“Reading newspapers in the state of Maine is like paying somebody to tell you lies.”

“He’s Back!

Former Maine Governor Paul LePage called himself “Trump before Trump.” Now he’s ready for a comeback.

Sasha Abramsky

“Let me tell you something: Black people come up the highway and they kill Mainers.”

“Tell them to kiss my butt.”

“What I think we ought to do is bring the guillotine back. We could have public executions.”

“You shoot at the enemy. You try to identify the enemy... people of color or people of Hispanic origin.”

“You must buy health insurance or pay the new Gestapo—the IRS.”

“If you want a good education, go to private schools. If you can’t afford it, tough luck.”

To the NAACP: “Tell them to kiss my butt.”

GRIEVING IN BUFFALO

INDIA WALTON

To the NAACP: “Tell them to kiss my butt.”
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Paul LePage (“Trump before Trump”) is staging a comeback in Maine.

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GARNET HENDERSON
One woman’s late abortion tells us everything about a post-Roe world.

Fear and Loathing in San Francisco
CHRISTOPHER D. COOK
In this reputedly progressive city, tech and real estate money has bankrolled a centrist backlash.

Mic Drop
The women helping drive the anti-abortion movement.
NICOLE NEHRIG

Candids
The art of Vivian Maier.
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The Stalwart
Hubert Harrison’s radical life and times.
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HBO’s My Brilliant Friend.
KATHERINE HILL

Skeletons (poem)
DEBORAH LANDAU

“The Supreme Court Is Broken. How Do We Fix It?”
RYAN DOERFLER AND ELIE MYSTAL

Letters
FRANCES KISSLING
CLAUDIA DREIFUS

No Offense
Censorship over Ukraine has gone to extremes.
DANIEL BROMWICH

Deadline Poet
The Next Move
CALVIN TRILLIN

“We won’t come close to the changes this country needs unless progressives transform the Democratic Party from within.”

Read this issue on May 28 at TheNation.com—before anyone else. Activate your online account: TheNation.com/register
Our Buffalo community is grieving right now. We’re grieving for Pearl Young, a grandmother who volunteered every Saturday at her church’s food pantry. We’re grieving for Miss Kat Massey, a dear friend of mine who would write a $10 check every month to the community land trust I ran. We’re grieving for Londin Thomas, an 8-year-old Black girl who hid in a milk cooler while a mass shooter opened fire on a supermarket full of shoppers in East Buffalo, killing 10 people and wounding three others. Londin survived, but she will live with the trauma of that day for the rest of her life. The shooter’s victims were mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunties—pillars of our community who were looked up to and loved.

Many elected officials and leaders have offered their “thoughts and prayers” to our community. But I’m going to be frank with you: If those kind words aren’t backed up with action, you can keep them.

This attack was not an isolated incident. It is part of a long history of racial terror and violence that dates all the way back to the country’s inception. Colfax, in 1873; Tulsa, in 1921; Rosewood, in 1923; Birmingham, in 1963—and now Buffalo. Black people’s existence in this country, since we first were taken from our homes, has been marked by terror. And if we’re not working actively to undo the systems of racism and harm, then nothing in this country will change.

The fact that Buffalo is one of the most racially segregated cities in the nation didn’t happen by chance, but by design. The Kensington Expressway was built to move people from the center of Buffalo to the suburbs as quickly as possible without having to witness the poor living conditions of the city’s Black residents. Even today, people in East Buffalo, through which the highway runs, have higher rates of asthma and other preventative health conditions.

Racism, similarly, is baked into our nation’s political and economic systems. It’s why we still have the Jim Crow filibuster, which stands in the way of commonsense gun laws and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. It’s why Black Buffalonians have suffered from decades of disinvestment, dispossession, and exploitation at the hands of big banks, landlords, and corporations.

The Tops supermarket where the shooting happened is in the heart of a Black working-class neighborhood in East Buffalo that continues to experience housing disrepair, air and water pollution, and poor access to health care, jobs, and food. The Tops store was one of the few places where people could buy fresh produce and fill their prescriptions and where young people could find stable jobs. Now, with the supermarket closed, people have nowhere to shop, and food apartheid in East Buffalo will grow even worse.

Following the attack, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown called for more funding for the notoriously brutal Buffalo Police Department. But more police and surveillance in our community wouldn’t have stopped this attack. And we owe it to our communities not to throw false solutions at the problem.

If we want to prevent future tragedies, we need to begin addressing racism and white supremacy at its source, not at its culmination. How does a system that devalues Black lives expect the members of society to value them?

Our leaders can no longer afford to run away from these issues, because they’re not going away. We need to treat white supremacy and structural racism as the moral crises that they are and make deep investments in Black and brown communities. Redlining and housing covenants made our community an easy target. The shooter was able to narrow down his list to a few locations where Black residents shop because of decades of racist policies.

We also need to increase the funding for community-based and culturally competent organizations providing care and support to people on the ground. We must combat the dangerous myths—like replacement theory—being promoted by the GOP and right-wing media outlets. And we must push back against nationwide efforts to prevent teaching the truth about our history in schools.

The shooter will be incarcerated for a long time. But there is no punishment that can erase the fear and trauma that people experienced or turn back the clock on that terrifying afternoon. True safety for our communities will come only when we have the courage to stand up to white supremacy and racism in their many forms.

India Walton is a senior adviser for the New York Working Families Party and a former Buffalo mayoral candidate.
Which Side Are They On?

Progressives need to recognize that the DCCC and the DSCC are not our allies.

After the leak of Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito’s venomous draft opinion overturning Roe v. Wade, activists took to the streets and money flooded into Democratic Party coffers, as the party’s leaders vowed to make Republican extremism on abortion a defining issue in this fall’s critical congressional elections.

And so, in the hotly contested Democratic primary in Texas’s 28th District between the pro-choice Latina challenger, Jennifer Cisneros, and the incumbent, Henry Cuellar, the sole remaining anti-choice House Democrat, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and the Democratic leadership are pulling out all the stops… in support of Cuellar.

WTF. Cisneros, a 28-year-old immigration lawyer supported by Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and various progressive electoral groups, forced Cuellar into a May 25 runoff—which Cuellar appears to have won by an extremely thin margin, though the votes were still being counted as we went to press. If the party leaders had just stayed neutral, Cisneros would have been the odds-on favorite to win the primary—and run as a pro-choice progressive champion in a district that leans Democratic.

Instead, Representative Jim Clyburn stumped with Cuellar, dismissing those who think “we have to agree on everything” as “sophomoric”: “If we’re gonna be a big-tent party, we got to be a big-tent party,” Clyburn told reporters. “I don’t believe we ought to have a litmus test in the Democratic Party.”

But Cuellar isn’t just anti-choice. He is Big Oil’s favorite Democrat. He consistently votes against lowering drug prices, winning the favor of Big Pharma. He gets an A rating from the NRA. He’s against the PRO Act, President Biden’s core legislation to help empower workers. For a kicker, his House and campaign offices were raided by the FBI in January. (His campaign says he is not a target of the investigation).

Democrats shouldn’t have to agree on “everything,” but it’s hardly “sophomoric” to suggest they stand for something.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is unrepentant, stating: “I support my incumbents. I support every one of them, from right to left. That is what I do.” The DCCC also weighed in heavily to help Shontel Brown turn back the challenge from Nina Turner, a true progressive champion, in Ohio. In Oregon’s newly drawn Fifth District, the DCCC backed Representative Kurt Schrader against a popular progressive, Jamie McLeod-Skinner, even after local party committees representing about 90 percent of the vote formally asked it to stay out of the race. Schrader, the chair of the House Democrats’ conservative Blue Dog Coalition, is infamous for being one of the three Big Pharma Democrats who worked to block legislation that would lower prices for prescription drugs. With super PACs linked to AIPAC, the American pro-Israel lobby, pouring money into the race, Schrader even snagged an endorsement from President Biden.

McLeod-Skinner had the support of Senator Warren and a broad range of local unions and progressive groups. Despite being outspent 10 to 1, McLeod-Skinner—who tagged Schrader as the Joe Manchin of the House—has a likely insurmountable lead in a race in which computer glitches have delayed the final vote count.

The DCCC not only protects incumbents; it also recruits designer candidates for open seats, favoring those with military or intelligence credentials and suitably pasteurized moderate views. Its show horse, Representative Conor Lamb, ran in the Pennsylvania Senate primary touting his ability to work with Republicans. Lamb was, as the Daily Beast put it, “sheared” by Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman, the 6-foot-8, tattooed, goateed Sanders supporter running openly against the Manchin wing of the Democratic Party.

Yet even more destructive than the ac-
tions of the DCCC during this cycle has been the tsunami of outside super PAC money that corporate and special interests have unleashed on progressive candidates in Democratic primaries.

When Brown upset Turner in the 2020 primary, big-time outside expenditures made the difference. That provided the playbook rolled out against progressives in primaries across the country this year. For example, AIPAC is putting out big bucks for the first time. Its first-round endorsements featured more Republicans than Democrats, including dozens who voted against certifying the 2020 presidential election, but it seems particularly focused on assailing progressive women of color.

In Pennsylvania’s Allegheny County, Summer Lee, a progressive powerhouse and state legislator, earned endorsements from union locals, state legislature colleagues, Sanders, and Justice Democrats, among others. The Democratic establishment consolidated around Steve Irwin, a former Republican congressional staffer and anti-union attorney. As Sludge reports, three out of every four dollars supporting Irwin came from AIPAC or super PACs associated with it, totaling more than $2.6 million. Despite this, Lee held on to win by a very small margin. And in North Carolina, sadly, Nida Allam, a proven progressive favored to win the nomination in the state’s Fourth District, was undone by the $2.4 million dumped into the race by AIPAC and its various allies.

In Oregon’s Sixth District, Andrea Salinas, a progressive candidate backed by prominent local and national liberal and Latino groups, found herself challenged by a political unknown, Carrick Flynn, whose candidacy was basically invented by $13 million in independent expenditures plopped down by a super PAC funded by a crypto billionaire. Bizarrely, Pelosi’s House Majority PAC spent $1 million for Flynn as well. Happily, Oregon voters resented the effrontery, and Salinas won going away.

All of this is a dramatic reminder that even as Democrats mobilize against a Trump-dominated Republican Party that poses a direct threat to our democracy, the fierce battle over who and what the Democrats represent must continue. The sabotage of Biden’s reform agenda by the likes of Manchin in the Senate and the Big Pharma Democrats in the House demonstrates that we won’t come close to the changes this country desperately needs unless progressives transform the Democratic Party from within.

In this struggle, the party committees—particularly the DCCC and its Senate equivalent, the DSCC—often stand in the way, along with the massive war chests of today’s Gilded Age special interests.

In response, progressives have been building an independent infrastructure to recruit and support insurgent candidates. Independent endorsements from progressive leaders like Sanders, Warren, Ocasio-Cortez, and Congressional Progressive Caucus head Pramila Jayapal galvanize support. The Working Families Party, Our Revolution, Justice Democrats, Way to Lead, Democrats for America, and the Progressive Change Campaign Committee seek out and help support progressive challengers. Progressive unions like SEIU and issue-specific groups like the Sunrise Movement increasingly endorse in primaries as well. These can help counter the outside super PAC money, but as the victories of Fetterman, Lee, and Salinas demonstrate, only ongoing—and on-the-ground—organizing can withstand the blizzard of negative ads and slanders that progressives will face. It is long past time for progressive donors and activists to stop contributing to the DCCC and its allied PACs and focus on building this independent infrastructure for change.
A Right to Be Human

The anti-abortion movement’s justification for overturning Roe is rooted in the dehumanization of women.


Nicole Nehrig

A Right to Be Human

The anti-abortion movement’s justification for overturning Roe is rooted in the dehumanization of women.

There are staggering numbers of women helping to drive the anti-abortion fight. Currently at the center of the action is Mississippi Attorney General Lynn Fitch. She petitioned the Supreme Court to review Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, which, according to the recently leaked court opinion, will result in Roe v. Wade being overturned. Fitch uses her own story of raising three children as a divorced, single working mother to justify her anti-abortion position: that overturning Roe will “empower” women, giving them a chance to “redirect their lives.” Fitch disregards the fact that the majority of women who seek abortions are already mothers and that working parents in the United States are disadvantaged by the lack of government-mandated parental leave and subsidized child care. As a result, motherhood is more likely to empower women who have the financial and social means to succeed in this role. For many women, having children, or having more children, increases their financial needs and makes regular employment more difficult, pushing them into poverty, which the child welfare system often conflates with neglect. Far from being empowered, these women experience the humiliating intrusion of investigations to determine their parental fitness and custodial rights.

Beyond Fitch’s blindness to the actual experience of many mothers in this country, what is so insidious about her position is that it rests on the assumption that only motherhood truly empowers women. It extends the traditional conception of motherhood as the only natural position for women and the only acceptable realm within which to assert power, leaving power in all other realms primarily to men.

The notion that we must have children to fully realize ourselves reflects a view of women as fundamentally incomplete. We are not sufficient on our own but can gain value as an extension of a man or by becoming a mother. Through self-sacrifice and care of others, we can be made whole. Our role as subservient caregivers determines not just our identity but our humanity. For anti-abortion activists, an embryo or fetus is more important than the woman whose body it resides in, and her life should be sacrificed for it. This clump of cells is more human than she is.

Women and girls have long been taught that we are only as good as what we provide to others. The residue of these messages plagues me even after significant efforts to educate myself about where they come from and to disentangle them from my sense of self-worth.

As a psychologist and parent of two young children, I spend the bulk of my day caring for others. These are meaningful activities and certainly challenge me to grow in valuable ways. But what challenges me the most is not doing for others but allowing myself to just be. Trusting that I am enough as I am to have value and rights.

My struggles are mirrored by so many of the women I see in therapy, who feel they must meet others’ needs before voicing their own, shrink themselves to make room for others, and not burden anyone by their existence. They wonder why they lack confidence, and they blame themselves.

These challenges often get worse with motherhood; many women feel that they lose themselves as their needs are subsumed by those of their children. Women who become mothers show declines in psychological health compared with women of the same age who are not mothers. They have higher rates of depression, and those rates increase with added life adversities (poverty, divorce, underemployment), which are more prevalent among women of color. Women with children are also at higher risk of intimate partner violence and are less likely to leave abusive partners than women without children.

The messages that lead women to internalize a sense of inferiority come from all the usual sources—the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (particularly mothers), wage gaps (which widen substantially when women have children), and fights over women’s rights to govern their bodies—but also directly from other women.

Our society weaponizes women against women. For Fitch to ascend the ladder of the conservative political structure, she had to make herself useful in a way that members of the male majority can’t: As a woman on their side, she lends them credibility in the fight to take away women’s rights. Worse, Fitch transforms their intentions to assert dominance and control into a message that, through submission to authority and acceptance of the position conferred on us by men, women can be empowered.

Like our worth, our power has traditionally been determined by our relationships to men and our roles as mothers. This is how women perpetuate the idea that our lives are about deference and self-sacrifice.
That in losing ourselves through the care of others, we find ourselves—as we ought to be by patriarchal standards. And having children is a way to justify our existence.

Women like Fitch, and there are many, are not likely to give up their alliance with this power structure, because it has put them among the oppressors rather than the oppressed. But millions of women—and trans and nonbinary people—suffer as a result. We have been taught to accept the forces of oppression rather than struggle against them, and that if we suffer, it’s our own fault for wanting more than the role afforded to us. That is the kind of “empowerment” Fitch is advocating: empowerment through submission and compliance with a system that benefits wealthy white men above all. Empowerment that comes at the expense of women’s agency, autonomy, and humanity.

In our fight for abortion rights, women must help one another see ourselves as human first. Only then can we choose whether to become mothers.

