March. Meanwhile, an English translation of the novel (by Richard Dixon) came out last fall.

The terrific success of the show thus far makes sense on the level of glossy spectacle. Running about three and a quarter hours, the Mendes production zips along with surprising alacrity as three stellar actors—Simon Russell Beale, Adam Godley, and Adrian Lester—metamorphose into infants, elderly men, and everyone in between through shifts in stance, vocal pitch, cadence, and expression, without the aid of costume changes or props. The actors play within a rotating glass box, scrawling on its walls from time to time when, for example, they adjust the sign for their business to reflect its evolution from Alabama dry goods store to plantation cotton brokerage to international finance or -gan. Behind them, gorgeous photographic projections of New York Harbor, Southern cotton fields, the Manhattan skyline, and a chilling cascade of stock market numbers help set time, place, and mood.

The plot of The Lehman Trilogy runs on twin engines. One is an archetypal immigrant story: The forebears arrive, make good, and bestow fortune on the ever more assimilated generations who come after them. The other is a grand historical narrative about American wealth: Enterprising individuals earn riches, thereby nourishing a national economy based on private ownership. Both hackneyed story lines, of course, are myths, but it is in their interlinking that The Lehman Trilogy enters troubling territory. By tracing presumed economic progress—and destruction—through one family, the play suggests that broad political institutions and interests, as well as myriad other actors, have had little role in shaping American capitalism. What’s more, that Massini’s text dwells on the fact that this particular family is Jewish drives the work headlong into virulent stereotypes. Like a subprime mortgage, the play’s shiny seductions obscure the dangers within.

The story starts (after a brief tableau set in 2008, as the firm is about to collapse) with Hayum Lehmann arriving from Bavaria in 1844. “He had been dreaming of America,” Hayum tells us of himself. (Because the text remains mostly in the third person, the action is narrated in cloying story-theater fashion rather than truly dramatized.) “The son of a cattle merchant, a circumcised Jew, with only one piece of luggage,
stood as still as a telegraph pole, on Dock No. 4 in the port of New York. Thank God he’d arrived. Baruch HaShem!”

Soon a clueless immigration clerk changes “Hayum” to “Henry” and drops an “n” from his last name. Never mind that this cliché of customs agents rather changes “Hayum” to “Henry” and drops an “n” from his last name. Never mind that this result is way above baseline, shall we? “I tried the 10:13 pheromone for the first time last night. My husband professed his love for me 4 times in 30 mins...Let’s just say that this result is way above baseline, shall we?”

The play labors to draw this arc of moral decline: The Lehman’s admirable ambition, which underwrites the building of America, turns malignant when they abandon Judaism and begin to worship profit, going so far as to compare Wall Street to a divine miracle and the stock exchange to a synagogue. But that would-be moral arc is twisted, mangled, and bent. First, the Lehman’s enterprise was malignant from the start: Its profits—like the national economy the Lehmans helped develop—depended on slavery. As Sven Beckert argues in Empire of Cotton, slavery was the “beating heart” of the burgeoning global economy that cotton spawned. Some curator lines in the play make mention of this fact. After the Civil War—the two surviving Lehnman brothers both supported the Confederacy—a local doctor tells Mayer that the South was bound to lose because “Everything that was built here was built on a crime. The roots run so deep you cannot see them, but the ground beneath our feet is poisoned.” But did Mayer really need to have this pointed out to him?

The play fails to mention that the Lehman shop stood opposite Montgomery’s central slave-auction block, and that Mayer himself had seven enslaved people in his household. That’s merely a fraction of the 1,250 enslaved people that J.P. Morgan acquired as capital, or the 13,000 that Morgan’s firm accepted as collateral while this ballyhooed hero of Wall Street was also forging monopolies, eating up small businesses, fixing prices, raking in millions, and wielding more power than the Lehmans ever caught scent of. Nonetheless, there is no J.P. Morgan in the play. There is no George Peabody either, and no Anthony Drexel, the Philadelphia financier and early mentor to Morgan. It’s as if the Lehmans alone created and perverted capital speculation and American investment banking. Massini narrows the world of Gilded Age capitalism and all that it wrought to the daring and avarice of a single Jewish dynasty.

Some reviewers have decried the play’s egregious neglect of the role of slavery in the Lehmans’ fortunes, but its constant harping on the family’s Jewishness has gone almost entirely unremarked on by the critical establishment, likely because the Jewish immigrant motifs it invokes are so ingrained as to be taken for granted. True, the members of the third generation were less religiously observant than their immigrant grandfathers, but assimilation moves along more jagged lines than the play recognizes. Perhaps Henry did affix a mezuzah to his doorpost in Montgomery and kiss it each time he entered a synagogue. But at the same time, according to Stephen Birmingham’s 1967 book Our Crowd, the Lehmans of Montgomery quickly blended in, becoming “slave-owning, Southern-accented, and devotees of Southern cooking, even of...pork.”

Alisa Solomon is the director of the Arts & Culture concentration at Columbia Journalism School.
ne wonders why so many fine theater artists went to such elaborate ends to tell what amounts to a slender and dodgy story. The theater can certainly accommodate a trenchant and highly entertaining take on the finance industry amid the mayhem of deregulation, as Caryl Churchill showed in her great 1987 satire *Serious Money*, and it can also accommodate more complex and situated tales of entrepreneurial Jewish families amid an industrializing world, as in I.J. Singer’s *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, adapted for the Yiddish stage in 1937. The American theater has long been a space that welcomes a more textured exploration of Jewish assimilation—from Clifford Odets and Arthur Miller to Woody Allen, Donald Margulies, Deb Margolin, Tony Kushner, Lisa Kron, David Adjmi, Dan Fishback, and on and on and on.

