

# THE **N**ation.

EST. 1865

DECEMBER 12/19, 2022

THE  
**GEORGIA  
RUNOFF**  
JOAN WALSH

THE WORLD OF  
**JOHN VON  
NEUMANN**  
DAVID  
NIRENBERG

## When the NYPD Gets Desperate

In a high-profile murder case, New York police swabbed hundreds of Black men, illegally used a private DNA lab, and then concealed their tactics.

AMOS BARSHAD

**CROSS**  
**POLICE LINE DO NOT**



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**THE WINTER SOLSTICE**  
may reason prevail.

There are no gods. No devils.  
No angels. No heaven or hell.  
There is only our natural world.  
Religion is but myth and  
superstition that hardens hearts  
and enslaves minds.

— *Anne Nicol Gaylor*  
*FFRF Principal Founder*

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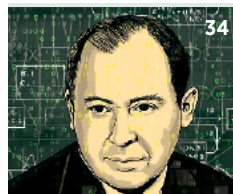
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EDITORIAL / JOAN WALSH FOR THE NATION

# Fighting for Georgia

**T**HE 2022 MIDTERMS ARE OVER, AND DEMOCRATS DID BETTER THAN THEY HAD A right to expect. The president's party almost always loses Congress two years into his first term; this time, it held the Senate and lost the House by, at press time, only six seats (with five races still to be called). Democrats won thrilling victories from Pennsylvania to Michigan to Arizona. Politically, though, they couldn't defy their own mistakes. In New York, establishment political malpractice led to the loss of four House seats. And Georgia, the star of the 2020 cycle, came up short of the promise we saw back then. The Peach State won the White House for Joe Biden, and in 2021 it elected two Democratic senators, giving the party its crucial majority (with the vote of Vice President Kamala Harris). This time, Stacey Abrams, one of the architects of Georgia's Democratic successes in the last cycle, lost her second race against Governor Brian Kemp, by almost 250,000 more votes than she did in 2018. And while Senator Raphael Warnock beat the former football star Herschel Walker, he fell a half-point short of the 50 percent he needed to win outright and was forced into a December runoff.

By the time many of you read this, you will know more than I do now: whether the incumbent senator, the pastor of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, ultimately won his race. The result will come down to whether Warnock was able to reassemble the progressive multiracial coalition that prevailed in the last cycle. This November, that coalition did not fully materialize. And many of the people behind the waves that turned out in Georgia in 2018, 2020, and 2021 say it's because of disinvestment in the grassroots voter mobilization infrastructure that created such success.

Voter turnout in Georgia was way down from the 5 million who voted in 2020, and almost two points lower than in 2018 in terms of the registered voters who showed up. Many states saw turnout fall from that midterm's anti-Donald Trump high, but few predicted it would happen in Georgia, where turnout has risen steadily since 2014. Local organizers blame, at least in part, a lack of donor support for their neighbor-to-neighbor ground game this time around. "You need the outside groups just as well funded as the campaigns," Hillary Holley, executive director of Georgia's Care in Action, told me. "And that didn't happen." While the Warnock and Abrams campaigns took in record-breaking hauls, many groups on the ground got less than in recent cycles. "There was just a refusal to acknowledge what it takes to pull out voters in this climate," said longtime organizer Nsé Ufot, a former CEO of the New Georgia Project. As of September, Ufot said, the New Georgia Project had raised roughly half of what it did two years ago.

The "climate" that Ufot mentioned was the result of the obstacles to voting imposed by SB 202, which was signed by Kemp in 2021. Its effects were masked at first by a record number of early votes. But absentee-ballot voting cratered: In 2020, Georgia voters cast more than 1.3 million absentee ballots; in 2022, the number was just over 200,000. SB 202 curtailed the time allotted for absentee voting, and it also drastically limited the number of drop boxes where voters could return their ballots if they didn't want to use the mail.

A robust ground game could have helped voters deal with those obstacles, but as an activist in one of Atlanta's most densely Democratic precincts told me, "Nobody ever knocked on my door!" In 2020 she sometimes saw two or three organizers a day.

That new voter suppression law kicks in again for the runoff. It cuts the campaign time from the last cycle's nine weeks to four,

abolishes new voter registration before the runoff, and leaves only a few days for early voting. Up against those barriers, Holley said, "it's our job to make sure voters know what to do." She believes they will. "People who were crying on Tuesday night were back in the field on Thursday," she told me. Funders stepped up too, hearing the clamor for grassroots resources. And Warnock announced 300 new campaign staffers and opened new field offices targeting key areas where Democrats underperformed in November.

"I'm feeling good," Holley said. "I'm optimistic." By the time you read this, you'll know whether she was right to be. **N**

**"There was just a refusal to acknowledge what it takes to pull out voters in this climate."**

—organizer Nsé Ufot



COMMENT/TINA GERHARDT

# The Climate Bill

*The prime minister of Barbados has a plan to dismantle Bretton Woods and fund climate spending.*

**W**HEN MIA MOTTLEY, THE PRIME MINISTER OF BARBADOS, spoke at the opening ceremony of last year's UN climate negotiations, or COP26, she made global headlines with her fiery criticism of rich nations. "The world stands at a fork in the road," she told the audience, "one no less significant than when the United Nations was first created in 1945. Will we act in the interest of our people, who are depending on us, or will we allow the path of greed and selfishness to sow the seeds of our common destruction?"