Nicole Nebrig, PhD, is a clinical and research psychologist in Brooklyn.

Can Another War Save Us From Ourselves?

The policing of public opinion over Ukraine goes to extremes unimagined during the fight against Hitler.

A merica has been involved in a crisis of conscience for some time. Most of our recent political controversies have ended in denunciations and upheavals that seem off the charts by the standard of all previous American experience outside war. Consider the right-wing birther movement, which questioned the authenticity of President Obama’s citizenship, and the left-liberal Russiagate scandal, which accused President Trump of being a Russian agent. The loudest voices leveling these charges came from people with no interest in evidence. Rather, the accusations served their purpose within the factions that constitute the “base” of the major parties.

Barack Obama, a few years into his presidency, got into the habit of saying (in a tight spot when Americans seemed to support a bad cause): “It’s not who we are as a people.” But do we know who we are as a people? On March 3, the Metropolitan Opera severed its relations with the singer Anna Netrebko because, in speaking out against the Ukraine war, she failed to denounce Russian President Vladimir Putin and said a word in defense of artistic freedom:

I am opposed to this war. I am Russian and I love my country but I have many friends in Ukraine and the pain and suffering right now breaks my heart. I want this war to end and for people to be able to live in peace…. I want to add, however: forcing artists, or any public figure, to voice their political opinions in public and to denounce their homeland is not right.

Would any foreign artist in living memory have been so publicly dishonored for not reciting the prepared script?

According to a July 2020 Cato Institute poll, almost two out of three Americans are afraid to voice their political opinions because they fear they might offend someone. They save those opinions for election time—and we should not be surprised that the results of elections surprise us. In 2016, the result turned into a permanent shock—a slow-rolling, everlasting panic—for Democrats. The same happened to Republicans in 2020. Constitutional democracy requires a peaceful transfer of power following free elections. This, in turn, depends on the custom that losers concede with grace and winners are allowed their innings. But a great many Democrats, led by Hillary Clinton, were persuaded that the 2016 election had been stolen by Putin. Four years later, a majority of Republicans, led by Donald Trump, came to believe
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Medical first: Multiply the “power generators” in your cells

Dr. 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, anti-aging medicine yet — a 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.

**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.

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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.”

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To secure bottles of this hot, new supplement, buyers should contact the Sears Health Hotline at 1-800-226-7151 within the next 48 hours. “It takes time to get bottles shipped out to drug stores,” says Dr. Sears. “The Hotline allows us to ship the product directly to the customer.”

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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 1-800-226-7151 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 NATUA0522 when you call in.
that the 2020 election was stolen by some combination of illegal ballot-harvesting, deliberate miscounts, and tampering with computers.

Both eruptions portended the loss of a national morale and discipline. If you were a foreign leader looking at the United States, you would say to yourself: “That is an unstable country; that is a troubled people. How can we enter into agreements with people who do not trust themselves?”

On May 13, Steny Hoyer, the Democratic majority leader in the House of Representatives, said that the US is now “at war” with Russia. Congressional Republicans were overwhelming, and Democrats unanimous, in voting for a $40 billion war-assistance package to be sent to Ukraine. Apparently without any serious debate, we find ourselves on the brink of all-out war in defense of a favored nation, against a nuclear-armed power, Russia.

Recall that Ukraine was the source of the information that launched the first impeachment of President Trump, and that Trump’s offense took the form of an extortionate demand for information about the salary paid by a Ukrainian energy firm, Burisma Holdings, in return for unexplained services by the son of our current president, Joe Biden. It is at points like this that Roman orators would break off a speech with a silence that signified: “Words fail me.”

George Washington said in his Farewell Address: “The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism.”

Concerning the division of other nations into friend and enemy, Washington added: “Nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded…. The peace often, sometimes perhaps the liberty, of nations, has been the victim.”

Washington’s warning applies with summary accuracy to American foreign policy since 2001.

Today we are far gone in “passionate attachments” and “inveterate antipathies.” But while we instruct the world in democracy, our own politics has become a scene of uninhibited aggression that undermines our standing as instructors. One party refuses to dissociate itself from the riot that burst into the Capitol and sought to disrupt the certification of the 2020 election vote. The other party answers the sudden increase of shootings in American cities after June 2020 by blaming it on Covid.

What we have seen in the last 10 years, intensified in the last five, and raised to a fever pitch in the last two, is the ascent of mob psychology and hysteria on an exorbitant scale. It shows in our lazy, frightened acceptance of censorship—lately elevated to the point where Facebook and Twitter could jointly announce a ban on all messages, news, and communications that “undermine trust in the Ukrainian government.” This kind of blackout was considered beneath our dignity in the fight against Hitler and the Cold War.

The US proxy war in Ukraine, and the bipartisan self-satisfaction with which many Americans regard it, is an exercise of displacement. We are risking a world war in the belief that only a world war can repair our broken democracy. But are we so helpless? And are we so important? If we could decide “who we are as a people,” we might go some way to reduce the terrible destruction of another war. We might even earn thanks from the billions who are not Americans but who are compelled to share the planet with us.
Let’s start with the obvious: I’m in favor of jurisdiction stripping, weather stripping, or stripping while dancing on a pole if that’s what it takes to stop the Supreme Court from turning the clock back to 1859. I’m in favor of using any and all nonviolent means available to stop the court’s current embrace of bigotry and misogyny. If jurisdiction stripping reminds the court that it is a coequal branch of government and not a judicial clergy, superior to the elected branches, then I’m all for it.

The legal theory behind what has come to be known as jurisdiction stripping is sound. The Supreme Court gave itself the power to declare unconstitutional both laws passed by Congress and orders signed by the president in the 1803 case Marbury v. Madison. This power of judicial review was not written into the Constitution nor contemplated during its ratification battle. The Supreme Court invented it, and that means Congress can, in theory, determine what is constitutional and what is not.

What happens next depends a lot on what kind of law Congress attempts to shield from the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the Constitution. If it’s the kind of law that requires the states to do, or not do, something, the states that agree with Congress will go along with Congress, while the states that agree with the Supreme Court will refuse to follow the “unconstitutional” congressional mandate. Think about jurisdiction stripping in the abortion context: Congress can pass a law that protects a woman’s right to choose and prohibits the Supreme Court from reviewing it.
The Debate

The religious fundamentalists will ask the Supreme Court to review the law anyway. It’s likely the forced-birth caucus on the Supreme Court will decide that Congress cannot strip its power and then determine, again, that Congress doesn’t have the power to protect women’s rights. Texas will listen to the court and outlaw abortions; California will listen to Congress and allow them. Nothing will have been solved.

In contrast, the types of laws that are ripe for jurisdiction stripping are those whose implementation the president, as head of the executive branch, has full control over. An environmental regulation on power plants might work. The Supreme Court might say the regulation is unconstitutional, but when armed agents of the federal government come to shut down the delinquent power plant, there’s little a Supreme Court decision can do to stop them.

But think about what I’m saying and play the tape all the way to the end. Jurisdiction stripping works only if a president, in command of an army, is willing to defy the Supreme Court’s view of itself. That is a dangerous game to play, especially if the goal is to “restore” democracy.

Jurisdiction stripping—the kind that doesn’t lead to a military takeover—requires the Supreme Court to willingly relinquish some of its power but does not reform or incentivize the court to relinquish that power. That’s why I favor court expansion instead. The problem, to my mind, is not that the Supreme Court is powerful but that we’ve decided to let conservative extremists wield that power, unchecked, for life.

But imagine this: Instead of starting with jurisdiction stripping, add 20 justices to the court who believe that jurisdiction stripping is constitutional—and then pass legislation not subject to judicial review. Or add 20 justices who believe the Supreme Court should have a code of ethics—and then pass ethics reform. Or give me 20 justices who believe the Supreme Court is powerful but that we’ve decided to let conservative extremists wield that power, unchecked, for life.

The problem is not that the Supreme Court is powerful, but that conservative extremists wield that power.

Real progress, though, requires the beast to be slain, stripping the court of its authority.

The Nation's justice correspondent.

Ryan Doerfler is a professor at the University of Chicago Law School.
Uruguays taking part in the *Marcha del Silencio* in Montevideo on May 20 hold portraits of their loved ones who were disappeared during the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1973 to 1985. Organized by the group Mothers and Relatives of Uruguays Detained and Disappeared, the annual demonstration began in 1996 as a way to commemorate the victims of state terrorism.

**By the Numbers**

- **693** Number of mass shootings in the United States in 2021
- **45,222** Number of people who died from gun-related injuries in the US in 2020
- **$25M** Minimum amount approved by Congress for firearms-related criminal background checks
- **$32.3M** Amount the NRA spent in 2020 on elections, lobbying, and “outside spending” (typically political ads for or against candidates)

**The Next Move**

“Republican lawmakers this year passed an unprecedented bevy of bills targeting the authority of state and local election officials, a power grab that might allow partisan legislators to overturn future election results by claiming there was fraud.”

—Stateline

Elections neutered by the right?
Now fears of that are mounting.
The battle’s changed from who can vote
To who can do the counting.
Paul LePage called himself “Trump before Trump.” Now he wants to stage a comeback.

Sasha Abramsky

“Reading newspapers in the state of Maine is like paying somebody to tell you lies.”

“Let me tell you something: Black people come up the highway and they kill Mainers.”

“Tell them to kiss my butt.”

“What I think we ought to do is bring the guillotine back. We could have public executions.”

“You shoot at the enemy. You try to identify the enemy... people of color or people of Hispanic origin.”

“You must buy health insurance or pay the new Gestapo—the IRS.”

“If you want a good education, go to private schools. If you can’t afford it, tough luck.”
O

A CLOUDY SPRING MORNING, MAINE’S EX-GOVERNOR, 73-YEAR-OLD Paul LePage, journeyed to the heart of his state’s largest, most diverse, and most progressive city to preside over the opening of a new Multicultural Community Center. Wearing a lavender shirt and slacks, LePage wooed liberal Mainers, declaring that he wanted to make Maine “inclusive to all new citizens,” that he loved talking to immigrants about the countries they came from, and that he hoped his state would roll out the welcome mat and tell new arrivals “We love you.”

There was a surreal quality to the speech, given the many anti-immigrant comments LePage had made during his eight years as a far-right Tea Party–affiliated Republican governor, from January 2011 until 2019. This is the man who, in his two terms in office, fired up his base by telling them that the country was at war against immigrants—especially Hispanic immigrants and, more generally, immigrants of color—and that in a war you shoot first and ask questions later. At the height of the panic about the mosquito-borne Zika virus, the governor announced that asylum seekers were bringing the “ziki fly” with them. Though LePage grew up in the historically oppressed French-speaking community of Maine, he failed to acquire any empathy for the underdog as a result. Instead, he became a major supporter of Donald Trump’s campaign promise of a border wall, his subsequent assault on immigrants’ rights, and his proposed travel ban aimed at Muslim immigrants and visitors.

Now, in 2022, LePage is running for governor again. In his effort to return to the office he vacated in 2019, he’s trying to soften his image on issues like immigration to appeal to a broader audience. Watching the charade unfold at the opening, 73-year-old Edgar Allen Beem, a longtime columnist for the Portland Phoenix and myriad other newspapers, was stunned. “It was a cynical appeal from a politician who’s always been anti-immigrant,” Beem says. “He, like a lot of Republicans, is very good at putting a happy face on horrors. He’ll tell you he balanced the budget, set up a rainy-day fund. What he doesn’t tell you is, more kids went hungry and fell into poverty. He dismantled the Department of Health and Human Services; it’s still not been built back up.”

It’s easy to do a recitation of LePage’s greatest hits, and not just on immigration: He declared that drug dealers, who he had at one point averred were Black and brown and coming up from New York to plunge white Mainers into addiction, should be beheaded. He refused to attend a breakfast commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. and then told a reporter who asked about it that the NAACP could “kiss my butt.” He challenged Democratic politician Drew Gattine to a duel, called him a “cocksucker,” and said he would shoot him between the eyes after Gattine allegedly called him a racist. He gratuitously vetoed legislation banning conversion therapy for gay Mainers—legislation pushed by Democratic Representative Ryan Fecteau, who would go on to become the youngest state House speaker in the country—even though the bill had won support from Republicans in the senate and similar bills had been signed by his fellow Republican governors in New Hampshire and New Jersey.

LePage is not collaborative,” Fecteau says. “He’s chaotic. And seemingly every day he’s trying to find the next thing by which to sow division and chaos. He was the first governor in the nation to veto legislation banning conversion therapy. I think Governor LePage either didn’t understand the implications this harmful practice had, or he did understand and agreed that LGBTQ people should be subject to this harmful practice. It was a day I will never forget.”

The ex-governor’s reactionary political résumé doesn’t end there. He largely dismantled the state’s public health system. He refused to implement Medicaid expansion—despite 60 percent of Maine voters having favored it in a 2017 referendum—creating what Robyn Merrill, of Maine Equal Justice Partners, describes as a perverse situation in which the state’s political muscle was used to “roll back help to people.” Like Trump, LePage was infamously hostile to the press. And he gleefully urged Trump, as president, to be more “authoritarian.”

In 2016, after endorsing Trump for president, the controversy-courting LePage boasted that he was “Donald Trump before Donald Trump.” It was a bombastic statement, but in spite of their dissimilar origins, there was more than a kernel of truth in it. Unlike Trump, LePage grew up in extreme poverty, as one of 18 children in an abusive, alcoholic household, and ended up homeless during his teenage years in the early 1960s. But he went from rags to riches, making a fortune as a businessman running a company called Marden’s Surplus & Salvage, and relied heavily on his life story, as well as his salty persona, in crafting his appeal when he eventually made the leap into electoral politics.

This time around, however, LePage—who won his 2010 and 2014 races when the field included a credible independent candidate, meaning he needed only a plurality of the vote to win—is going mano a mano against an incumbent Democratic governor, Janet Mills. Eliot Cutler, a former attorney who served as the spoiler candidate in

Sasha Abramsky is The Nation’s West Coast correspondent.
It’s entirely possible that this will become the road map used by other verbal-bomb-throwing demagogues—even Trump himself.

The incumbent:
Governor Janet Mills shakes hands with attendees at the Gulf of Maine 2050 International Symposium in Portland.

When Janet Mills was elected governor in 2018, progressives in Maine heaved a collective sigh of relief. True, the ex-attorney general was about as mainstream a candidate as one could get, and during the election she made a point of tacking to the middle. But while she may not have championed a number of progressive priorities, such as expanding tribal rights in the state, Mills was rational and competent. She was committed to implementing Medicaid expansion and repairing the damage LePage had done to public health institutions; she wanted a cooperative rather than an antagonistic relationship with labor unions; she vowed to protect voting rights; and she aspired to meet the state’s constitutional requirement to fund K-12 schools at a much higher level than had been the case in recent years.

After the Covid pandemic hit, 14 months into her term in office, Mills was at the forefront of efforts by governors from both political parties to counter the chaos and disinformation emanating from the panicked Trump White House. She implemented strict stay-at-home measures early on, introduced mask mandates, and later coordinated an extraordinarily effective vaccination campaign, which resulted in Maine having one of the highest vaccination rates in the country. By October of last year, over 80 percent of eligible Mainers were fully vaccinated, making it the fourth state in the country to reach that goal.

2010 and 2014, was recently arrested on child pornography charges, and no one else of note has filed paperwork to enter the race. If LePage—already the de facto GOP nominee, with endorsements from the state party and Senator Susan Collins—wants to win in the general election, he needs to appeal to a significant number of moderates and younger voters. There are, potentially, voters who don’t share his xenophobia but are nevertheless ripe for plucking from the Democratic coalition, given their anxiety about the state of the economy. Cue his shameless pivot on how to treat, and talk about, immigrants.