*The Lehman Trilogy*, however, is not seriously interested in its own themes. It remains so narrowly concerned with the transactional lives of its protagonists that it can’t place them in history in any meaningful way. For the Lehmans, the Civil War is primarily an impediment to cotton sales (to thwart the Union blockade, they send goods to Europe); they survive the 1929 crash by keeping their heads down and refusing to help other banks, reasoning that if those take the fall, they might hang on. Not even the rise of Hitler goes even further, liberally sprinkling in Yiddish phrases.)

All this misplaced mishegoss underlines how the Lehmans’ Jewishness in the play is, at best, an instrument, a gauge for marking a disintegration of values and the disintegration of America itself. The play wants to critique the cruel intertemporance of American finance that made Lehman Brothers implode, but the vast human consequences of that failure—the millions of Americans who lost their homes to foreclosure, for starters—aren’t considered here. So the tragedy we are presented with is one family’s tragedy, a family we are supposed to care about by dint of fond feelings for old bootstrap-yanking tropes and Yiddish lullabies, as well as the considerable charm of the actors.
At the end of the first week of January, as Covid-19 surged through the country’s newly reopened schools, a group of students at the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) came together to demand “a safe learning environment.” In a public letter, the students made it clear that they are “not comfortable going to school with the rising cases” and demanded that the district provide them with basic Covid protections—including KN95/N95 masks for every student, twice-weekly PCR and rapid tests, and more outdoor spaces so kids could eat safely—or let them return to online learning. “If these demands are not met, we will be striking by not attending school,” the letter reads. “We will be striking until we get what we need to be safe.”

The letter has been signed by over 1,000 students, and their efforts have inspired similar actions around the country. I talked to organizers Ayleen Serrano and Nikayla Dean, both 15-year-old sophomores at Oakland’s MetWest High School, about their efforts to make their school safe. What follows are excerpts from our conversation.

—Eoin Higgins

**On going to high school during a pandemic:**

**AS:** I started high school online. It was very hard at first. I had been in in-person school my whole life and then, “OK, we’re going to close down for a couple days, and we expect a week to two weeks in online school.” Then, out of nowhere, we did a whole year of online school.

Last August, when we started going back to in-person school, it was kind of normal. Yeah, you’ll see the kids with masks, and that was a little bit weird.... There were still cases here and there. [But] I didn’t really see it till after winter break, when there was a big outburst of Covid cases.

**ND:** When we came back from winter break, my parents were even more iffy about it because of the variant and the rising cases. It’s not just going to school, but going to school, being around people, and then bringing it back home. And then my mom has to go to work. My dad has to go to work. They interact with people who have kids, so it’s not just me.... That was something we had a conversation about.

**AS:** In my classroom, there were two students who just got told they couldn’t come back. For the ninth graders, they went from eight students to two students.... Classrooms are empty, hallways are empty.

**On deciding to take action to make their school safe:**

**ND:** We came back to school on Monday, and there was a rise in cases, so it was something we basically talked about as soon as class started: “How do you feel about this?” Everybody was kind of in groups, and we all came up with ideas.... Ayleen and one of my classmates came up with the idea of maybe doing a boycott or strike.

**AS:** That’s kind of how it all started. For the petition, we knew we couldn’t just drag out of nowhere, “These are the demands”—you can’t even call them demands because, in reality, they’re just things that the district promised us. And we started the petition. And then we started posting it on social media, and that’s how we started getting attention.

I was very shocked that we were able to get help from other kids and that we’re almost to the 1,000-mark of signatures. It amazes me that we got so much attention.

**AS:** Besides the strike, we’re also doing a sick-out. [Administrators said that] someone just donated 10 million KN95 masks, could we call off the sick-out? No, we will not do that. Same with the strike. Just because you guys are giving us one of our demands, we won’t be calling it off because that’s just meeting one of them. This really won’t stop till they give us all our demands. We do not have faith in them because they’ve been promising us mass weekly testing for the past two or three months, and we haven’t seen it—we still aren’t seeing it. So we don’t have faith in that.

**On inspiring other students:**

**ND:** This started with the OUSD, but it kind of moved everywhere. We’ve gotten e-mails from Canada, Texas, Florida, asking to use ours as a template. People are offering support, to sign their names. It’s amazing to see.

**“This really won’t stop till they give us all our demands. We do not have faith in them.”**
INTRODUCTORY SPECIAL:
4 EXCEPTIONAL WINES FOR $29.98 AND ONLY 1¢ SHIPPING!

Each wine comes with a detailed tasting note from our buyers featuring insights into what makes the wine unique, the stories behind the wine, a rundown of its flavors and aromas, and delicious food-pairing suggestions.

Your membership supports The Nation’s indispensable, one-of-a-kind journalism. The Nation Wine Club sources wines that reflect progressive values.

ORDER NOW AT THENATIONWINECLUB.COM/2022 OR CALL 800.946.3568
Inspiring a greater and greener world, one IRA at a time.

Our women-led, impact-leading firm uses independent ESG research to continuously evaluate the social and environmental performance of our investments. Together, we can create a better world for people and planet.

Invest in the Domini Impact Equity Fund℠
Learn more at domini.com/moreinfo

Before investing, consider the Fund’s investment objectives, risks, charges and expenses. Contact us for a prospectus containing this and other information. Read it carefully. The Domini Impact Equity Fund is not insured and is subject to certain risks including impact investing, portfolio management, information, market, recent events, and mid- to large-cap companies’ risks. You may lose money. Shares of the Domini Fund are only offered in the United States. DSIL Investment Services LLC, Distributor. 9/21