This year, at COP27 in Egypt, Mottley followed up her viral speech with a proposal that she believes would help ensure social, economic, and environmental justice. She put forward the Bridgetown Agenda, which is named after Barbados's capital and calls for an overhaul of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Citing a debt crisis exacerbated by the pandemic, rising living costs, and climate change, the Bridgetown Agenda would suspend IMF debt payments for the poorest countries, defer interest surcharges, and make \$100 billion immediately available to those nations that need it. Additionally, the proposal demands a new global mechanism to cover the loss and damage caused by climate change, which was a successful outcome at COP27. This, according to Mottley, would lay the groundwork for "a new financial system that drives financial resources towards climate action."

The Bridgetown Agenda states: "Most climate-vulnerable countries do not have the fiscal space to adopt new debt. We must move beyond country-by-country responses that have become bogged down by issues of who should do more." It advocates a new multilateral institution for "raising reconstruction grants for any country just imperiled by a climate disaster." It calls for \$650 billion in emergency liquidity and for development banks to issue \$1 trillion in low-interest loans for climate spending in poorer countries.

Mottley has also pushed back against some of the traditional IMF stipulations to qualify for loans, questioning the need to privatize national assets, fire civil servants, liberalize trade, and deregulate domestic economic activity. Confronting the climate crisis will require a lot of spending and investment, especially in frontline communities in the Global South. Wealthy countries typically get interest rates between 1 and 4 percent, while developing countries are forced to borrow at rates of between 12 and 14 percent. The Bridgetown Agenda asks that nations in the Global South be offered better financial terms, closer to what countries in the Global North already receive.

This new approach would effectively dismantle the financial framework that has been in place since 1944, when 44 nations met in Bretton Woods, N.H. The Bretton Woods conference established the IMF and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which today is part of the World Bank.

Addressing COP27 on November 11, former vice president Al

Gore said, "We need to reconvene Bretton Woods and completely revamp and reform the World Bank system." He said it could be accomplished within a year. Gore also called for David Malpass, the Donald Trump-appointed World Bank president, to be removed from his post.

In September, when Malpass appeared alongside the head of the IMF and Bahamian leaders on a *New York Times* climate panel, he was asked if he agreed that the "man-made burning of fossil fuels is rapidly and dangerously warming the planet." He refused to answer the question three times before he finally replied, "I don't even know—I'm not a scientist."

In response, Joe Thwaites of the Natural Resources Defense Council wrote, "We know climate change is not a priority for Malpass, not just from

his words but from his deeds." Thwaites went on to outline how, since Malpass's appointment in 2019, the World Bank "has been dragging its feet on taking the climate crisis seriously, at a time when we need it to sprint," namely by "lagging behind its peers" in funding climate-focused projects, hampering

other multi-development banks from doing so, and providing over \$14 billion in funding for fossil fuels.

The UN climate negotiations are the world's largest gathering of nations and NGOs (and, yes, a growing number of fossil fuel lobbyists). Crucially, these talks bring participating nations together on a level playing field. Critics point out that even though 27 annual UN climate negotiations have taken place, the climate crisis has only grown worse during that time. But Mottley's actions offer hope. While the Bridgetown Agenda is a long way from implementation, it has widespread support among countries in both the Global South and the G7.

Mottley has used the unwieldy and unlikely vehicle of the UN climate conference to have this discussion about the global financial architecture. And her plan just might undo the Bretton Woods system, which was decided on by a minority of nations, less than 80 years ago, with disastrous results. Overhauling Bretton Woods would be one of the most radical economic and political shifts of the past century. And it can't happen soon enough.

*Tina Gerhardt is an environmental journalist who covers climate change negotiations.*

**Her plan just might undo the Bretton Woods system, which was decided on by a minority of nations less than 80 years ago.**

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# Q&A

## Nancy Fraser

In her new book, *Cannibal Capitalism*, Nancy Fraser offers an expansive history of capitalism, proceeding from mercantilism and 19th-century theories of laissez-faire to 20th-century state-organized capitalism and, finally, to today's financialized capitalism. Taking a comprehensive view allows Fraser to capture how gender oppression, racial domination, and climate destruction are not incidental to capitalism but embedded in it. She also calls for a broader understanding of capitalism that isn't exclusively focused on private property, the means of production, wage labor, and accumulation. The world we live in, she writes, is an "institutionalized societal order" like feudalism. We spoke with Fraser about her new history, how to understand the multiple intersecting crises of capitalism, what Covid revealed about our health care system, and more.

—Rhoda Feng

**RF: What does it mean to look at capitalism as more than an economic system?**

**NF:** If we don't see capitalism broadly, if we continue to think of capitalism as synonymous with the economy, we'll imagine that the only relevant form of social conflict is the class struggle of workers at the point of production. This obscures the connection with other forms of conflict—ecological struggle, anti-racist struggle, feminist struggle around issues of care and social reproduction—which will always appear secondary. That position is both empirically false and politically counterproductive. [With this mindset], we'll never build the kind of broad coalition that we need in order to get to the root of all these problems.

**RF: With this in mind, what distinguishes contemporary capitalism from its forms in the past century?**

**NF:** I would say that the current form of capitalism is almost trying to return us to a stage of capitalism before the social democratic or New Deal era, in which there was very little public responsibility for all the difficult, energy-consuming, time-consuming, skill-requiring, thought-requiring activities that it takes to nurture and sustain people and communities.

**RF: Given what is arguably a series of ongoing and accelerating crises, what would it take for the left to be better prepared for the next crisis? Is capitalism in the US headed for terminal decline?**

**NF:** I don't think it's about the next crisis; I think it's about how we're going to get a resolution of this crisis. It's a general crisis, not a sectoral crisis—not just about the economy or ecology or care, but all those things intertwined and exacerbating each other. The root of all this is the design of a social system that licenses a small group of profit-driven institutions and actors to cannibalize the bases of their ability to make profits. I don't expect this problem to be resolved soon. As Gramsci said, "The old is dying but the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." Trumpism and all its cognate political forms throughout the world are all morbid symptoms, and they're pretty plentiful at the moment. There's no guarantee that the good emerges victorious. There are some very promising, potentially emancipatory political formations that are emerging, but they're less powerful at the moment than the bad ones in most places.