Yet LePage needs to pull off this maneuver without alienating his hard-right base, the Mainers who don’t always vote—or always vote Republican—but who flocked to LePage because he refused to temper his language and didn’t tone down his distaste for outsiders. Hence his continued embrace of Trump’s “Stop the Steal” lies about the 2020 election, as well as his revival of a preposterous scapegoating claim, seemingly drawn from thin air, that people took buses from Massachusetts to Maine to illegally vote in the gay-marriage legalization referendum in 2012.

If LePage can perform this trick successfully in 2022, it’s entirely possible that this will become the road map used by other verbal-bomb-throwing demagogues—even Trump himself—to take back power on the national stage come 2024. But if he loses—if he once more fails to break through the 50 percent threshold—it will show the limits of demagoguery, as well as the power of collective memory in rallying voters to reject a return to governance based on scapegoating and the deliberate stirring of destructive chaos.

Mills has racked up a strong record since January 2019, says Gattine, now the chair of Maine Democrats, as he sits at the heavy wooden dining room table in his atmospheric 19th-century house in the town of Westbrook. In addition to expanding Medicaid and raising state spending on K-12 education, Mills has also increased funding for mental health, disability, and elder services.

State Senate President Troy Jackson details yet more accomplishments. In the past few years, Mills and the Democratic-controlled legislature have introduced universal school meals, established collective bargaining mechanisms for loggers, and used state surpluses to help offset soaring property taxes. Moreover, under Mills, the state has doubled its rainy-day fund. This is a source of particular pride for Jackson—yet he fumes at the fact that so many Republican and independent voters, fed a steady drip of misinformation, continually tell him that the rainy-day fund under LePage was larger. In reality, it now stands at nearly half a billion dollars, more than double what it was in January 2019.

Jackson is horrified at the thought of LePage returning to power, slashing the state income tax in an effective giveaway to wealthy residents, and using the resulting cash shortfall as an excuse to launch another round of savage attacks on the social safety net, education, and the public health infrastructure—all in the name of fiscal probity. “A lot of things that I care about are at risk at that point,” he says tersely.

At the moment, the few existing polls on the race show Mills significantly ahead, though by no means with a blowout margin. As of mid-May, the polling site Race to the WH had her most favorable poll showing her 7 points ahead, with a 56.1 percent chance of winning. Though several polls in recent weeks have shown LePage’s number rising, none of those polls show the ex-governor outpacing the current governor, whose office didn’t return repeated calls and e-mails requesting comment for this article.

For many progressives in the state, however, Mills’s margin isn’t nearly comfortable enough. Mike Tipping, the author of As Maine Went: Governor Paul LePage and the Tea Party Takeover of Maine, is adamant that there’s no room for complacency. An activist with the Maine People’s Alliance, the 38-year-old...
Tipping is running for the state senate in the purple Eighth District, which ranges from the liberal college town of Orono, in the center of the state, to the conservative community of Lincoln 40 miles north.

In his book, Tipping writes that LePage won high office by preaching an “aggressive, conservative populism,” by convincing low-propensity voters to turn up at the polls, and by telling “a series of whopping lies on the stump.” Twelve years after LePage’s first victory, that playbook remains potent.

Tipping, in blue jeans and sneakers, with a raincoat to guard against the chill and rain of early spring, canvasses in the evenings and on weekends, rapping rhythmically seven times on each door and reciting his patter about how he wants to learn what issues most concern the person whose door he’s just rapped on. He hopes to knock on 4,000 doors before primary day in June and aims to give out thousands of his leaflets, as well as round wooden “Tipping State Senate” refrigerator magnets that he has hand-milled and polished in his basement workshop. His goal is to collect thousands of phone numbers that he can text on primary day with reminders to vote.

People are angry about inflation, Tipping tells me as he canvasses a low-income housing development made up of long, mustard-colored wooden modular bungalows on the edge of Orono. They don’t feel they are earning enough to live stable lives. They’re angry at what the Covid crisis has done to them, both economically and psychologically. Since Democrats control the White House, Congress, and Maine’s legislature and governor’s office, many are blaming the party for their woes. As a result, the party is facing a noticeable enthusiasm gap in getting its voters to the polls in the midterms. Because of this, Tipping argues, even if LePage is far behind going into the last weeks of the race, there is still the risk of catastrophe, as occurred in the US Senate race in 2020. In that contest, polls consistently showed the Democratic challenger ahead of Susan Collins, yet on Election Day, drawing on strong support from rural counties, Collins pulled out a 9 percent win over her opponent.

“It think [LePage] absolutely could get reelected,” Tipping says. “He got 48 percent last time in a three-way race. If the polls show him down a significant amount, I wouldn’t trust them at all. All through 2014 he was polling at 35 to 39 percent—right to the end, when he won with 48 percent. It’s similar with polling issues with Trump. It’s difficult to reach certain populations, and a lot of people are reluctant to say they support LePage or Trump.”

—Mike Tipping
A critical mass of erstwhile mill workers and their families abandoned the Democratic Party and helped LePage secure a second victory.

at the University of Maine in Orono, he is a cleaner redux candidate in 2022 than Trump would be in 2024. Given the soaring rate of inflation, the unknowns of how the pandemic will evolve, and the sense felt by many that the good times are disappearing in the rear-view mirror, Brewer believes that LePage could break through the 45 percent ceiling that would, in normal times, hem in a candidate as conservative and polarizing as he is. “If people are still paying over $4 a gallon for gas in November, that won’t be good for Mills,” Brewer says. “And what happens if there’s a new Covid variant in November? None of that would be good for an incumbent officeholder, regardless of who the incumbent is. His ceiling could be in the low 50s if all the dominoes fall right.”

Mike Michaud, the Democratic candidate that LePage defeated in 2014, agrees. A longtime paper mill worker and union member, Michaud served 20 years in the state legislature and 12 in the US Congress as a moderate Democrat from the rural Second District of northern Maine. In his race against LePage, the Democrat was consistently up in the polls during the campaign, only to lose by 4 percent come Election Day. Michaud had hit all the issues that ought to have resonated in mill country, he says: He had opposed NAFTA, slammed China for currency manipulation, and railed against the unfair trade deals that were decimating Maine’s paper industry. In short, he did all the things that Trump would do, to great effect, two years later. Yet, battered by the gun lobby and facing LePage’s onslaught against welfare spending, big government, and other bugaboos of the right, he ended up being vulnerable. When push came to shove, a critical mass of erstwhile mill workers and their families abandoned the Democratic Party and helped secure LePage’s second victory.

Nursing a local pale ale at a long wooden table in the Blue Ox Saloon in Millinocket, its walls lined with old books and mounted moose heads, Michaud recalls how he’d tried to phone LePage to concede the election and congratulate his opponent. The Republican victor, ever the pugilist, refused to take his call. Could LePage win again? Michaud answers cautiously: “The party in control of the White House usually takes a beating during the midterms. Biden’s not doing well [in the polls]. Hopefully the Democrats will get enthusiastic and get their voters out to vote and not be complacent.”

What tipping and Michaud recognize as possible—the return of a right-wing demagogue to power years after his political obituaries had been written—is, for reformers in Maine, the ultimate nightmare scenario, one that they have spent years trying to build firewalls against.

In November 2016, halfway through LePage’s second term, voters passed ranked-choice voting into law via a referendum, making Maine the first state in the union to adopt such a system. Some organizers say that they did so to make it less likely that an extremist like LePage (who would be very few voters’ second choice, in a state that has historically prided itself on its moderate version of Yankee Republicanism) could win office with minority support. But they were thwarted: Months after the referendum’s passage, the state supreme court upheld the constitutionality of ranked-choice voting for primaries and federal elections, but not for state elections, citing, in its decision, passages in the state constitution that specify these only have to be decided by a plurality of the voters. A bitter blow for progressives, the decision meant that in races with multiple candidates, someone like LePage would continue to have a viable path to power.

 Ranked-choice voting is a way of strengthening local democracy, says Maine’s secretary of state, Shenna Bellows, a longtime supporter of the change. It allows people to vote their hearts instead of having to think strategically about which candidate is the most viable, knowing that their second choice will count almost as much as their first choice does. But, she acknowledges, the wording in the state constitution does make it very difficult to implement ranked-choice voting in general elections for state offices.

Bellows, who’s 47, grew up in extreme poverty. Her parents were environmental and antinuclear activists, and until she was in fifth grade the log cabin that her father built for them had neither electricity nor running water. Today Bellows sees Maine becoming more diverse, and as secretary of state she has supported reforms such as the one recently signed into law by Governor Mills, which allows tribal IDs to be used as proof of identity for
the purpose of voter registration. But she worries that when candidates for high office like LePage opportunistically glom on to Trump’s false narrative about a stolen election in 2020, it “undermines the fabric of our democracy”—not only in Maine but in the country at large.

“It feels like we turned the page on LePage. It was a dark chapter,” says Robyn Merrill, of Maine Equal Justice Partners. “The fear, though, is that the page wasn’t actually turned, that he could get back into power and eviscerate programs again, gutting systems in a way that will again take years to recover from. He tries to stoke people’s fear, and that’s part of the divisive rhetoric around blaming groups of people for the fact that folks are struggling and having a hard time. Really, we want to be going in the other direction. Government should be by the people, for the people—and we should continue to do a better job in terms of connecting to people.”

LePage’s appeal is similar to that of Trump, or Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, or, say, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. To his fans, LePage is a tell-it-like-it-is straight shooter, a man who speaks from the heart and sticks it to the liberal elites with their thin skins and their 24-hour-a-day readiness to be triggered by crude comments. He doesn’t let the so-called experts dictate policy or allow outsiders—those “from away,” as Mainers describe them—to determine what local political priorities should be.

In the mill towns and hamlets of the north, a marvelous landscape of frozen lakes and Impressionist-like reflections of sky and clouds in the rivers, LePage’s persona is widely appreciated. In places like Millinocket—a small town along the banks of a tributary of the West Branch Penobscot River, the glory days of which are decades in the past—many of the run-down wooden houses sport Trump flags in their yards and LePage posters in their windows. It’s not uncommon to see “Fuck Mills” bumper stickers on the cars parked outside.

On Central Street, just inside the Millinocket town limits, is American Legion Post 80, complete with a helicopter and tank outside and a basement bar inside. For 49-year-old Joseph Batchelder, who books entertainment at the post, LePage is a breath of fresh air. And he makes Batchelder feel that his part of the state isn’t just some backwater, that it actually matters. “He’s straight-up, right to the point. When he gets stuff done, he gets stuff done. Any improvement to the state, it’s always to the southern part. LePage did the northern part. I’d rather see him than that other woman [Mills]. Everything she’s done has been backwards.” (In reality, according to data provided by the Maine Center for Economic Policy, despite LePage’s rhetoric about helping down-at-the-heels northern mill towns, the economic growth during his two terms in office was overwhelmingly concentrated in the cities of the south; from 2007 to 2014, a period that included most of LePage’s first term, rural Maine saw a period of economic contraction.)

Batchelder, who says he has contracted Covid twice—the first time made him feel like he had a combination of asthma, pneumonia, and pleurisy—isn’t vaccinated. He doesn’t appreciate Mills’s imposition of mask mandates and her efforts to make vaccines compulsory for some parts of the workforce, and he supports LePage in his opposition to mandates. “A lot of us don’t believe in the vaccines,” he says. “A lot of people with vaccines are still getting sick. I believe it’s a big money game. I believe Covid’s real, but they make it more scarier than it is.”

LePage’s life story resonates with people like Batchelder, the people who feel routinely ignored and humiliated. The ex-governor came of age in gritty industrial Lewiston, in central Maine. It is a place dominated by large brick riverfront factories and warehouses, with imposing churches whose copper steeples have turned green with age and low-end department and grocery stores. While many Maine towns exude an old-world charm, Lewiston’s architecture is brutalist and functional. It was on these streets that the young LePage lived for several years, after he fled his violent family home.

To his opponents, LePage came away from his abusive childhood with a sense of brutality rather than empathy, with a soul curdled in some very profound way. Steve Turner, an activist with the Maine People’s Alliance who has his own firsthand experience about the obstacles he placed in the way of people attempting to get unemployment insurance. “He treated poor people in a very mean way, made it difficult for us to access what social services we have in the United States.” He is particularly scathing about LePage’s veto of Medicaid expansion and about the obstacles he placed in the way of people former governor with something approaching loathing. “He treated poor people in a very mean way, made it difficult for us to access what social services we have in the United States.” He is particularly scathing about LePage’s veto of Medicaid expansion and about the obstacles he placed in the way of people attempting to get unemployment insurance. “LePage has a keen sense of individual responsibility,” Turner says, “and a defective sense of mutual responsibility, of collective responsibility, of ‘we’ rather than ‘me.’ I wish that someone would explain to LePage that Stage 3 or 4 cancer is not the same as laziness, and PTSD is not the same thing as shiftlessness. But he’ll never get it—because he’s all set.”

Davida Ammerman, a transgender board member of the Maine People’s Alliance and a 52-year member of the carpenters’ union, recalls that in 2018 LePage signed on to a brief asking the US Supreme Court to permit employers to fire queer and transgender employees because of their identity. After LePage left office, the political culture in Augusta became more sympathetic to trans issues.
As a candidate in 2022, LePage has opposed mask mandates and denounced the vaccine requirement for health care workers.

For tough-guy politics and his attacks on social safety nets simply make him feisty—a big bear of a man whose tough exterior eventually gives way to a friendly soul underneath. “LePage had a bombastic way about him,” says Hanington, a self-proclaimed moderate whose strong Maine accent does things with the letter “A” that somehow defy gravity. “But I saw later he was very personable. The persona of him being a bully and bombastic? He was attacked constantly, and when you’re attacked for being what you know you’re not, you get defensive.”

At the 3 Cousins Firearms store, on the corner of Lincoln and Cedar streets in Lewiston, next to a large church and a few blocks from the majestic Androscoggin River, much of the staff and their clientele are solidly in LePage’s camp. The little shop, one wall lined with powerful rifles and another painted with a giant American flag, is co-owned by Trevor Brooks. For Trevor’s father, 71-year-old Dan Brooks, LePage’s support for the Second Amendment is critical. “Without the Second Amendment, I’m afraid of what the country would look like,” he says. Wiry thin, in jeans, a plaid shirt, and a camo cap, with a trimmed gray goatee, Brooks worries that Mills doesn’t “support the Second Amendment like I would like. She doesn’t seem to be with Second Amendment people. LePage, I do like him.” He particularly likes the permitless carry law passed in 2015. “I would definitely vote for him again.” Brooks also likes the fact that LePage slashed government, worrying that there’s a tendency to “law ourselves to death” in America. Even though he and his son are both fully vaccinated and, during the early months of the pandemic, customers were asked to mask up before entering the store, Dan says he is wary of mask and vaccine mandates and is concerned that Mills’s public health policies are eroding the state’s storied live-and-let-live principles.

Brooks’s friend Steve, a machinist and gun enthusiast who is hanging out at the store in a 3 Cousins Firearms sweatshirt, agrees. Regarding masks, his philosophy is “You want to wear it, wear it; you don’t want to wear it, don’t wear it. It’s a free country. To push your issues on somebody else, your way or the highway—I last I checked, it isn’t preschool. This is a free country that could be exterminated just by people doing stupid shit.”

In his two terms as governor, LePage successfully tapped into the resentment toward big, encroaching government. He positioned himself as the defender of the little man and railed against what he saw as government overreach. As a candidate in 2022, he has opposed mask mandates, denounced Mills’s vaccine requirement for health care workers, and suggested that children needn’t be protected from a virus that, for most of them, will not have lethal consequences.