**RF: You assert that "[the battle against] the coronavirus served as a textbook vindication of public power." Yet it seems to have been a victory for the private sector as well, and health care in the US remains in dire straits.**

**NF:** One thing that Covid has shown us is how depleted and disinvested the public health care infrastructure in the US and elsewhere has become over the last 40 years of neoliberalization. Capital has turned over the lion's share of the world's health infrastructure resources to private hands—from R&D to manufacture and production, distribution capacity, and so on. The result is a disaster. It means that all these utterly essential resources are in the hands of actors who have zero interest in the common good and whose sole driving interest is shareholder value. They're operating on the basis of motivations that are completely at odds with those that need to be governing the sphere. This brings us back to socialism: When it comes to basic goods, like health-related therapeutics and infrastructure, we have to take them outside of the logic of the market. Those are some of the lessons that we should have learned from Covid.

**N**



**"It's not about the next crisis. It's about how we're going to get a resolution of this crisis."**



# Objection!

## Elie Mystal



# Tribal Rights Attacked

*With Haaland v. Brackeen, the conservative legal apparatus is trying to redefine Native sovereignty.*

**T**HE MORNING AFTER ELECTION DAY, AS MANY AMERICANS waited to learn whether Democrats would retain the power to pass laws that will later be invalidated by conservatives on the Supreme Court, the court heard a critical case aimed at rescinding key rights held by Native Americans. The conservative legal apparatus has launched a frontal attack on the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), and with it an attempt to redefine the nature of tribal sovereignty.

The case is called *Haaland v. Brackeen*. At issue are the claims of non-Native plaintiffs who wanted to adopt Native children through the foster care system but claimed they were thwarted by ICWA. The law requires state agencies to make “active efforts” to place Native children who are in the foster care system or up for adoption with their families or tribal communities. ICWA was passed in 1978 in response to the long and gross history of white families (with the aid of state agencies) taking Native children against the will of those Native communities.

The plaintiffs in *Brackeen* contend that ICWA violates the 14th Amendment of the Constitution and is an overreach of federal power. They say that ICWA’s preference for Native families is discriminatory toward non-Native (largely white) families and should be prohibited under the equal protection clause.

There is a deep irony to this claim by white families, who are in essence the beneficiaries of centuries of theft, discrimination, and outright genocide of Native peoples, that they are the victims of a law preventing them from claiming Native children against the will of tribal governments. More to the point, this case should not turn on the race of the families involved in the dispute because, from the perspective of ICWA, race is irrelevant.

Tribal identity has long been considered a political category, not a racial or ethnic one. Accordingly, ICWA doesn’t consider the race of the adoptive family but instead considers the national identity of the people they’re taking the babies from. Justice Amy Coney Barrett’s family and my family would be treated exactly the same if we wanted to adopt a Native child under ICWA: as foreigners. And that is exactly the same way we’d be treated if we wanted to adopt a child from Russia or China or Botswana. The law protects the ability of tribal

authorities to decide for themselves what’s in the best interest of Native children, without unnecessary meddling from the United States government.

Unfortunately, conservative justices were so obsessed with how the law treated white people, they lost the plot of how the law protects independent sovereign governments. Alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh put it most bluntly when he called the case “difficult” because, he suggested, ICWA violates the “fundamental principle we don’t treat people differently on account of their race or ethnicity or ancestry.” Meanwhile, Amy Coney Barrett worried that ICWA requires the states to take “active efforts” to keep Native families together. Chief Justice John Roberts crafted a hypothetical in which he asked whether the “best interests of the child” were really being served by keeping Native children within Native communities if there was a loving non-Native family willing to adopt.

These justices, fresh off the anti-affirmative-action oral arguments at which they whined and pined for deans of college admissions to ignore the race of the applicants, couldn’t ignore the race of the plaintiffs in *Brackeen*, even though there were objective, nonracial factors on which to base the case.

The fact that *Brackeen* is even in front of the Supreme Court is a triumph of the racialized arguments of the plaintiffs over long-standing tenets of constitutional law. Both the federal Constitution and Supreme Court precedent say that Congress and the executive branch have exclusive, “plenary” powers to govern relations between the United States and sovereign tribal nations. But conservative judges from the Northern District of Texas and the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that ICWA was an unconstitutional overreach of congressional power. Their theory is based largely on an ahistorical law review article published by a talk show host and failed gubernatorial candidate from Montana, who argues that congressional power extends to “trade” with tribal nations and nothing else. Conservatives also argue that ICWA “commandeers” state governments (by forcing them to try to place Native children with sovereign Indigenous nations) in violation of the 10th Amendment.

It’s not going to come as a galloping shock to astute readers that the argument supported by a random talk show host from Montana—as well as, apparently, Clarence Thomas—is nuts. But it may come as a shock to learn that not all of the conservative

**There is a deep irony to this claim by white families that they are victims of a law preventing them from adopting Native children.**



justices seemed to be on board with it.

Neil Gorsuch suggested that he would break ranks with his conservatives colleagues. Gorsuch is a consistent defender of states' rights and takes a dim view of congressional power, unconstitutional racism at the state level be damned. If the case was really about race or congressional overreach, one would expect him to go with #TeamWhite and #StatesRights, like he always does.

But Gorsuch is also the staunchest defender of Native sovereignty on the court. At oral arguments, he joined the liberals in pushing the issue of sovereignty over the race-conscious concerns of his conservative colleagues.

**The conservatives' theory is based largely on an ahistorical law review article published by a talk show host.**

Whether Gorsuch can attract a fifth vote to his point of view is hard to say. If only justices like Roberts, Kavanaugh, and Barrett could be more... color-blind, they might see that ICWA is not designed to discriminate against this

country's precious white families but instead is designed to protect sovereign peoples from our rapacious confederation of states. But white Americans are so used to stomping around this continent like they own the place that the mere concept of respecting the authority of Indigenous nations had conservative justices worrying that white families were being racially oppressed. **N**

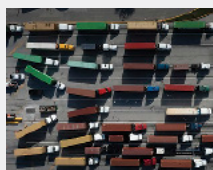


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RACHEL PHUA

## Subject to Debate Katha Pollitt



# The Women's Vote

*Far from alienating the electorate, the Democrats' emphasis on abortion rights delivered victory.*

**S**O IT TURNS OUT WOMEN DO CARE ABOUT THEIR RIGHT to control their own bodies. Who'd have guessed? In the run-up to the midterms, we heard a lot about how abortion had "peaked too soon"—a friend even suggested that the Supreme Court deliberately released the *Dobbs* decision in June precisely to give voters enough time to forget about it. Um, no. Too many people thought women couldn't keep the loss of their reproductive freedom in their pretty little heads for more than a month or so when milk prices are so high. Democrats were criticized by everyone from David Brooks to Bernie Sanders for—finally!—making abortion their banner issue. If only the party had done so for the past 30 years!

I won't lie: I was worried, too. Doomscrolling will do that to you, and following polls and reading a dozen hot takes before breakfast predicting catastrophe if Dems focused on abortion. It was the old story of men telling women to calm down—the same thing they've been doing for years whenever feminists warned that reproductive rights were at risk. There was so much gloom and panic among Democrats, you could start to think it was just a fever dream that Kansans rejected an anti-choice amendment to their state Constitution by an 18 percent margin in August, after predictions that it would just squeak by.

Here's what actually happened. On November 8, with a rush of new voter registrations and a high turnout, five states chose reproductive rights, women's health, and freedom. In California, 66 percent of voters passed Proposition 1, enshrining abortion and contraception rights in the state Constitution. In Vermont, voters went one better, locking down in their Constitution the rights to abortion, contraception, sterilization, and decision-making around pregnancy. In Michigan, voters won constitutional protections for abortion, contraception, and pregnancy and childbirth decisions.

Most surprising, in cherry-red Kentucky, where post-*Roe* trigger laws currently ban most abortions, voters rejected a constitutional amendment that would have explicitly denied protection for abortion, and in even cherrier-redder Montana, where Republicans control the governorship and both houses of the state legislature, voters rejected a deceptively worded "born alive" law that could have given doctors who provided palliative care to infants with fatal fetal anomalies a \$50,000 fine and 20 years in prison.

Far from sinking Democrats' hopes with their pesky uterine concerns, in many states pro-choice voters helped Democrats on to victories. As I write, we don't yet have hard-and-fast numbers on who turned out and why, but it's safe to say that abortion measures helped to bring plenty of women and

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young people to the polls. As a result, Gretchen Whitmer defeated Tudor Dixon, who claimed that giving birth after rape could be “healing” for a 14-year-old, and remains the governor of Michigan; Dems now control both houses of the formerly Republican state legislature. Pennsylvanians chose John Fetterman and Josh Shapiro over the anti-choice Mehmet Oz and Doug Mastriano. In the New Hampshire Senate race, Maggie Hassan beat ultra-Trumper Don Bolduc, who made the fatal mistake of telling her she should just “get over it” about the *Dobbs* decision.

*Dobbs* is proving to be something of a political embarrassment to Republicans, emboldening anti-abortion extremists and pushing to the fore an issue where they are in the minority. It has also concentrated the minds of middle-of-the-road people on what losing abortion rights actually means. It’s one thing to have qualms—to worry that there’s “too much abortion” and that women are too casual about it. It’s quite another to learn that abortion bans are forcing doctors to risk lives by refusing to treat incomplete miscarriages or to end pregnancies for 11-year-old girls who have been raped.

According to a recent *Washington Post*/ABC News poll, support for abortion rights has surged since *Dobbs*: 66 per-

**For now, the lesson I’m taking is this: Abortion rights are popular, and Democrats should act that way.**

cent of Americans now support all or almost all abortion, the highest since 1995—among women it’s 74 percent. Moreover, ABC News reports that “in the 14 states that have ceased nearly all abortion services, 63 percent now support legal abortion, up 20 points since April.” Reality bites.

I don’t want to oversell Democratic success in the election. We avoided the predicted collapse—for the last four first-term midterms, the party holding the White House has lost an average of 37 seats—but it could happen next time. President Biden is still unpopular, Republicans still control all branches of at least 23 state governments, and they will end up controlling the House of Representatives come January. The weakness of the state Democratic parties—looking at you, New York!—is a huge problem, and it would be a shame if whoever decides these things took the midterms as proof that it doesn’t matter: just parachute in every two years, pour on the TV ads, and hire more fancy consultants.

We need to think, too, about why the media so confidently predicted a red wave in the first place. Why did they buy the claim that abortion—and preserving democracy—

didn’t matter and that inflation, crime, and immigration would be decisive? There are surely lots of reasons: the conventional thinking about the way midterms usually go, fear of being accused of liberal bias, and the plain fact that most media outlets are owned by corporate interests who stand to benefit from pro-corporate Republican policies. Democrats seem prone by nature to pessimism, even when our opponents are incompetent weirdos.