Of course, as with Trump, there is more than a pinch of hypocrisy to the “I speak for the people” shtick. When LePage, whose campaign ignored repeated phone and e-mail requests to make the candidate available for an interview for this article, termed out in January 2019, he left Maine for the warmer climes and lower taxes of Florida, the latter of which were better suited for his wealthy businessman needs. When LePage argued against Medicaid expansion, he was making it harder for many of his most fervent supporters—who are disproportionately white and working-class and, frequently, work in gig-economy or non-union jobs—to gain access to medical care; all the while, as a public employee, he had state-of-the-art insurance. When he attacked the minimum wage in the name of business efficiency and ordered the jackhammering of a mural celebrating Maine workers that adorned a wall in the state’s Department of Labor, he wasn’t just giving the middle finger to Maine’s artists, who, predictably, howled in outrage at the cultural vandalism; at the same time, he was deliberately sticking it to the interests and the very dignity of the ordinary working-class men and women that he claimed to be a spokesman for. In January, even as he was attacking vaccine mandates for health care workers, he floated the idea of requiring all welfare recipients in Maine to provide proof of vaccination in order to receive benefits.

**Taking a stand:**
Susuvi Furaha, an asylum seeker from Burundi, at a protest against LePage’s immigration policies.

On the polished wooden walls of 76-year-old Eric Rojo’s high-ceilinged living room in a farmhouse at the end of a dirt track outside Lincoln, which he bought when he moved back to Maine after living around the world since 1967, there hangs a large collection of swords. One is a World War II-era ceremonial sword from Japan; another is a weapon with an eagle motif from the Austro-Hungarian Empire that he picked up at an antique store in Munich when he was serving in the Army there after he had been rotated out of Vietnam.

Rojo is an energy security specialist who retired from the US Army, where he served in the Department of Energy, a few years back and then moved to Mexico (he had married a Mexican professor, and the two wanted to live there for a few years). In Mexico, he was an active...
The economy is a disaster here,” Rojo says. And the skyrocketing cost of fuel “has a lot of people pretty much locked up in their homes, making choices between buying food and gasoline.” He wants to promote energy independence, in particular an increased use of nuclear power; to find ways for parents to have more input on what their children learn in the classroom; to invest more in technical schools to train the state’s workforce; and—a rarity among today’s Republicans—to strengthen environmental laws against pollution and the despoilment of public lands.

On the stump, the candidate—who is running in the primary against a woman who has embraced the more hard-right rhetoric that has shaped so much of modern GOP discourse—found that these issues were resonating. “We are picking up a lot of Democratic support both here and in the south [of the district], because they’re unhappy with the economic situation and the lack of opportunity.”

Rojo’s campaign manager—none other than LePage’s friend Sheldon Hanington—believes not only that Rojo has a good chance of winning in November but that Maine is about to swing right after recent election cycles in which the Democrats have come to dominate the state government in Augusta. “This election cycle is going to turn in favor of turning the state red,” Hanington says, adding that LePage could pick up as much as 60 percent of the state red,” Hanington says, adding that LePage could pick up as much as 60 percent of the state vote. “People are having it hard,” he continues. “It’s going to be hard for Mills to explain the state of the economy versus LePage saying, ‘We’re going to fix the economy, because we’ve done it before.’ When you [spend] $70 for a tank of gas, it hurts, just as much for a Republican as for a Democrat. Heating oil costs $500.”

Maine’s shame: College-age students protest LePage at a town hall meeting in Lewiston in 2016.

Since LePage left office, poverty is down, health insurance coverage is up, and the rainy-day fund has never been fuller.

By most metrics, despite the high inflation and soaring energy costs, Governor Mills has a sterling set of accomplishments to fall back on during her reelection campaign in the coming months; by contrast, LePage’s record is mediocre at best. When he was governor, in the period after the Great Recession, there was significant job growth—but as Garrett Martin, president of the Maine Center for Economic Policy, explains, compared with other states, the growth was unexceptional; in fact, Martin’s team has calculated, Maine ranked 43rd out of the 50 states for job growth during this time. By contrast, under Mills, the recovery from the job swoon in the early months of the pandemic boosted Maine’s rank to 17th. Since Mills took office, poverty is down, health insurance coverage is up, and the rainy-day fund has never been fuller. With employment ticking up and tax revenues soaring, Maine is in a position to give a tax rebate of $850 to most residents this year.

In 2017 the Maine Center for Economic Policy produced a paper, “Lost Federal Funds: Lost Opportunities for Maine,” that estimated that LePage, in turning his back on Medicaid expansion, feeding hungry families, treating people with substance abuse issues, improving services for mentally ill teenagers, and other programs, had forfeited $1.9 billion in funds that Maine was eligible for. During LePage’s time in office, the center’s economists found, Maine was the only state in the country that did not see an increase in the number of residents with medical coverage in the four years after passage of the Affordable Care Act. It was also the only state with no statistically significant jump in the percentage of children with some form of health insurance. Since Mills took office, Maine has accessed federal funds to cover more of the uninsured and has ramped up a host of public services that, under LePage, had withered on the vine.

Yet, like President Biden, Mills faces an electorate that seems to have soured on Democratic policies and rhetoric (continued on page 27)
It Was a "Nightmare"

One woman’s story about seeking a second-trimester abortion tells us everything we need to know about post-Roe America.
N October of 2021, Kristyn Smith checked herself out of the hospital in Charleston, W.Va., where she had been denied an abortion. Bleeding and in pain, Smith drove for six hours with her fiancé to Washington, D.C., to have the procedure performed there. On the day of her first appointment at the Dupont Clinic, she was 27 weeks pregnant. “They were the sweetest, most compassionate people that I had ever met,” she said of the clinic staff, who made her feel safe and supported. The seven weeks leading up to her arrival there, however, had been a “nightmare.”

Less than two months after her abortion, Smith contacted me after finding my podcast, ACCESS. She sent an e-mail with the subject line “Abortion at 27 weeks” that detailed her story of agonizing delays and denials of care. In many parts of the country—particularly in the South and the Midwest—getting an abortion at any stage of pregnancy is difficult because of the dwindling number of abortion providers, the onerous legal restrictions, and other financial and logistical barriers. But getting an abortion later in pregnancy, particularly in the third trimester, is difficult everywhere. Twenty-two states have bans in effect that prohibit abortion starting between 20 and 24 weeks’ gestation, and 20 states impose a ban at viability, generally recognized as 24 weeks. When exceptions to these bans exist, they are often narrowly applied, and in the handful of states where third-trimester abortion is legal, there are few providers.

According to a 2014 Guttmacher Institute report, while 72 percent of abortion clinics offer care up to 12 weeks, only 25 percent offer care up to 20 weeks, and just 10 percent offer it through 24 weeks. Following the 2009 murder of Dr. George Tiller—who was relentlessly targeted by anti-abortion extremists for more than a decade because he provided abortions in the third trimester—very few doctors are willing to openly provide this care. A small number of clinics provide abortions at 26 weeks and beyond; all are independent, meaning they are not affiliated with Planned Parenthood and therefore have less public and institutional support. Hospitals are more likely to provide abortion care later in pregnancy; however, hospitals perform only about 4 percent of all abortions in the United States, and many have policies that limit abortion care.

Any day now, the Supreme Court is expected to issue a ruling that could overturn Roe v. Wade or gut it beyond meaning. In that event, 26 states are poised to ban abortion to the fullest extent possible. Many things have changed profoundly since the pre-Roe days; perhaps most significant, illegal abortions can be medically safe thanks to the advent of medication abortion. However, anti-abortion policies still endanger lives, as in Smith’s case, by delaying or denying care in life-threatening situations. What’s more, research shows that most people who need abortions later in pregnancy experienced logistical delays in accessing care at an earlier point in the pregnancy. These delays will only compound if abortion is banned in roughly half the country, because thousands of patients will be forced to travel across state lines to the few remaining clinics. The number of people seeking later abortions is undoubtedly about to increase, and our medical system is unprepared to care for them.

Smith’s pregnancy was a wanted one. She knows that stories like hers— involving fatal fetal diagnoses and health risks—are often presented as exceptional and used to undercut the needs of people whose reasons for seeking an abortion may be less sympathetic to some. Smith is unequivocal that later abortion patients deserve care regardless of the reason. “Abortion is health care; it is needed,” she said. “It saves lives, even if not physically like mine.”

Smith discovered she was pregnant just over six months after giving birth to her third child. The pregnancy was a surprise, but it quickly became a happy one. Smith and her fiancé picked a name: Kase. “We were ecstatic,” she told me.

In the early ultrasounds, Smith said, “everything was perfect and healthy, just as in my other three pregnancies.” But during her 20-week anatomy scan, things took a turn. Kase’s kidneys and bladder were dilated, and very little amniotic fluid surrounded him. Without enough amniotic fluid, the lungs cannot develop properly. The fluid also cushions the fetus and allows it to move, so low levels can result in restrictions on growth and other musculoskeletal complications.

Smith’s ob-gyn referred her to a team of maternal-fetal medicine (MFM) specialists in Cincinnati, a three-and-a-half-hour drive from her home. Smith lives near Charleston, which is one of West Virginia’s largest cities but has a population of less than 50,000. Nearly all of the MFM specialists in the US—particularly those practicing cutting-edge techniques like fetal surgery—reside in urban areas, which poses a significant barrier for those with high-risk pregnancies in rural or smaller metropolitan areas, who may not have the means to travel. According to a 2020 report from the March of Dimes, 2.2 million women in the US live in maternity care deserts.

Smith made two trips to Cincinnati, initially hopeful that she might be able to continue the pregnancy with the help

The number of people seeking later abortions is undoubtedly about to increase, and our medical system is unprepared to care for them.

**Garnet Henderson** is an independent journalist reporting on health and abortion access.
Many people who had a fetal health issue assumed their state’s abortion ban wouldn’t apply to them, and yet it did.”
—Katrina Kimport
effects of having or being denied an abortion. Kimport and her coauthor, Diana Greene Foster, found that 94 percent of the participants who had abortions at or after 20 weeks experienced a delay in accessing care.

In a situation like Smith’s, new information can itself be the cause of delays. An abnormal finding on an anatomy scan often leads to further tests and visits with specialists, Reeves said, which means it can be weeks before a person knows whether their pregnancy will ultimately be viable or not.

For Smith, the waiting became unbearable after she was sent home to West Virginia, which has a law that is nearly identical to Ohio’s, banning abortion at 20 weeks postfertilization. The West Virginia ban does include a vague exception for a “nonmedically viable fetus”; however, the state’s sole remaining abortion clinic performs abortions only up to 17 weeks and six days. Smith’s obstetrician wasn’t willing to intervene as long as the fetus had a heartbeat, but the heart never stopped. With each weekly ultrasound, Smith felt more distress. Her Cincinnati doctor’s description of the condition disturbed her. “His exact words were ‘Imagine if you were wrapped in Saran Wrap, vacuum sealed, then wrapped again in a thick, tight blanket. That is what your baby is experiencing with no liquid around him.’ With every kick...I broke down, knowing my baby was struggling to move, and how uncomfortable he had to have been since week 16, when this abnormality typically occurs,” she said.

Finally, a midwife told Smith about the Dupont Clinic. She took the first available appointment, which was two weeks away. Because abortion is legal at all stages of pregnancy in D.C., people from all over the region who need later abortions travel there when they are unable to obtain care where they live. Reeves estimates that at least half of the clinic’s patients come from more than 100 miles away. “Some weeks it’s 70 or 80 percent,” he said. The clinic’s website states: “We do not require any particular ‘reason’ to be seen here—if you would like to terminate your pregnancy, we support you in that decision.”

But then, about a week before her appointment, Smith started bleeding. She described the blood as coming in “gushes” accompanied by sharp pain, comparable only to what she had experienced during labor. After two days, Smith’s obstetrician admitted her to the Charleston Area Medical Center (CAMC) Women and Children’s Hospital for monitoring. There, she was placed under the care of an ob-gyn named Byron Calhoun. As reported by Caroline Kitchener in The Washington Post, Calhoun is well-known for his anti-abortion views. A former president of the American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists, Calhoun is an outlier even among physicians who oppose abortion: He believes abortion is never necessary to save the life of a pregnant person. In fact, he advocates cesarean sections to deliver fetuses that won’t survive birth, a practice most experts consider not only dangerous because of the risk to the pregnant person, but also unnecessary.

Calhoun also has a long history of trying to discredit abortion providers. In 2013, he called a former patient up out of the blue, gave her the phone number of a lawyer, and encouraged her to sue an abortion clinic and its doctor. Calhoun told the woman something shocking: that he had found a 13-week fetal skull in her uterus while treating her for pain and bleeding following an abortion the previous year. However, she had been only nine weeks pregnant at the time of her abortion, and Calhoun had said nothing about a skull at the time. The woman did sue, but a pathology report from CAMC found no evidence of a fetal skull. In dismissing the lawsuit, the judge called Calhoun’s assertions “sensational.”

Also in 2013, Calhoun claimed that he was caring for patients experiencing abortion complications on a “weekly” basis. The claim was dubious on its face, given that such complications are rare. One of the most comprehensive studies on the subject found that minor complications, such as bleeding and mild infection, occur in about 2 percent of abortions. Major complications, including hospitalizations, surgeries, and blood transfusions, occur in just 0.23 percent of cases. Overall, abortion is 14 times safer than childbirth. Once again, Calhoun’s claims were contradicted by his employer, CAMC, which provided data showing that the hospital had treated only two patients for abortion complications in the previous year. Despite a public outcry following these incidents, CAMC continues to employ Calhoun.

He is also the only maternal-fetal medicine specialist in Charleston.

“Immediately, before even saying ‘Hi, hello, how are you?’ he asked me what type of drugs I had been doing,” Smith said. Calhoun also told her that she wasn’t bleeding consistently enough to justify intervention: “His words were ‘Until you start bleeding at a rate of a fountain of blood, then I can’t intervene with a c-section,’” she said. Even after she pressed—through tears—for a possible explanation for her pain and bleeding, Smith said, Calhoun continued to imply that she had done something to cause the complications, but eventually concluded that her placenta was likely separating from her uterus as a result of the procedures that were performed to save her baby. In severe cases, this condition, called placental abruption, can cause hemorrhage, a leading cause of maternal mortality.

“He said he wanted me to lay in that bed for weeks or months until it got bad enough for him to intervene,” Smith told me, adding that Calhoun advised medications that are typically given during preterm labor to speed up fetal brain and lung development.
I signed myself out and prayed I would make it to D.C. the next week.”

—Kristyn Smith

Shortly after her first conversation with Calhoun, Smith started experiencing sharp, intense pains that came on quickly. A nurse administered the narcotic Stadol, which Smith said made her feel extremely disoriented. “It just felt like they gave me that medication to shut me up,” she said. During her time in the hospital, she continually asked the doctors to induce labor in order to end the pregnancy and allow her to hold and comfort her baby until he died. “[Calhoun] said I was requesting an abortion and his beliefs did not align with that, therefore he would not be doing that,” she said.

Both Calhoun and Smith’s regular ob-gyn told her that if she gave birth at this point—she was 26 and a half weeks pregnant—the hospital would be required to give her newborn medical care under a West Virginia law that mandates medical intervention for fetuses “born alive.” Even pulsation of the umbilical cord—before it has been cut—qualifies as a sign of life under the law. Smith found the thought of prolonging Kase’s suffering after birth unbearable. “I signed myself out and prayed I would make it to D.C. the next week,” she told me. (Neither Calhoun nor CAMC responded to multiple requests for comment.)