For now, though, the lesson I’m taking is this: Abortion rights are popular, and Democrats should act that way. As Maya Rupert of the Center for Reproductive Rights put it to me in a phone call, “We have to let go of the idea that abortion is a uniquely divisive issue that people shouldn’t talk about.”

My friend Heather Booth is a progressive Democratic activist and was a member of the Jane Collective, which performed illegal abortions in pre-*Roe* Chicago; she’s been on the front lines for decades. Months ago, she told me, “If we organize, we will win.” Being a bit of a gloomster, I was privately skeptical. But Heather was right. Let’s not forget that as we move toward 2024 and doom clouds hover again.

OPPART / PETER KUPER



\*Oil and gas industries sent 636 lobbyists to COP27, a change of over 25% more than the last conference.

# Town Called Malice

CHRIS LEHMANN

## American Oligarchy

*Republicans remain committed to promoting the interests of the wealthy in government. Democrats win by fighting back.*

**W**HEN THE DEMOCRATS DEFIED RECENT POLITICAL history by facing down a long-predicted “red wave” in the 2022 midterms, a battery of insta-takes sought to establish single-bullet theories for the surprising outcome. The balloting was a referendum on Donald Trump, we were told—or on the *Dobbs* decision, or on the GOP’s multifront assault on democracy. Of course, it was all these things and more, as one would expect to be the case for more than 600 contests for national and statewide office in a sprawling, divided country. But it’s worth lingering a bit on an issue that many polls and pundits expected to favor Republicans: the specter of inflation, widely taken to be a surefire driver of public dissatisfaction with the state of the economy. The actual returns registered little of this alleged outrage; indeed, economic populists of the left performed better than conventional, centrist Democrats. Left-leaning candidates secured major statewide offices in Pennsylvania and helped Democrats hold the line in key Western contests. Even where a marquee economic populist lost—as Tim Ryan did to J.D. Vance in the Ohio Senate race—it was close enough to buoy several House candidates in the state. (It’s also worth noting that Ryan ran to the right on some economic issues; unlike Pennsylvania Senator-elect John Fetterman, he came out against President Biden’s student-loan-relief package.)

The populist successes of 2022 contrast sharply with the Democratic failures of the 2010 midterms. Then, rising right-wing anger over the recently passed Affordable Care Act combined with the flagrant bailouts of the financial sector in the wake of the 2008 meltdown to create an economic referendum on the Democrats, as unemployment hovered near the double-digit mark. But the 2022 results should serve notice that full-employment conditions, backed by strong income supports and forward-looking policies like student-loan forgiveness, can trump anxiety over inflation—contrary to the conventional wisdom of the macroeconomic austerity measures that the investment class marshals to combat it.

More than that, the populist wins of 2022 point to a broader appeal that can help unite the disparate elements producing hard-fought victories for the Democrats in other battlegrounds. By stressing the robust conditions of equality that can be secured under a populist political economy, astute Democrats can draw on the understanding of reproductive choice as a foundational economic right, press the case for racial justice in steeply unequal housing and jobs markets, and lend

much-needed urgency to the party’s rhetoric around the democracy crisis. By focusing on the abuses of oligarchy—the rampant migration of top-heavy economic power into political life—Democrats can build on the outcome of the 2022 midterms to make an argument for expanding provisional, pandemic-era commitments to social democratic justice into the broader spheres of working life and civil society.

Oligarchy is at the heart of the Republican governing project, which cynically exploits a racialized brand of pseudo-populism to mask an agenda that serves the interests of the wealthy. Calling out this unholy fusion is central to defeating it. “It’s the alliance between the very wealthy and very powerful economic players, oligarchs and wannabe oligarchs, who want to convert their wealth to political power,” says University of Texas law school professor William Forbath, a coauthor of the recent study *The Anti-Oligarchy Constitution*. “We’ve seen this alliance move from nativist and racist dog whistles to full-bore white nationalism at the same time that it wants to shore up a neoliberal and anti-regulatory politics—that’s a hell of a trick.”

What has allowed that trick to take hold is the chronic diffidence that savvy inside-the-Beltway Democrats show toward class-based politics, a failing that dates back to the 1994 midterms. It wasn’t until recently that Democrats found renewed footing in such appeals. In the final 2022 election push, “President Obama was the closer,” says David Kusnet, a speechwriter who worked for the Clinton White

House. “His speech in Philadelphia made the closing argument well, melding personal freedom and defending democracy with economic populism and social inclusion. ‘Freedom’ resonates with the Black freedom struggle, and ‘democracy’ resonates with resisting oligarchy and plutocracy—building

the strength to fight for social and economic justice.” Obama bolstered the case by striking a combative note, Kusnet says: “The issue isn’t judging the record of the last two years after a medical and economic catastrophe—Obama squared the circle there by presenting that record as the first part of the fight ahead.”

To build on that message, the Democratic Party will need to reckon with just what sort of constituency it sees itself serving over the long haul. “It’s no secret to those of us who advocate for populist campaigns and populist governance that the donors pull Democratic candidates one way and the voters pull them the other way,” Kusnet says. “If you listen too much to the donors, there’s no way to pull back.”

**Oligarchy is at the heart of the Republican project, which cynically exploits a brand of pseudo-populism to mask its agenda.**





# THE ARGUMENT

## I'm Not Leaving Twitter. Neither Should You.

OLAYEMI OLURIN

**N**OT A DAY HAS GONE BY WITHOUT CONTROVERSY since Elon Musk completed his \$44 billion takeover of Twitter. History tells us that social media platforms rise and fall. But Twitter is not like other platforms. Twitter has been instrumental in the spread of social justice movements and in the dissemination of news and information many otherwise would not have accessed. Twitter has fostered connections among millions of people, elevating countless previously lesser-known thinkers, organizers, advocates, artists, and journalists, and made way for solidarity across geographic and imagined borders. Twitter is what allows us to respond and push back against what we disapprove of in real time, whether it is seeking retribution against a white woman who lied about a Black man birding in a park or bullying Paramount Pictures into redesigning Sonic into a hedgehog we could all be proud of.