The family’s cars weren’t reliable enough to make the six-hour drive to D.C., so Smith and her fiancé rented one. She paid $200 to put a deposit down for her appointment. The remainder of the $9,000 fee was paid by an abortion fund, as were her travel costs. In the end, three different abortion funds pitched in.

Smith’s mother, who is strongly opposed to abortion and took her to anti-abortion rallies when she was growing up, drove from her home three hours away to care for the children. “She wasn’t as bad as I thought she would be, but she did say, ‘You know, if you decide not to go through with this, I’ll help with the baby. I’ll raise him, I’ll take him to doctor’s appointments,’” Smith said. “She was living in this fantasy world of ‘Just do anything to save the baby.’”

Still experiencing pain and heavy bleeding every few hours, Smith traveled to the Dupont Clinic. It was while recalling her experience there that she teared up for the first time during our conversation. “It was the worst experience of my life, but they made me feel some type of comfort,” she said. At Dupont, Smith was paired with a specially trained doula to support her through the process. Most important, the medical team made it clear that the way Smith had been treated in West Virginia was unacceptable. For the first time, she felt she was being listened to.

The doctor also confirmed that Smith’s placenta had been separating from her uterus and said her baby’s kidneys were the biggest he’d ever seen. Smith was able to hold the baby after he was delivered—the outcome she’d wanted but was denied in her home state. “The doula suggested I may not want to uncover him from the neck down due to how small his chest was in comparison to his belly. These are just some reassurances that I’d done the right thing,” she told me. “I truly don’t know how I’ll ever get over it,” she added. “But knowing I put my Kase out of suffering and he will never know an ounce of pain is the only thing that helps.”

Smith’s story is unusual in that she encountered a doctor so vehemently opposed to abortion. But even if a different doctor had advocated for her to have an abortion in West Virginia, the bid may have been unsuccessful. “Often doctors first have to defend these decisions to their institution. Before you even get to the state, you have to defend it to the administrators,” Kimport said.

A 2020 study by some of her colleagues found that 57 percent of teaching hospitals, mostly in the South and the Midwest, placed limits on access to abortion that went beyond the dictates of state law. Catholic hospitals in particular are known for their refusal to provide abortion and many other types of sexual and reproductive health care, and the number of Catholic hospitals in the US is growing rapidly: As of 2020, one in six hospital beds is now in a Catholic facility. However, Protestant and secular hospitals limit abortion as well, especially in the South. These hospitals often rely on committees to determine whether doctors can perform medically indicated abortions, and their institutional policies are rarely straightforward or transparent.

Abortion regulations also have a chilling effect, making medical providers reluctant to offer care for fear of punishment or even criminalization. Shortly after SB 8, Texas’s near-total abortion ban, went into effect, reports began to surface of doctors hesitating to treat ectopic pregnancies, which must be terminated without delay for the health of the pregnant person.

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A woman takes part in a candlelight vigil outside the Supreme Court prior to oral arguments in the case that may overturn Roe v. Wade this summer.
and that notices the bad economic indicators, especially the sticker shock of high inflation, while ignoring improvements in the broader economy and the social safety net. Despite the fact that roughly 70,000 low-income Mainers have gained health coverage under Mills and unemployment is down to 3.3 percent (lower than the national average), the Democratic governor’s support may well be softer than that of LePage, who is not just tolerated by his fans but, like Trump, adored for his willingness to ruffle feathers and step on toes.

For Troy Jackson, this signals danger. The state立法 president, a working-class politician who prides himself on having his finger on his state’s blue-collar pulse, believes the outcome of the election is a toss-up, and he is deeply concerned that the GOP is well-positioned to tap into public anger, especially around inflation, over the coming months. “There’s people who feel, it doesn’t matter who’s in charge, they’re always getting screwed—and sometimes I wonder if they’re right,” he says, laughing nervously.

For the ex–Tea Party governor, this makes for fertile political terrain. “Paul LePage,” says Steve, at 3 Cousins Firearm, “is a man’s man. He’s a personable person. He doesn’t think he’s better than you.”

Does LePage’s penchant for inflammatory language bother Joseph Batchelder, in Millinocket? Not in the slightest. “Tell me what sailor don’t swear!” he says with a hearty, barrel-chested explosion of mirth. “Everybody has a foul mouth. It’s the way it is—just words. A lot of people are getting too sensitive, I guess.”

In fact, Batchelder continues, LePage’s language helps to engage his audience. “It wakes people up: ‘Oh my gosh! He said that?!’ They’re actually listening.”

State Senator Chloe Maxmin, a longtime activist on climate justice, says LePage’s campaign is a predictable if dispiriting follow-on both to his earlier spells in the governor’s mansion and to the Trump era. “The antagonism and division and vitriol is still really alive and is just being transferred to LePage,” she says. “People want hyper-independence from the government. Mask mandates and closures fed into this, and LePage took advantage of it.” If he were to win in November, she says, “it would be like Trump getting reelected, completely decimating all government services...for people who need them the most.”

As the spring melts the long winter’s snow and gradually breaks up the lake ice, LePage is traversing the state with his tax-cutting, anti-mandate, anti-welfare, anti-regulatory agenda. He is seeking to capitalize on a broad, inchoate sense of anomie, to pick up support in places that previously shunned him. To do so, he’s been willing to moderate his image on immigration and other key issues, even as he doubles down on his tax policies, his anti-regulatory stances, and his embrace of election conspiracy theories. “I can honestly say he has softened,” Hanington assures me. Then he pauses and backtracks slightly. “But he is not weak. It’s the same beat of the drum, but he has learned to tone it down.”

(continued from page 21)
In this reputedly progressive city, tech and real estate money has bankrolled a centrist backlash.

By Christopher D. Cook

AFTER JUST TWO YEARS IN OFFICE, CHESA BOUDIN, THE district attorney of San Francisco, gets blamed for every crime in the book—even offenses committed before he took office and beyond the city limits. For his efforts to tackle wage theft, end cash bail, expand the program that diverts nonviolent offenders from prison, and prosecute abusive cops, Boudin has been rewarded with a recall campaign scapegoating him for all of this city’s woes. The vote takes place on June 7, and recent polls suggest it will be an uphill battle for Boudin and progressives.

Loaded with cash from local billionaires, Big Tech, and other corporate interests, Neighbors for a Better San Francisco and an allied group called San Franciscans for Public Safety have poured a whopping $5.1 million into the campaign to recall Boudin. Real estate interests have also kicked in, including more than $600,000 from Shorenstein Realty Services, a major local developer. As the Democratic strategist Cooper Teboe told Forbes, Boudin is “the unfortunate recipient of all of the anger from the investor class and the billionaire class.” The recall’s top funder is the Republican billionaire William Oberndorf, who donated $3.7 million to federal candidates in 2020—mostly to Republicans, including Senators Mitch McConnell and Tom Cotton.

While Boudin is the primary target, this centrist uprising first came to public attention in February when it spearheaded the recall of three school board members (a campaign that was financed heavily by Oberndorf and the billionaire investor Arthur Rock). Next came electoral threats to progressive supervisors who didn’t support the school board recall, revealing a larger political agenda. Then, in late April, corporate interests mounted a gerrymandering effort that

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could put some supervisor districts in the centrist camp. And now, the furious push to recall Boudin.

“There is a big money effort to roll back progressive politics in San Francisco,” says Tim Redmond, founder and editor of the progressive news site 48 Hills, who has covered politics here since 1986.

Propelling this movement is a well-financed narrative that has insinuated itself into local media and politics—and a sizable portion of the electorate. This narrative blames San Francisco progressives for complex crises whose causes reach back decades and far beyond the city line. The writer Michael Shellenberger, who’s making an improbable run for the California governor’s office, bizarrely blames the left for the city’s ills in his book San Fransicko, with its bombastic subtitle: Why Progressives Ruin Cities.

At the heart of this reactionary movement is a misdiagnosis of genuine problems. Burgeoning homelessness and drug addiction here are preventable tragedies. Housing costs are among the highest in the nation, with the median single-family home priced at $2 million, far out of reach for most people. The city also hosts the world’s greatest concentration of billionaires, and the Bay Area is home to California’s most glaring inequality, with the top 10 percent of earners raking in 12.2 times what folks in the bottom 10 percent make.

While progressives have often held a majority in the city’s legislature, they haven’t had a mayorally ally since Art Agnos lost to conservative Frank Jordan in 1991; the city’s “strong mayor” charter also adds to centrists’ power when they control the executive branch. Rising homelessness, addiction, and crime are the result of national and regional crises, including woefully insufficient spending on supportive housing for homeless people. Redmond says the current scapegoating is “a total distraction from the fundamental inequalities in the US and in San Francisco.” If anything, progressive policies like the city’s living wage ordinance, universal health care access, rent control, ten-
“Every crime trend can somehow be blamed on him. Car burglarized? Blame Boudin. Walgreens and CVS closing stores? Boudin’s fault.”
—Gil Duran, the San Francisco Examiner

“Chasing Chesa, Fomenting Fear
When he was elected in November 2019, Boudin was hailed as a bright new star in a wave of reforming district attorneys that included Larry Krasner in Philadelphia, Rachael Rollins in the Boston area, and Kim Foxx in Cook County, Ill. All have faced criticism, but the backlash in San Francisco has been particularly virulent, prompting pundits to label it “Chesa Boudin Derangement Syndrome.” As the San Francisco Examiner writer Gil Duran described it, “Every crime trend—even those pre-dating his tenure—can somehow be blamed on him. Car burglarized? Blame Boudin. Walgreens and CVS closing hundreds of stores nationwide? Boudin’s fault. National fentanyl epidemic? Thanks, Boudin. Police not making enough arrests? Boudin hurt their morale.” One recent recall campaign ad featured a man who closed his store because of drug dealing—but a reporter revealed that the business had been shuttered before Boudin was elected.

San Francisco has its share of urban problems. But analysis by the San Francisco Chronicle found that “reported crime data does not clearly show a trend toward worsening public safety.” Even as crimes like car break-ins have increased in the city (as they have statewide and beyond), violent crimes are way down. But that hasn’t stopped the fearmongers from fanning a political wildfire.

The typically center-right Chronicle surprised locals with a strong editorial against the recall, arguing, “Crime stats that mirror those of when Boudin took office do not justify a recall. Violent crime is low and has stayed low even as it has surged across the country.... Cities across the country—regardless of their criminal justice approach—have struggled after COVID lockdowns lifted.” The Examiner and the local Democratic Party also reject the recall, as have many former prosecutors and judges.

Scapegoating Homeless People

In a recent afternoon, across the street from a shining new glass tower of condos for sale a few blocks from City Hall, city workers descended on tents arrayed neatly on the sidewalk’s edge. A burly public works employee snatched and tossed a silver tent onto a platform truck, atop other “junk” bound for the dump.

“The man that lives in there is a 65-year-old dude who’s out on a medical appointment,” a fellow tent dweller, an amply tattooed Marine veteran, told me. “It’s our constitutional right to live here, to have a home. You can’t take that away from us,” he urged the workers in an increasingly irate voice. When I asked who’s demanding the tent removals, city workers insisted, “The mayor, London Breed.”

Trashing an elderly homeless man’s shelter and belongings—a violation of city policy, advocates tell me—is brutally familiar in this city, where “there are more anti-homeless laws than in any other city in the state,” says Jennifer Friedenbach, the longtime director of the Coalition on Homelessness. “Homelessness in San Francisco is a popular wedge issue,” she continues. “And politicians—Shellenberger no exception—stoke fear of homeless people to get their name in the paper.... Homeless people, drug dealers, and criminals are all lumped together and scapegoated.”

A Twitter account named “BetterSOMA” (referencing the South of Market area) posts photographs of homeless people shooting up or crumpled on the sidewalk, a humiliating public exposure that could haunt these people’s futures. When I confronted the group about this practice, BetterSOMA and its acolytes came at me like piranhas. As one put it, “It should be humiliating. They should be shamed. If you coddle street addicts, MORE SHOW UP and are lured into depravity.” Another insisted, “They are drug addicts. Their dignity went out the window before the photos pal.”

The pandemic has only intensified the street crises, Friedenbach says. “People have been out there for two years—their [precarity] has gotten much worse, their drug use much worse.” Meanwhile, Friedenbach sees a growing “promotion of tried-and-failed strategies” such as criminalization and forcing homeless mentally ill people into institutions through conservatorship. The forces behind the recall campaign, she adds, “are complaining about homelessness and then fighting against the solutions,” citing Mayor Breed’s opposition to voter-approved measures to expand funding for homeless services and shelters.

As the writer Gray Brechin, founder of the Living New Deal, puts it, “The question isn’t asked enough: Why are people taking so many drugs? To dull the pain of living in this incredibly cruel society. At the root of it is poverty,” he says, and “a dystopic neoliberal environment that is guaranteed to drive people insane” while living on the streets.

Follow the Money

Fueling this city’s centrist octopus is an engine of big money—largely from Big Tech, real estate, and other corporate interests. And these efforts reach beyond the recalls: As 48 Hills documented, Oberndorf has given at least $300,000 to Neighbors for a Better San Francisco—money spent campaigning against progressive candidates and measures. In 2020, the group and its corporate allies—all aligned with Mayor Breed—spent big to oppose Proposition I, a real estate transfer tax on the wealthiest property owners to help fund emergency aid and affordable housing in the pandemic. (Voters approved the measure by a large margin and rejected several centrist candidates.)

The centrist constellation includes tech-funded groups like GrowSF, AdvanceSF (whose
Big Tech’s Shadow

The writer and activist Roberto Lovato offers a scathing diagnosis of his native city’s neoliberal tilt, pointing to Silicon Valley’s ethos of “digital Darwinism.” The recalls, Lovato explains, show the cumulative effects of Big Tech’s power: “You’re looking at what Silicon Valley did over all these years, the near-totalitarian control of the body politic of San Francisco.” This “greed machine,” he argues, is manufacturing “a normalization of displacement…. One way to do it is to reengineer the political system.”

“There’s a fascistic cruelty beneath the shiny silicon surface of San Francisco,” Lovato says—one that displaces communities and cultures in the name of relentless growth and profit. “All my friends who grew up here have been displaced. The organic growth of the Mission [District] that created the largest concentration of murals in the world has been displaced by gentrification and tech workers buying $14 burritos…. They use our murals to push us out.”

“Tech has such a libertarian tendency,” Solnit says, “but a lot of it is economically regressive. We don’t have the language to express how many of these folks are Burning Man libertarians while being economic Republicans.” Tech’s predominance here, she adds, has cultural as well as political implications: “Everything is DoorDashed and smartphoned; it’s a much more mediated experience. The desire to avoid human contact has been such a part of the tech culture—the desire to live in one of the most densely urban centers in the country while being hostile to much of that life.”

Even amid this centrist uprising, San Francisco progressives have mustered some positive changes. A voter-approved tax on vacant storefronts took effect in January, and activists are preparing a ballot measure to tax up to 40,000 vacant residential units to pressure landlords to fill them (a similar effort worked well in Vancouver). In March, the city enacted a groundbreaking law enabling tenants to form union-like associations to bargain with landlords. It’s also worth remembering that in 2019, city voters elected Boudin on the platform of criminal justice reform that he’s now implementing. On June 7 and beyond, voters have a chance to reject this corporate-funded reactionary movement. San Francisco, as always, remains intensely contested terrain.

“We don’t have the language to express how many of these people are Burning Man libertarians while being economic Republicans.”

—Rebecca Solnit
During the first Covid lockdown, I, like so many other people, took to wandering my neighborhood alone, observing details that I might otherwise have glossed over. Perfectly black irises in an otherwise colorful garden; street graffiti declaring “Black Lives Matter”; a root shoving up from beneath the sidewalk; the house down the street with seven-foot-long wooden dinosaur skeletons in the front yard; handmade posters stapled to telephone poles demanding that the state “Cancel Rent.” I took pictures of my shoes next to cracks in the sidewalk, fallen flowers, and, later, autumn leaves—and I took lots of pictures of myself, of course. I sent them to friends by text and WhatsApp or posted them...
to Instagram, where we all filled our grids with strangely empty cityscapes and wilderness. Did we record these images for ourselves or for the friends we were no longer able to see? Did we post them to feel connected or just to remember that we were still alive?

I thought of all this while reading Vivian Maier Developed: The Untold Story of the Photographer Nanny, Ann Marks’s new book on the woman who became posthumously famous in the early 2010s for her beautiful and haunting street photography. So many of us became Vivian Maires during the pandemic, wandering streets between the day’s work and taking pictures of anything and everything that struck us as pretty or funny or strange. Like Maier, we took photos not because we hoped to become famous artists or commercial photographers; we took them because we all had cameras in our pockets and nothing else to do.

In the 2013 documentary Finding Vivian Maier, John Maloof, credited with the titular discovery, goes searching for the woman whose beautiful photographs he bought at a storage auction, talking to her friends, her former employers, the children (now grown) that she cared for, a living relative. For him the question, above all others, was: Why didn’t Maier share her amazing works of art with others? Professional artists appear on-screen to declare that “had she made herself known, she would have become a famous photographer,” as if it is easy to make oneself known, as if “sharing” is something that today’s art world is even interested in, revolving as it does around asset purchases by the wealthy finessed by a legion of gatekeepers. Meanwhile, others wonder on-screen why Maier didn’t even share them with her family and friends—what was her motivation for taking these pictures?

Maloof and many of his interviewees are mostly confounded by these questions, but more confounded still by the idea that this great photographer was also a domestic worker. In Vivian Maier Developed, Marks also takes up these questions. A self-described “former corporate executive,” Marks sets out, detective-like, to uncover the story behind the photographs. “For me,” she writes, “no detail is inconsequential, and no question is left unanswered. My greatest passion is solving quotidian mysteries—the more convoluted, the better.” But her book still treats Maier’s life and art as a riddle to be solved rather than as the complicated and contradictory products of a formidable intellect. Marks may abandon Maloof’s thinly veiled contempt for Maier’s day job, but she nonetheless seems unable to situate Maier in a broader cultural and economic context, preferring to hunt for clues in her biography and even biology. Like Maloof, she misses the tension that could animate Maier’s story: that artists are not, in fact, from a different world, but live right here and do the tasks of social reproduction just like the rest of us.

Who was Vivian Maier? She was born in New York City in 1926 to a French immigrant mother and German Lutheran father, and her youth was divided between New York and a rural French village. She had an unstable home life: Her parents separated when she was young, and neither one was around much. What stability she did have came from her maternal grandmother, Eugenie, who found work in the homes of the wealthy as a cook. Because Eugenie, like many immigrant workers, had to put her job before her family, the emotional support she provided came with limits, and Maier and her mother often found a home with family friends—including the photographer Jeanne Bertrand, who was probably responsible for giving her access to a camera for the first time.

At age 6, Maier returned to France with her mother, beginning a relationship with the Champsaur Valley and her mother’s family that would inspire much of her photographic work. By age 12, she was back in New York, leaving France just ahead of World War II and returning to a city where, again, except for time spent with Eugenie, she was left to her own devices as a teenager and young adult.

What Marks calls Maier’s “forty-year career in photography” began when she returned to the Champsaur in 1950, age 24. She had come to settle a small inheritance, which gave her the freedom to spend her time photographing seemingly every inch of the valley and its people. In her early photographs, one can see her aesthetic and political judgments shaping up: attention to children and to the working class, interest in a communist rally and a film shoot, and plenty of self-portraits.

The inheritance mostly settled, Maier returned to New York and eventually secured a job as a governess to support herself and her photographic habit when her nest egg ran out. The caring jobs gave her flexibility and even made travel possible; she went to Cuba with one family and joined another on a cross-country road trip, taking pictures all the while. And she did so without much contact with the art world. At certain moments in her life—particularly when she lived in New York and later in California—Maier did spend time with other photographers, jostling for position in photo pools, shooting portraits of artists, and planning to create prints for sale. But most of the massive trove of work she produced in these years was for herself alone: 45,000 of her photos were never even developed, let alone printed.

Throughout these years, Maier may have been trying, though erratically, to become a professional photographer, but her ambition to make a living from her pictures seems to have waned by the time she reached Chicago in 1956. From then on, she continued to photograph and stockpile her pictures, but fewer of her clients seemed to know about their nanny’s creative pastime. Toward the end of her life, acquaintances commented on the sheer volume of stuff Maier had amassed, but few seemed to wonder if it could be worth anything. By the time she died, in 2009, at age 83, collectors had already begun to discover these photos, but Maier was never to know.

To be an artist, does someone have to view your work? Perhaps not—but to be recognized by the world as an artist, your work has to be deemed “art” by the kinds of people who are expected to make such judgments: gallery

Sarah Jaffe is the author of Necessary Trouble: Americans in Revolt and Work Won’t Love You Back.
owners, collectors, other artists. Both Maloof and Marks subtly acknowledge this, marshaling famed photographers like Mary Ellen Mark and Joel Meyerowitz to explain why Maier’s work is valuable. Would it be possible for an unknown author like Marks to write a biography of an unknown nanny without “art” being involved? Unlikely.

For Marks, this “discovery” of Maier as an artist is as much the story as Maier’s own life is. She cheerily describes it as a tale of “colorful characters whose skills, tenacity, and scrappiness revealed [Maier’s] talent to the world,” but it is also a story about the contradictions in how our society values art. We expect artists to work for the love of it but are confounded by Maier’s seeming lack of interest in profiting from her pictures. Art is supposed to be its own reward, but Marks and Maloof and many of their art world interlocutors are baffled that Maier did not seek other rewards. We say that artists are those naturally endowed with special talent, yet that talent usually needs to be credentialed through an often expensive process of art school and galleries and wealthy collectors making purchases.

Indeed, by the time Maier’s photographs had been “discovered,” she had only a few years left to live and had stopped paying rent on the storage lockers where her photos were stashed. Maloof only found out the basic details of her life from her obituary and then reached out to the Ginsburgs, her former clients, who had still more lockers full of photos. Maloof was able to persuade them to give him the whole stash rather than toss it, and shortly thereafter, he put on the first show of Maier’s work at the Chicago Cultural Center. Would she have wanted such a show? Those who knew her are conflicted; some say yes and others no. And the art world generates a different problem from this question: If Maier did not develop and print her own work, are the prints from her negatives authentic Vivian Maiers? Of course, artists do not create alone, and many famous photographers outsourced their printing—but without Maier there to supervise, how do we know she had considered the work hers? Then again, she had often simply dropped off her film at a neighborhood store, the same kind of place that most of us, in the pre-iPhone days, would have taken a roll of snapshots.

We should also ask: If Maier had created her pictures as a professional photographer would, making choices based on what might sell or who might buy, would her art have been the same? We can understand any piece of art, as the sociologist Howard Becker explains in his book Art Worlds, “as the product of a choice between conventional ease and success and unconventional trouble and lack of recognition.” But when you don’t aspire for recognition, might you make altogether different kinds of artistic choices?

The real star in Marks’s book is, of course, the photos themselves.

The question that haunts Marks’s book is, at bottom, the same one that haunted Maloof’s movie: Why didn’t Maier “share” her work? What neither of them quite grasps is that the question they are really asking is why she didn’t make money from it. Marks shows that early in her adult life, Maier had plans, though they were not realized, to start a postcard business, citing Maier’s letters to a French colleague who’d made samples from her landscapes. When she returned to New York, Maier purchased an expensive, professional-quality Rollei-flex camera designed for shots from the hip. She seems, too, to have occasionally sold prints for $1, though her haphazard record-keeping makes it unclear how many and to whom, and to have photographed the families she worked for. In one case, she took promotional photos of the steak house her clients owned. Marks also finds evidence that later in Maier’s life, her acquaintances sent her information about freelance work and a former employer wrote to her saying that she hoped Maier “would find an audience for her photography and collections.”

For Marks, the main hindrance to a photographic career was Maier’s perfectionism, but there are many other conclusions one could draw. The bits of information sprinkled throughout the book that indicate that Maier had connections and was recognized by others as a photographer—such as the fact, dropped on page 166 with no explanation and never mentioned again, that she “had a direct line to the Playboy Club’s publicity department”—do as much to undermine Marks’s preferred explanations as to support them. Despite Marks’s confident assertions, it remains unclear why Maier never became a full-time professional. Did
she feel disheartened by her early attempts to become one? Did she decide instead to “work to live,” taking jobs as a nanny that allowed her to ramble, charges in tow, and snap whatever she wished? Did she shoot celebrities exiting the Playboy Club or on movie sets as work, or because she was a fan? Did the employers who expressed shock that she didn’t “share her photographs” ever offer to pay her for her creative work? To these questions, we have few answers.

Part of the problem is that Marks and Maloof cannot imagine why a talented photographer might choose a career as a care worker. Maloof’s film is laced with contempt for care workers; he snickers as he asks “why is a nanny” taking photographs, as if it’s inconceivable for the working class to have hobbies. Marks is not so much contemptuous of Maier’s care work as simply uninterested in why it might have appealed to her, or at least why it might have been the best of a bad set of options. Marks lays the story of Maier’s “family dysfunction” on thick, diving down a rabbit hole on her grandmother’s mental illnesses. But she misses some of the reasons why nannying may have filled a gap in Maier’s life. In a family that often treated her “as if she were wallpaper,” Marks writes, care may have been in short supply; by contrast, her most functional relative, her grandmother Eugenie, secured a decent life looking after the needs of the rich, and care work offered a kind of freedom that the other jobs open to a working-class woman of the time did not.

Marks also seems uninterested in the overlapping skill sets that Maier might have developed as a nanny and a photographer. Like most nannies, she would have been expected to lavish her charges with love and affection while receiving little in return. But it seems to occur to no one that Maier used the same skills to comfort her charges and to set a subject at ease, to fade into the background of her employers’ lives and to be an unobtrusive street photographer. Marks briefly notes that Maier’s “dispassionate demeanor” helped her photography by “diminishing her own presence,” but this too is a skill in the care laborer’s toolkit.

Whether Maier’s employers—some of whom were photographers or media personalities, including the talk show host Phil Donahue—took her photography seriously enough to see it as a bonus when they hired her, an extra skill to be exploited, or whether Maier sought out jobs in creative families, is perhaps unknowable. But in Marks’s book these are just more items in a jumble of details, as is the fact that at least one of Maier’s charges grew up to be a photographer herself.

The family that Maier was closest to, the Gensburgs, employed her for 11 years and remained close to her until the end of her life, cosigning for her final apartment and taking responsibility for her cremation. They, at least, described her lovingly, and photos of the family show Maier being uncharacteristically affectionate with the children. While other clients described her as standoffish—one claimed to never have known her name, referring to her only as “Mademoiselle”—the Gensburgs embraced her adventurousness, and leaving them seems to have been traumatic for Maier.

The philosopher Eva Kittay, in Love’s Labor, describes a life like Maier’s as one characterized by a “dialectic of dependency,” in which women are able to enter public space by taking on paid care work, even though such work stigmatizes them as dependents themselves, not part of “the fraternity of equals in political life,” even as it grants them other freedoms. When the paid caring relationship ends, as most of them do, the worker is left out in the cold, cut off from the home and family that until recently was theirs. When a family no longer needed a nanny, did Maier no longer need them? The Gensburgs, unlike many of her employers, seem to have recognized their debt to her. But the work that Maier did and the care she poured into it was often discarded quickly. What effect did her disposability have on her psyche and on her art?

The question of mental illness hangs over Marks’s portrait of Maier, intertwined with the question of why she kept her photos to herself. An early incident that Marks describes finds an employer complaining, “Mademoiselle must be mentally ill. Why else would she refuse to make copies? Making copies is how you make money with photography.” Disability, as Sunny Taylor and others have written, often makes one “unproductive” by the rules of capitalism, and many seem to have reversed this framework in their analysis of Maier: If she decided that she didn’t want to “make money with photography,” she must have had an impairment.

At times Marks seems to agree, though she ties herself in knots to argue more than this: that Maier was severely mentally ill, that she would have been a successful photographer if she hadn’t been so afflicted, yet also that she “lived the life she wanted to live” and would not want readers’ pity or their concern about her wishes regarding her work after her death. Maier, Marks writes, was considered “strange” and “abnormal” and a person with “underdeveloped social skills,” even if, Marks also notes, she showed “mastery at guiding conversations and deflecting questions.” Some of the children Maier cared for speculated about her discomfort with men and recall her intense reaction to being photographed when she was not in control of the picture, in one case apparently hitting a man with an umbrella. Marks also consults mental health experts to diagnose Maier posthumously. The use of the qualifier “may have” does a lot of work in these sections, as does the phrase “as if”: “It was as if she possessed a form of post-traumatic stress disorder related to potentially threatening men.” And at the end of the book, Marks simply states it as fact: “It was trauma and mental illness that drove many of her critical choices.”

Marks will no doubt consider me, in writing this, another part of the “well-intended art and feminist communities” who “drove matters offtrack early on by voicing long-standing biases against the attribution of mental illness to explain artists’ talent or women’s decision-making.” But I must raise the same challenge that Rose Lichter-Marcik did in her excellent New Yorker review of Finding Vivian Maier in 2014: Why must we explain women’s unconventional lives “in the language of mental illness, trauma, or sexual repression, as symptoms of pathology rather than as an active response to structural challenges or mere preference”? What is missing from Marks’s version of Maier’s life is, of course, the politics—or rather, it is scattered throughout her book like the political buttons found in Maier’s trove. Marks’s casual dismissal of “well-intended” feminist critiques is of a piece with her casual reference to Maier’s political worldview as “communist, socialist, and libertarian”
The East-West confrontation over Ukraine, which led to Moscow’s annexation of Crimea but long predated it, is potentially the worst international crisis in more than fifty years—and the most fateful. A negotiated resolution is possible, but time is running out.

—Stephen F. Cohen

The story of Vivian Maier is not a story about her being “discovered” but about discovering how we are all artists.

Yet her politics is very much a part of what made Maier exceptional. At the height of the Red Scare, and before the civil rights struggle broke into the national headlines, she seems to have sought out leftist politics, identified as a feminist, supported Black freedom organizations and Native rights, and not only photographed children of color who were “just as charming,” in Marks’s words, as the rich white children she tended, but sought out political discussion and debate and even sabotaged her employers’ attempts to support right-wing causes. She covered labor rallies and political events like a journalist, even carrying a tape recorder to ask strangers and friends their opinions on the events of the day. “Many have observed that Vivian possessed an underdog’s perspective, and regardless of her circumstances, she identified primarily with the working class,” Marks notes, and Maier “kept literature like the ‘Bill of Rights for Working People’ and a critique of Washington Post union busting in storage.”

How these political views might have shaped her art and care work is, like so many other aspects of Maier’s story, not really a question we can answer. But it is in thinking politically—as Maier herself did—that we find the real challenges she poses. We should not treat her as an individual puzzle to be solved by digging up genealogies and photo store receipts, or view art as the domain of a select elite. What if the real lesson of Maier’s life as an artist and care worker and immigrant and politically active person is, following C.L.R. James’s assertion (written in 1956, as Maier was photographing Chicago with the Gensburgs in tow) that “every cook can govern,” it is also true that every nanny can make great art.