I started using Twitter seriously when the pandemic hit. I remember the first day of the lockdown because they closed the courts—and they never close the courts in New York City. That's when I knew it was real. But as a public defender, I was aware of how fortunate I was, in that I didn't have to face Covid from the inside of a crowded cell at Rikers Island, where people were unable to socially distance and contracted Covid at alarming rates. But my clients did have that experience—and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo was working overtime to ensure that they stayed locked inside. Twitter became an avenue to fight Cuomo's rollback of bail reform, which left thousands of poor Black and brown people trapped in Rikers.

A few months later, in May, the entire world listened and watched for eight minutes and 46 seconds as George Floyd cried out for his mother and pleaded with Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, saying that he could not breathe, as Chauvin continued to kneel on his neck until Floyd took his last breath. George Floyd's murder launched a summer of protests all over the world, and we used Twitter to organize and communicate about where to find legal resources amid the mass arrests.

Months later, despite New York City's passage of the "Say Their Name" reform package, which promised that police wouldn't restrain people the way Chauvin had restrained Floyd, four NYPD officers were recorded sitting on top of Carlyle Arnold in Queens while he lay totally

still. One officer was kneeling firmly on Carlyle's neck as the onlookers screamed in horror, "Get your knee off his neck!"—to no avail. Carlyle survived the encounter, but he was arrested and charged with a misdemeanor for driving an ATV, which is how I met him. I represented him at his arraignment, and after he was released on his own recognizance, he sent me the video and I tweeted it to the world. Within hours of my posting it, numerous media outlets had contacted us to tell his story. We called for the Queens district attorney to drop the charges against him and to charge the officer involved. The DA declined to charge the officer but dismissed the charges against Carlyle—not because it was the right thing to do, but because we fought back in the court of public opinion. Not dropping the charges would've made the DA look bad.

Twitter is the primary way most millennials and Gen-Zers get or share news. Even the people who think they don't get their news from Twitter in fact do. Twitter is also a place where unlikely voices are propelled to the main stage, and where people who generally feel unreachable and untouchable can be bullied into submission by the masses—which is a good thing.

All of this is precisely why Elon Musk wished to seize it and to use and manipulate it to his own advantage. That should neither surprise nor deter us. The fight for justice and equality has far tougher obstacles than the fact that it shares the same Internet space as the bigots we already know are out there and must

contend with in real life. There is nothing fundamentally destabilizing about a billionaire buying one social media app when most of the others are also owned by wealthy white men. The struggles our communities face, the tragedies we're trying to highlight, and the rights we're fighting for far outweigh

the discomfort of having our Twitter space feel a little more like the white-billionaire-owned structures we've always been fighting against in society at large.

Despite the intentions of its new owner, Twitter is one of our most effective tools for challenging the status quo and powerful people and institutions. Twitter has proved that a social media platform can be a force for social justice movements—and if its downfall is truly inevitable and the app does burn, we should form something even better in its wake. But for now, I'm not leaving. Neither should you. **N**

*Olayemi Olurin is a movement lawyer, political commentator, writer, and abolitionist thinker.*

**Twitter is one of our most effective tools for challenging the status quo and powerful people and institutions.**



**SNAPSHOT**/Jeff J Mitchell

## Amid the Ruins

A girl poses in front of a mural in Borodyanka, Ukraine, painted by the anonymous artist Banksy. The artist has created several murals in Ukraine in a show of solidarity with that country in its war against Russia. In a video that Banksy posted on Instagram documenting the works, a woman explains that the building was her daughter's school before it was destroyed in the Russian invasion.

### By the Numbers



**\$44B**

Amount Elon Musk paid for Twitter

**3.7k**

Approximate number of jobs

Musk planned to axe after taking over as CEO, or about half of Twitter's staff

**1.2k**

Number of Twitter employees who resigned after Musk issued an ultimatum: commit to an "extremely hard-core" work culture or leave

**137k**

Estimated number of tech employees laid off in 2022

**90%**

Portion of Twitter's

revenue, totaling \$2.18 billion in the first half of 2022, that comes from advertising sales

**10.2%**

Portion of US GDP contributed by the digital economy

**\$32B**

Value of the cryptocurrency firm FTX before it collapsed

**\$1B**

Approximate amount of client funds missing at FTX

CALVIN TRILLIN

**DeadlinePoet**

### The Agenda of House Republicans

We said when we ran that we'd make this place great.

We'll honor that pledge, but right out of the gate,

Inflation, the border, will just have to wait.

We need to nab Hunter before it's too late.





# When the NYPD Gets Desperate

**In a high-profile murder case, New York police swabbed hundreds of Black men, illegally used a private DNA lab, and then concealed their tactics.**

BY AMOS BARSHAD

**I**N THE FALL OF 2017, I SAT IN A WINDOWLESS BACK ROOM in O'Neill's bar in the Maspeth neighborhood of Queens and watched the Retired Detectives of New York (RDNY) honor two of their own.

The first was Louis Scarcella, whose record of high-profile arrests in Brooklyn in the 1990s had just crumbled under evidence that he'd coerced people into giving false confessions. The second was John Russo, who'd only recently become tabloid famous: He'd identified a Black man as a suspect in the murder of Karina Vetrano, a 30-year-old white woman who was killed in the summer of 2016 while jogging near her family's home in Queens.