The story of Vivian Maier, then, is not a story about why one woman chose (or did not choose) to become an artist, but rather a story about how we all have art locked inside of us somewhere, how we are all capable of seeing and capturing the humanity of those around us, and that while only a few of us are ever lucky enough to be allowed the time and space for that art to come out and be recognized and pronounced “good” by the world, we can still go out onto the street with the cameras that nearly all of us carry now and, for just a moment, create a picture of something beautiful, whether we share it with the world or someone special or just keep it to ourselves. What if we understood that all of us—nanny, bus driver, journalist, teacher, even, yes, corporate executive—have an undeveloped trove of masterpieces within us? How, then, would we change the world?

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“The East-West confrontation over Ukraine, which led to Moscow’s annexation of Crimea but long predated it, is potentially the worst international crisis in more than fifty years—and the most fateful. A negotiated resolution is possible, but time is running out.”

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The Stalwart

Hubert Harrison’s radical life and times

BY ROBERT GREENE II

Hubert Harrison represents one of the clearest examples of the difficulties of being a Black intellectual and activist in the 20th century. Upon his death in 1927, Harrison was recognized in many magazines and journals for the prominent role he’d played in this country’s socialist and Black radical politics. As someone who’d organized a number of advocacy groups, as well as edited Negro World for Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, Harrison was arguably at his best writing, but he was also a powerful speaker and agitator. Three decades after his death, he was still revered within the Black left. In the summer of 1963, in the midst of the decolonization movement in Africa and civil rights upheavals in the United States, an essay from a Harlem-themed issue of Freedomways put him front and center as one of the leading protagonists of the Black radical tradition. Richard B. Moore, in his article for the magazine, observed that Harrison was perhaps the greatest of the great outdoor speakers who gave Harlem’s culture its unique flair. “Above all,” Moore noted, “Hubert H. Harrison gave forth from his encyclopedic store, a wealth of knowledge of African history and culture” that presented early ideas of Black consciousness to a Harlem populace hungry for such sustenance.

Yet since the 1960s, Harrison’s genius and importance have gone somewhat into eclipse. While left intellectuals like Michael Harrington and Black socialists like A. Philip Randolph are fondly remembered, Harrison’s critical contributions to socialism and Black political thought are often unfairly passed over. Even in histories examining the Black left’s rich and important literary and activist history, Harrison’s name isn’t invoked nearly enough.

A recent two-volume biography by Jeffrey B. Perry—Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883–1918 and Hubert Harrison: The Struggle for Equality, 1918–1927—seeks to correct this oversight. Tracking Harrison’s life from his birth in the Danish West Indies to his long career as an activist and intellectual in Harlem, Perry leaves no stone unturned in understanding the man, the times in which he lived, and the ideals he championed. Harrison’s intellect was matched only by his steadfast refusal to bend on his principles—including not taking money from sources he disagreed with. A biography that is also a work of intellectual and institutional history, Perry’s two volumes offer an incisive survey of the radical upheaval at the turn of the 20th century. But above all they make a case for why Harrison is a crucial part of the American radical tradition.

Perry’s background as a working-class intellectual—not to mention his writings on race and labor in American life—make him the perfect person to help recover one of the early 20th century’s great Black intellectuals and socialists. Having written for publications like Black Agenda Report, CounterPunch, and many others, Perry has spent years arguing for the importance of understanding how race and class are bound together as categories used to stratify and divide American society. For Perry, what defined Harrison’s legacy as a radical was that he avowed a socialist and class-based politics and yet also refused to abandon the masses of Black Americans, north and south, in their struggle against racism. Instead, Harrison examined the problem of race and class and came to the inescapable conclusion that only mass politics and
organizing among Black Americans could free them and, by extension, the working class from future exploitation.

Indeed, the story Perry presents revises what most curious readers know about the history of US radicalism in the early 20th century. Harrison played a key role in two important radical traditions at once: the Black freedom movement and the building of a Socialist Party in the United States. While many histories of the era treat the two as separate, Perry’s biography shows that for Harrison, socialism and Black radicalism were inextricably linked, motivated by the same insights and commitments; there was no way to privilege one over the other. As Perry argues in the first volume, Harrison was “the most class conscious of the race radicals, and the most race conscious of the class radicals.”

Harrison’s personal life provides some sense of the ways in which he was both different from and quite similar to many other Black activists in 20th-century America. Born and raised on the island of St. Croix in the Caribbean, then a colony of Denmark, Harrison grew up in a working-class home. His mother was an immigrant from the island of Barbados, and his father was once enslaved on St. Croix. Harrison’s formative years were at times difficult, Perry notes: He “worked as a servant, knew poverty, and developed an empathy with the poor.” His early experience caused Harrison to develop not only a class consciousness but also a race pride, having associated with so many others of African descent while living on the island.

In 1900, Harrison left St. Croix for New York City. “In a sense,” Perry writes, “Harrison was like many other West Indians who came to the United States at that time: young, male, and literate; thwarted by limited educational, political, and occupational opportunities at home; in search of a better life; and with a desire for more education and a propensity for self-education.” While we consider this period as one of the great ages of immigration to the United States, we usually think in terms of people coming from Southern and Eastern Europe—and perhaps the banning of immigration from China in 1882. But at the same time, many from the West Indies also came to the United States, exerting a considerable influence on Black American culture, and American culture more generally, in the 20th century.

Harrison’s arrival in New York City coincided with the aftermath of the August 1900 race riot, which injured more than 70 Black New Yorkers and marked a new low in the city’s race relations. The rest of the country was arguably worse: The South was host to an epidemic of lynching (though there were murders in the North as well). But New York City was also a harsh place for African Americans—according to Perry, “seventy percent of single Black males earned under $6, and ninety percent of single Black females under $5 per week.” Segregation marked a good deal of life in New York City as well, including education; in 1913, Perry points out, fewer than 200 Black students attended desegregated high schools. Harrison had hoped to find greater opportunity in the United States, only to discover that the country was at a “nadir” in terms of race relations. Despite proclaiming itself to be the land of the free and the home of the brave, the nation proved to be deeply oppressive for anyone of African descent.

Harrison moved in with his sister Mary and made the most of the rare opportunities offered him to pursue an education. Attending an evening high school that had mostly white students, Harrison worked during the day as an elevator operator. Despite excelling at his studies—the New York World published an article about him headlined “Speaker’s Medal to Negro Student: The Board of Education Finds a Genius in a West Indian Pupil”—Harrison would never attend college.

Instead, after high school, he became absorbed in politics. Like many other activists, Harrison sought a viable solution to the so-called “Negro Problem” of the early 20th century in whatever political programs he could find. At the time, there were many courses of action championed by Black intellectuals and activists as well as by white radicals and liberals. Booker T. Washington publicly advocated Black self-reliance and a retreat from political agitation; W.E.B. Du Bois insisted on full political rights and social agitation as the way forward; Marcus Garvey preached a form of Black nationalism that linked the plight of Black Americans and those of African descent around the world, while harboring a distrust of white America and a refusal to see desegregation as possible—or even desirable. There was also the liberal Black politics that emerged with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which included Mary Church Terrell, James Weldon Johnson, and numerous others who favored the creation of biracial organizations to combat the rampant racism of the day through political and moral suasion, boycotts, and legal campaigns against Jim Crow segregation in its many forms.

Harrison’s approach cobbled together much of the above, with an added emphasis on socialism. Drawn to the Socialist Party’s aggressive advocacy on behalf of immigrants’ and women’s rights in New York, he worked for the party as an organizer and writer. He also supported the Industrial Workers of the World—the Wobblies—and their leader, “Big” Bill Haywood, throughout the 1910s. For Harrison, the Socialist Party offered the forms of Black nationalism that linked the plight of Black Americans and those of African descent around the world, while harboring a distrust of white America and a refusal to see desegregation as possible—or even desirable. There was also the liberal Black politics that emerged with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which included Mary Church Terrell, James Weldon Johnson, and numerous others who favored the creation of biracial organizations to combat the rampant racism of the day through political and moral suasion, boycotts, and legal campaigns against Jim Crow segregation in its many forms.

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“The work must be done where Negroes ‘most do congregate.’”

However, he became increasingly frustrated by the racism and anti-Black thinking that permeated parts of the Socialist Party, and he sought to persuade his fellow socialists to make race more central to the party’s clarion call to workers caught in the class struggle in the United States. This proved to be an uphill battle for Harrison and others. As Perry notes, leading socialists like Victor L. Berger—who would later become a US congressman for Wisconsin—argued in 1902 that “negroes and mulattos constitute a lower race.” Meanwhile, even those who declared a commitment to racial equality minimized its importance when it came to organizing. Eugene Debs, in 1903, argued that “the history of the Negro in the United States is a history of crime without a parallel.” Yet in the same essay, “The Negro in the Class Struggle,” Debs finished by stating plainly, “We have nothing special to offer to the Negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races.” For Debs, the class struggle subsumed all other struggles in American society. For Harrison, this was at best a fallacy and at worst a critical strategic mistake. Like other Black socialists, he argued that the ten million Negroes of America form a group that is more essentially proletarian than any other American group. They could, if approached with sophistication and understanding, become the backbone of a larger socialist movement in the United States. But the concern of many Socialist Party leaders, including Debs, that appealing directly to Black Americans would divide the working class stopped the party from ever fully embracing this position.

For a time, Harrison continued to push the Socialist Party on the issue of anti-Black racism and to make the party an attractive alternative for African Americans in an era when both the Democrats and the Republicans expressed little interest in attracting Black voters. But in the end, his efforts were unsuccessful, and his Colored Socialist Club began to founder after it failed to receive enough support from the rest of the party in New York City.

Even as he grew distant from the Socialist Party, Harrison never completely abandoned socialism, but he began to look beyond its institutions and clubs when it came to matters of politics. He crossed paths with Washington, Du Bois, and Randolph, at once befriending and establishing rivalries with them as he vied for the attention of the people of Harlem. Harrison envisioned a movement for the Black masses instead of what most of his contemporaries offered, such as the “Talented Tenth” proposed by Du Bois in The Souls of Black Folk or other attempts to create a small cadre of Black radicals to lead the movement. Harrison argued that the potential members of the Talented Tenth were “the left-handed progeny of the white masters” and could not function without white patronage. He also argued that Washington’s notion of building up Black capital through hard work and vocational education was wrongheaded, asserting that Washington wanted the political and social relations of Black people to “one of submission and acquiescence in political servitude.” At the same time, Harrison felt that the newly created NAACP was a good start—but that the organization was still too concerned with the opinions and goals of white liberals.

During this period, Harrison began to develop a view of Black liberation that was worldwide in scope and not merely focused on the United States. Even as other Black leaders, most notably Du Bois, asked African Americans to “close ranks” and get behind the US entry into World War I, Harrison made no secret of his contempt for those who did. For Harrison, it was more important for Black Americans to arm themselves for the battle at home—and in this case, his words were not meant to be taken metaphorically. In the aftermath of the East St. Louis riots of July 1917, Harrison urged Black people to embrace armed self-defense as a proper and necessary strategy in the face of rampant oppression. The New York Times quoted him as saying, “We intend to fight if we must…for the things dearest to us, our heard and our homes.”

Harrison’s squabbles with Du Bois over the war may have pushed him to the margins of mainstream Black thought, but by the end of the war Harrison was moving toward the center of the “New Negro” movement. With the rise of this movement and the Harlem Renaissance, Harrison’s socialism, Black radicalism, internationalism, and modernism all found new audiences among Black Americans.

Like many Caribbean radicals, Harrison combined anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism.

Cochairing the Liberty Congress in 1918, he had a front-row seat to observe the growing radicalism of a younger group of Black Americans that formed the heart and soul of both of these movements. The New Negro movement, in particular, embraced what Harrison referred to as ‘the Race Consciousness of the Negro people.’ His earlier call for Black people to arm themselves after the East St. Louis riots also became a hallmark of the New Negro movement—an acceptance of the idea of armed self-defense and other militant tools in the greater struggle for human rights. Until then, Harrison had remained committed to a politics that had not created a mass movement. Now, leading the effort to resurrect the Harlem Voice newspaper in 1918, he found himself at the center of a new political and intellectual ferment, hatching a plan for organizing that would anticipate efforts by the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the Black Panthers, and a variety of other groups devoted, in one form or another, to organizing the Black working class in the United States.

The focus of Harrison’s ambitions was the South. He had grown tired of what he saw as the play-it-safe tactics of groups like the NAACP (which some of his radical peers derided as the “National Association for the Acceptance of Colored Proscription”) in the region. Part of this frustration stemmed from political setbacks, but it also came from his growing belief that very few white liberal activists could be trusted, even if they had the money and cultural and political prestige to lend legitimacy to a project. For Harrison, Black people could not trust others to do the work of emancipating Black America; they would have
to do it themselves. This commitment to Black agency and self-help led him to Marcus Garvey, who had arrived in New York City from Jamaica in 1916, bringing with him his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which had already been active on the island. Harrison and Garvey met in the revolutionary year of 1917, and, according to Perry, Harrison’s views on Black independence heavily influenced Garvey during the latter’s time in New York. Garvey attended meetings of Harrison’s Liberty League, and Harrison encouraged the league’s members to also attend Garvey’s events.

Harrison would eventually join the UNIA and serve as the editor of its newspaper, Negro World, which he elevated to a new level of sophisticated political engagement with the wider Black diaspora. Beginning his tenure during the “Red Summer” of 1919, against the backdrop of heightened labor strife in the United States and nationwide campaigns against the lives and livelihoods of African Americans, Harrison sought to use his editorial position to rally Black America and lauded those who embraced his calls to action, hailing the resistance against the Red Summer attacks as one of the “brilliant events in the history of the Negro race in America.”

Harrison also became increasingly vocal about his internationalism during this time. In a dazzling variety of ways, he used his powerful perch at Negro World to promote ideas of Black diasporic solidarity and to highlight the weaknesses he perceived in liberal attempts to fight segregation in the United States. For Harrison, Black Americans, West Indians, and other elements of the broader Black diaspora had far more in common than they recognized: All of them were subjugated and livelihoods of African Americans, Harrison reasoned, as Perry writes, that it was more important “to break the white monopoly on holding office” than it was to support a Black socialist for the mere sake of supporting one. Harrison’s tactical and intellectual arguments with Randolph and other Black socialists continued throughout the Great War period and into the 1920s. What was paramount for Harrison was the adoption by Black Americans of a race-centric strategy that would also allow room for a strong class politics. In 1920, his debates with Randolph and Chandler Owen, both editors of The Emancipator, were partly born out of Harrison’s need to defend what he called “the principles of the New Negro Manhood Movement” from attacks by the two. However, even the editors of The Emancipator—which was created by the merger of the better-known The Messenger (edited by Randolph and Owen) and The Crusader (formerly edited by the activist and intellectual Cyril Briggs)—were far from united on the question of putting class ahead of race. Whereas Harrison criticized Randolph for continuing in his class-first analysis, Randolph retorted that Harrison’s work with Garvey had tainted him with the larger problems that many Black activists—socialist or liberal—had experienced with Garveyism and the UNIA. (Nonetheless, when Harrison died, in 1927, Randolph paid him tribute as “our comrade and co-fighter for race justice.”)

In fact, Harrison’s continued commitment to class politics also separated him from Garvey, as did the latter’s grandioses style. Harrison grew exasperated with Garvey’s ostentatious uniforms and grand public pronouncements and eventually left his position as editor of Negro World. The final straw was Garvey’s misuse of funds, which to Harrison was especially egregious considering the working-class background of the vast majority of UNIA members.

Harrison often found himself navigating the worlds of Black nationalism and Black socialism.

Criticizing Black socialists like Randolph for continuing their class-first pronouncements, Harrison argued for a “race first” approach that, he insisted, did not abandon socialism. At times, he challenged Randolph and other Black socialists for what he considered to be their political naivete in navigating the complicated waters of city politics. In 1918, for example, Randolph ran for the 19th Assembly District and, in Harrison’s eyes, prevented the potential victory of a Black Republican, Edward A. Johnson.