I was covering the event for *New York* magazine. Russo's police work was a "true iteration of that cinematic 'detective's intuition' that cops love to valorize," I wrote. "It's the same one Scarcella was so famous for before the allegations appeared to suggest he was just making all that shit up."

The name of the man Russo ID'd is Chanel (pronounced "Tcha-nel") Lewis. At Lewis's trial Russo testified that on Memorial Day, about two months before Vetrano's murder, he was off-duty and in his car with his daughters when he saw Lewis, then 19, walking through the majority-white neighborhood of Howard Beach. Russo deemed him suspicious and tailed him for 45 minutes. When Russo spotted him while off-duty the next day too, he alerted nearby police. The officers stopped Lewis and drove him to a McDonald's in the Far Rockaway neighborhood of Queens,

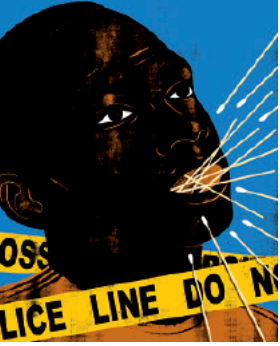
where he was questioned and released.

In Russo's telling, seven months after Vetrano's murder, he suddenly remembered Lewis and established him as a person of interest. When police officers went to his house, Lewis voluntarily gave them a DNA sample that matched DNA found on Vetrano's neck, on her phone, and on her fingernails. Lewis was arrested on February 4, 2017, and he confessed to killing Vetrano the next morning. Russo's story was that he had a hunch, and it hit.

That night in Maspeth, Russo was low-key while his fellow cops swooned. "Because of his actions an animal was put behind bars," an RDNY organizer said. They presented Russo with the ARDY, "our highest honor." As the ovation died down, Russo took the podium and addressed Vetrano's family, who was seated nearby. "We all work together every day to bring justice to every crime

*Amos Barshad is a journalist living in New York City.*





## In one case, a family sold their house and moved to Westchester County to get away from police harassment.

**Conviction integrity:** Melinda Katz, the Queens DA, established a unit in her office dedicated to investigating possible wrongful convictions.

victim's family; we thank them for being here. God bless this police department. God bless the people of the city of New York."

In Lewis's first trial, in 2018, the jury couldn't reach a verdict and the judge declared a mistrial. During his second trial, in 2019, an anonymous whistleblower who self-identified as a member of the New York Police Department sent a letter to Lewis's attorneys stating that Russo's story was a fabrication. For nearly two weeks after the murder, according to the whistleblower, the cops assigned to the case were told to look for "two jacked up white guys." Then, the whistleblower alleged, the NYPD's Forensic Investigations Division received a report stating that the DNA found at the crime scene belonged to a Black man. In the following months, the whistleblower said, the NYPD stopped hundreds of Black men in Howard Beach and its surrounding area and swabbed them for DNA evidence.

The letter included a copy of a partial record of the men whose saliva was tested that had come from an internal NYPD database, something only an officer with knowledge of the case would have access to. *The New York Times* confirmed that the DNA collection had taken place, and the *Daily News* interviewed some of the men, who described a pattern of intimidation that they and their families endured while the NYPD aggressively sought out swabs. In one case, a family sold their house and moved to Westchester County to get away from police harassment. The Queens County District Attorney's Office has never denied the authenticity of the whistleblower's letter; it has just ignored its claims.

After receiving the letter, Lewis's then-lawyers, who were working on behalf of the Legal Aid Society, moved to reopen pretrial proceedings for more discovery. They wanted to learn how the NYPD had come to identify their client as a suspect. The judge rejected that motion, and Lewis was convicted by the jury. Since 2019, he has been serving a sentence of life without parole in various New York State prisons.

Lewis, now 26, is represented by the veteran defense attorneys Rhiya Trivedi and Ron Kuby. They believe that Lewis was just another name on the NYPD's list of Black men who'd been previously arrested or detained in or around Howard Beach and that the department used John Russo's hunch story to cover up its tactics in the Vetrano investigation—an indication, Trivedi said, of "what the NYPD does when they are truly desperate," of "how far they're willing to go."

If they're right, the Queens DA would be guilty of a Brady violation, meaning a failure by the prosecution to provide the defense with exculpatory evidence. If the DNA match and confession in the Vetrano investigation came from a search tactic that was never disclosed in court, that evidence could be ruled inadmissible, and Lewis's conviction could be overturned.

**A**FTER RESEARCHING LEWIS'S CASE, KUBY AND TRIVEDI GUESSED THAT Parabon NanoLabs was the company that provided the NYPD with the DNA report cited in the whistleblower's letter. The private lab, funded in part by the Defense Department and headquartered in Reston, Va., is one of the few places in the United States that analyzes DNA from police investigations to determine a person's race.

The Queens DA never mentioned Parabon during Lewis's two trials. And while the company touts its successes in police investigations—its website boasts of work in 33 states, plus Canada and Sweden—Parabon had never discussed its role in the Vetrano murder case.

Recently, I spoke by phone with Parabon's director of bioinformatics, Dr. Ellen Greytak. She'd agreed to speak about the company's work with police departments. Fifteen minutes into our conversation, I asked about the Vetrano investigation.

"We did ancestry for that case," Greytak said, then added that from the sample they were given, they felt confident to say the individual was "of African and European descent."

I asked for clarification. Does that mean the report suggested the person could have been either of African or European descent?

"The report says 'African,'" Greytak said. "I think the focus was mostly of African..." She trailed off. "Most people of African descent are also of European descent. I'm trying to remember. I remember he was of African descent. So that's the extent of it. I don't know if we also said 'and European.'"

I asked her to share the report with me. She offered a terse rejection. "Whatever the police said is what we're allowed to say."