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Illusions
HBO’s My Brilliant Friend

THE THIRD SEASON OF HBO’S MY BRILLIANT FRIEND OPENS where the second left off, in a bookshop in Milan. It’s 1968, and Elena “Lenù” Greco (Margherita Mazzucco) has just finished an event for her debut novel. The first face we see, emerging from behind a gold metal-work spiral on the door, is that of Nino Sarratore (Francesco Serpico). Lenù has loved him since she was a girl, and now, after many twists and turns, including Nino’s tortured affair with her best friend, Lila (Gaia Gerace), he finally seems ready. He holds the gilded door open for Lenù, and he holds her gaze in the crowd. These two working-class kids from Naples have made it in the cultured North; with their matching glasses, they’re practically made for each other. Too bad she’s already engaged to Pietro Airota (Matteo Cecchi), a classics scholar from one of the preeminent left-wing families in Italy.

It’s a rather lush, romantic opening for the season that ushers in Italy’s “Years of Lead,” a 15-year period marked by political violence on both the right and the left—and that’s just one of the season’s many pointed ironies. Adapted faithfully from Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay, the third novel in Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Quartet, the new season launches Lila and Lenù into adulthood.
Of course, neither woman is happy, because neither really owns her own life, even though they’re now adults. Lila, who was raped by Stefano on their wedding night, is sexually assaulted at work and shunned by her family for fleeing her marriage. Lenù, who was seduced by Nino’s father as a teenager, an event she has fictionalized in her book, is constantly fending off unwanted advances from the supposedly cultured men of her new social circle—aged professors, younger intellectuals and artists. When she and Pietro finally marry, he refuses her request for birth control, insisting that marriage means having children. Lenù is shocked; she thought theirs would be a union of equals. “Can I write another book first?” she asks in the car on the way to the civil ceremony. “You can write a book while you’re expecting,” he replies angrily. He impregnates her that very night, ensuring her transformation into a bourgeois housewife.

Yet progress feels possible for both women, if not without compromise. With navigating the conditions of work, marriage, and family in a society undergoing radical change.

So many previously forbidden things suddenly seem possible as Lila and Lenù move out of adolescence: autonomy for working women, the rise of organized labor, fulfilling romantic love. But this season’s story, written by Ferrante with series creator Saverio Costanzo, Laura Paolucci, and Francesco Piccolo, wryly checks those hopes even as it encourages and entangles them. Men crowd the road to liberation, and even the most sympathetic husbands, comrades, and lovers won’t easily relinquish their traditional authority. Among the many tantalizing fantasies of this season is the suggestion that they will.

Costanzo directed all but two of the episodes in the first two seasons, but now he has passed the baton to Daniele Luchetti, who oversees this sharpest turn in Lila’s and Lenù’s lives. Lila doesn’t even appear in the first episode, and Lenù plays only a framing role in the second. For much of season three, they are separated by geography and circumstance. Lila, the brilliant elementary school dropout who married the prosperous and ultimately duplicitous grocer Stefano Carracci (Giovanni Amura), remains in Naples. Since her affair with Nino, she has descended in class, now living out of wedlock with her son, Gennaro, and her companion, Enzo Scanno (Giovanni Buselli), while working in ugly conditions in a sausage factory. At night, Lila and Enzo study the new technology of computer coding and, at the encouragement of their old friend Pasquale Peluso (Eduardo Scarpetta), attend meetings of the local Communist Party, which is trying to organize Lila and her coworkers. Lenù, meanwhile, has graduated from the Normale University in Pisa. She rides the success of her first novel, and the influence of her well-connected in-laws, to a contributor’s desk at Italy’s Communist newspaper L’Unità, supplying her parents (Luca Gallone and the magnificently furious Anna Rita Vitolo) with a coveted TV and telephone.

Skeletons

Skeleton, some wonder if you are really practical keening as you do through this city ensconced in flesh, a tailored suit for bones lost plush in skin. Is it a good life within exiled in the singular anatomical body? (Thanatophobia, mine.) Ok, breathe. There’s oodles of oxygen for now—let’s live a little, we’re here! Natter on, nitwit. I’ve had about enough of you.

* Sorry not sorry, said death. He wasn’t fucking around, the klepto. Meanwhile, the internets wouldn’t shut up about perfection, elegance, the feminine ideal, that old regime. It was hard not to puff up while lactating. It took heft to host the parasite. Pregnancy brought a swampy edema. Bye-bye ankles. Nice knowing you, feet. Intermittent fasting? Time to give it a rest. We’ll shrink eventual to the ultimate bone, obits keening farewell, flesh! So wax zaftig, carb while you can, willy nilly you’ll get there, we’ll get there together, we’re already on our way.

* Sunday sloth is its own milk and honey, honey, am I right? Kudos to you for rationalizing your lazy ass again as in er “not writing is also writing.” Pussycat, I have bad news. Lethargy is for losers. Be kind to yourself, the shrink said. I felt shrunk. Enervating this dopamine addiction and tendency to toggle between gloomy and elate. Yeah, one minute she’s ogling men on the metro like some grody monsieur, the next wanting to die. Natch, dear, you’re here! Don’t ruin everything, for god’s sake.

DEBORAH LANDAU
help from Lenù, Lila wins an exhausting labor victory at the factory and heads back to the old neighborhood. There she reluctantly goes to work for the Solara brothers, Michele (Alessio Gallo) and Marcello (Elvis Esposito), organized crime bosses she spent most of the first two seasons resisting. They’ve always wanted to possess her, but now they’re offering to pay her handsomely to run a data-processing center, buying her intelligence instead of her body. Lenù, meanwhile, manages to stay connected to a thread of intellectual life, even while caring for two small children full-time. With her girls, the younger one still in her arms, she attends political demonstrations and visits her feminist sister-in-law, Mariarosa (Giulia Mazzarino), who encourages her to get back to writing. A new book, about the literary fabrication who encourages her to get back to writing. A new book, about the literary fabrication

Neither woman is happy, because neither really owns her own life.

ough Luchetti is new to the show, he builds on the aesthetic established by Costanzo in previous seasons, borrowing from the film movements of the periods dramatized: Italian neorealism for season one’s postwar childhood and French New Wave for the second season’s plunge into the 1960s. Luchetti, for his part, uses the handheld cameras of cinéma vérité to bring to life the political action and domestic unraveling of the late ’60s and early ’70s. The result is a story that seems to move almost seamlessly through history, using visual cues that many viewers already subliminally associate with the culture and the times.

Core aspects of the original aesthetic remain, including an abundance of flat, wide establishing shots that are by turns enchanting and estranging, appropriate for this long story of illusions dashed and transformed. The contrasts of North and South are many: Thin, sickly Lila largely inhabits the dark, suffocating spaces of the old Neapolitan neighborhood, while Lenù enjoys a Tuscan life of old money, natural light, and towering double doors that open onto lush green gardens. Her clothes are elegantly tailored, her hair softer and better cut, her daughters constantly praised for being so well-behaved. Even Lenù’s telephone, her most consistent connection to Lila, is a cheerful yellow, a subtle contrast to Lila’s violent red one. Before the telephone, the brightest color in Lila’s life belonged to the endless rows of pig carcasses hanging in the factory.

One of the most arresting choices of the season is the retention of the entire young adult cast, led by Gerace, 18, and Mazzucco, 19, who have grown up before the audience’s eyes. In a neorealist gesture, neither had acted before My Brilliant Friend, and they are now playing characters older than themselves. Their indelible youth might have been a distraction, but instead it highlights one of the novels’ most defining claims: the idea that we retain our core essences even through periods of great change. Lenù will always be Lenù, restrained and apparently good but harboring a wild, envious ambition that propels her out of the neighborhood—a tension Mazzucco captures beautifully in the faintest movements of her mouth. Lila, for her part, will always be Lila, as inflexible as Gerace’s shoulders, and preternaturally correct in her critiques of power—not just of the brutal Solaras, but of the upwardly mobile Lenù too. Both actresses do their best work this season, their performances lived-in and honest; it’s almost a shame they’ll be replaced by older actors going forward.

The same is true of the men in My Brilliant Friend, who take up more space in the story now that the girls have become women. Serpico’s Nino is a perfect snake, charming and self-deprecating enough to fool a smart woman; Buselli’s Enzo sees the hard truth through piercing blue eyes; and Gallo’s slick Michele might be dismissed as a small-time crook if he didn’t keep turning up as the threatening force behind the scenes. The standout is Cecchi as the stubborn scholar Pietro. Though congenial and nonviolent in principle, he is nevertheless a disappointment. Often seen at his desk, the centerpiece of his comfortable study, Pietro gets to devote himself to his intellectual work while Lenù squeezes hers into the margins around household duties. When she points out the disparity, he sits there stolidly, as though physically incapable of understanding. All of them, to the actors’ great credit, make perfect sense to themselves.

 Appropriately for a season focused on domestic life and children, a lot of screen time, especially Lenù and Pietro’s young daughter Dede (Soﬁa Luchetti, the director’s own child), who frolics and goes to the potty with the best of them. Observant and precocious, Dede is at once her mother’s spirit reborn in better circumstances and her inconvenient conscience. She’s also a young girl in a violent world, and we watch anxiously along with Lenù as Dede discovers what that means in a country planned and controlled by men.

In Florence, Lenù is largely protected from the vendettas of the old neighborhood, but the Years of Lead bring violence even to the most cultured, peaceful spaces of the North. A student pulls a gun on Pietro over an exam question. Pasquale and his upper-class girlfriend, Nadia Galiani (Giorgia Gargano), show up at Lenù’s home unannounced, aggressive and clearly on the run from something bloody. And after a murder in the old neighborhood, Lila sends Gennaro to Lenù for safekeeping.

In a world shaped so thoroughly by male authority and violence, is hetero-sexual love even desirable for women? The answer for Lila and Lenù is still open, but Luchetti’s use of “Spring,” a recomposition of Vivaldi by Max Richter and a refrain throughout the series, is telling. In season three’s first episode, the piece plays over a nightmare of social control, as Lenù imagines an angry chorus from the neighborhood chasing her down over her “dirty” novel. In the last episode, “Spring” consecrates a moment of romantic fantasy fulfilled. That the same piece of music can accompany such apparently contrasting emotional states indicates they have more in common than a superficial reading would suggest. In this brave new Italy, a working-class woman can write an important novel and find her soul mate, two transformative experiences for the individual. But when the personal thrill wears off, the collective problems remain. “Everyone talks themselves into a life that suits them best,” Lila tells Lenù on the phone. The question, in every season of their lives, is what they will talk themselves into now—and how, and for whom, they will act.
Involuntary Psychiatry
Re “Breaking Off My Chemical Romance,” by P.E. Moskowitz [April 4/11]: For many of us, administration of psychiatric medications was not our own choice but that of psychiatric personnel acting against our will. Yet it was only in 2008, thanks to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, that the UN special rapporteur on torture tentatively applied the right to be free from psychiatric forms of torture (and other ill treatment) to “persons with mental disabilities.” In 2020, the special rapporteur declared that “practices such as involuntary psychiatric intervention” based on the “best interests” of the patient “generally involve highly discriminatory and coercive attempts at controlling or ‘correcting’ the victim’s personality, behaviour or choices and almost always inflict severe pain or suffering,... If all other defining elements are present, such practices may well amount to torture.”
I work to obtain recognition, redress, and reparation in international law for the human rights violations perpetrated in the name of therapeutic treatment against a person’s will. I look forward to more open discussion of psychiatric harm, whose victims are too often silenced by the slur that any complaint is the product of mental illness.

Tina Minkowitz
Chester, N.Y.

The Nation is president of the Center for the Human Rights of Users and Survivors of Psychiatry.

Letters

US Imperialism and Anti-Asian Violence

I had to take breaks in reading Panthea Lee’s brilliant article, which was relentless in its detailing of the mentality that is promoted by “a girl for the price of a burger”—and what it allows it to persist [“Sex, Death, and Empire: The Roots of Violence Against Asian Women,” May 2/9]. Bravo, or, as is said where I come from, shabash.

Bindu Desai

Abortion Activism

Re “Q&A: Lauren Rankin,” by Amy Littlefield [May 2/9]: I am a strong pro-abortion advocate, but as a man, I have shied away from pro-abortion activism. This brief interview has provided me with an obvious path of action: Call my local clinic and ask them if they need anything. Thank you for the reminder and for the solid, practical, and commonsense advice given here. So simple, really.

Robert Borneman

Tucson
Frances Kissling, 78, the president of the Center for Health, Ethics and Social Policy in Washington, D.C., is a bioethicist who has spent most of her professional life thinking about and working on issues of women’s rights and reproductive health. In the early 1970s, she was the director of two of the first legal abortion clinics in the United States. Later, she headed up the National Abortion Federation and, in 1982, became the president of Catholics for a Free Choice, now known as Catholics for Choice. I caught up with Kissling, who is currently writing her memoirs, via telephone shortly after Politico published the leaked version of US Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito’s draft opinion in a forthcoming decision to overturn Roe v. Wade.

—Claudia Dreifus

CD: What was your reaction when you read Alito’s draft opinion?

FK: On one hand, I wasn’t surprised. But there’s a real difference between expecting a rollback and actually seeing something in front of you.

I reacted as a woman but also as a Catholic, because the decision was, in essence, written by five Catholic lawyers who accept the most conservative version of Catholicism on abortion and who have applied it to secular American law. They have an approach to the law that is based on natural law theory. What the church says about natural law is that every phenomenon, every behavior, is governed by nature and, as such, you can’t argue with nature. In the case of sexuality, a natural law thinker would say, “What is the purpose of sexuality? Well, sex can end in procreation, and so sex was given to us to procreate. You cannot interfere with that!” That’s what these folks believe.

Now, I don’t mean to imply that a Catholic must accept these ideas—or even that many Catholics do. There are multiple positions on almost everything, and natural law is only one among many. Moreover, abortion, like everything else in Catholicism, is covered by the right of conscience. Since the church doesn’t know what the fetus is, each of us is free to decide for ourselves and to act on our conscience.

CD: In the early 1970s, in the years immediately before the 1973 Roe decision, abortion access was left to the individual states. What did you see during that period, and what are the lessons for today?

FK: I saw there was tremendous demand. On weekends, we did about 100 abortions a day. About half our patients came from out of state. I’d get to the clinic around 7:30 in the morning, and the parking lot would be filled with cars from Maine to Florida. People had traveled all night to get to us.

Most of the women, I’d say, were working- or middle-class—teenagers, young mothers, women who, for whatever reason, understood they couldn’t have a child at that moment. Their decisions were reasoned and well-thought-out. No one seemed to take this lightly.

CD: I’ve had students who’ve said that a post-Roe future won’t be devastating because abortion will probably remain legal in the blue states. How would you answer them?

FK: "Devastating" is in the eyes of the beholder. A woman whose starting point is fear that she won’t be able to get a safe abortion goes through torture. It is true that it will be easier for a woman to identify a legal clinic than it was in 1970, but not all women—especially young women—will be able to navigate the process. Some women can’t travel, and there will be a return to unsafe abortions in red states. A woman who has had an abortion in a legal state may have a rare complication when she gets home and will be afraid to go to the emergency room. Some women will die. Many will suffer trauma. But large numbers will move on quietly with their lives.

CD: Given the likely possibility that Roe will fall in June, what should be the next move for activists?

FK: The short-term priority should be to make sure that many of the women who want an abortion can get one. The long-term battle will be to recover what has been lost—but in the interim, you can’t abandon the women who need abortions now. There’s a moral obligation to take care of those women.
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