In 2017, the New York State Department of Health issued a warning to Parabon for operating in New York without a permit, stating that this was a misdemeanor "punishable by fine or imprisonment or both." The department took this action after it became aware that the NYPD had sent Parabon specimens from two separate 2017 Brooklyn murder cases. In an e-mail exchange, Thom Shaw, a case manager at Parabon, confirmed that it was the NYPD's Forensic Investigations Division that had hired Parabon in 2016 for DNA analysis during the Vetrano investigation.

It wasn't until 2020 that the Department of Health approved Parabon's application for a permit. I asked Greytak why the company had worked with the NYPD before it was allowed to do so. "We were told that they were outside the permitting process and that they could make their own decision based on what labs they sent things to," Greytak said. "We trusted them on that."

Parabon's confirmation of the existence of a report indicates that, as Trivedi and Kuby contend and as the whistleblower alleges, the NYPD covered up its tactics in the Vetrano investigation and that the Queens DA protected



the flawed prosecution of Lewis by burying the NYPD's illegal use of a private lab.

What's in Parabon's report? How exactly did it lead to the NYPD's arrest of Lewis? And why won't the department disclose any of that information?

The NYPD did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

There is, of course, another question: Is Chanel Lewis innocent? But for now, Kuby and Trivedi don't need to prove that. What they need to show to overturn his conviction is that Lewis was wrongfully convicted. And if they do, we'll learn something about how law enforcement functions in New York City.

**C**HANEL'S MOTHER, VETA, HAD moved to New York from St. Mary Parish, in northeastern Jamaica, in the early '90s. One Friday in the winter of 2017, two plainclothes officers, a man and a woman, came to her front door. She told me this was her first-ever interaction with the NYPD.

They said to Veta, "We need to talk to Chanel." She said, "Pertaining to what?" The woman asked Veta if she had "heard about this lady in Howard Beach." Veta said she knew about the murder of Vetrano. The female officer told her something to the effect that "no one person could ever have killed Karina Vetrano." Meanwhile, the male officer pulled Chanel aside. Veta didn't know that the officers didn't have a warrant, which meant Chanel could refuse the request for a DNA sample. She didn't even know they were taking a DNA sample.

The next day, Veta, a home nursing aide, woke up at 4 AM to go to one of her two jobs. While she was gone, the police arrested Chanel. "When I came home, I couldn't even get inside," Veta told me. The NYPD was swarming her residence. "I dropped down right outside. I collapsed."

When she asked which precinct Chanel had been taken to, she said the cops claimed they couldn't provide that information. "He did not come home. He did not come home, and until now he's still not home," she said.

On Sunday morning, Veta watched the local news and waited for information from the police. There was a breaking news bulletin. "I saw his face on the TV, and I hear someone say, 'They have a confession. They have a confession.'"

Before his arrest, Lewis, a recent graduate from a high school for developmentally delayed students, had never spent a night away from home. Police held him for 11 hours, overnight. The morning after his arrest,



Detective Barry Brown secured Lewis's confession.

In the video of the confession, Lewis comes off confused, tentative, and afraid. The confession is coached out of him, painfully, bit by bit. A Queens assistant DA repeatedly offers a statement about Lewis's actions during his alleged attack on Vetrano in Howard Beach and then cajoles Lewis into confirming it. At one point, the assistant DA prompts Lewis to explain that the reason he attacked Vetrano was that he was upset about loud music that an unidentified person had been playing in his East New York neighborhood earlier that day.

Despite the coaching, Lewis gets details wrong. Most glaringly, he says that Vetrano died by asphyxiation with her face in a puddle, which did not happen. At the end of the confession, he appears to believe that the assistant DA taking his statement is his own defense lawyer and fumblingly asks about a "restitution" program that he indicates was offered before the recording began.

Barry Brown recently resigned from the NYPD after he was caught hiding exonerating evidence in a different murder case, leading to a \$2 million settlement.

**R**ON KUBY, 66, HAS BEEN A PUGNACIOUS CIVIL RIGHTS attorney for decades. His office in the Flatiron District of Manhattan is in a converted factory loft with futons, hammocks, and at least one mural of an octopus. When I visited him in the spring, he looked on-brand in a colorful tie and a long white ponytail. Trivedi, 32, started working with Kuby right out of law school about five years ago. In her boots and black cut-off T-shirt, she looked like a singer in a critically acclaimed but obscure industrial metal band. The first thing Trivedi said to me was "Do you like dogs?" Then Jack and Sammy trotted up. By the time we finished our interview, Kuby was in his socks tucking into a massive burrito.

At the time of Lewis's trials, Trivedi and Kuby were defending a young Queens man named Prakash Churaman, who had been arrested on a felony murder charge at 15 and sentenced to nine years to life in prison. Churaman had long maintained he'd been coerced into confessing to Barry Brown. Trivedi and

#### **Trials and errors:**

Chanel Lewis gave his confession to Detective Barry Brown, who was caught hiding exonerating evidence in a different murder case.

**"He did not come home. He did not come home, and until now he's still not home."**

—Veta Lewis,  
Chanel Lewis's mother





Kuby succeeded in overturning Churaman's conviction, in part by focusing on the judge's denial of Churaman's request to call an expert witness on false confessions.

After their success with the Churaman case, Trivedi and Kuby were hired to work on Lewis's appeal by a person who wished to stay anonymous. "Some nice Italian American citizen from Queens called me up," Kuby said. "And he really does not want his name known, because he lives in that community," meaning Howard Beach. The amount this person could pay was low, but, Trivedi says, she and Kuby were "hyped" to take on the case.

As their first action, Trivedi and Kuby sent a letter to the Queens DA asking for documents and communications from the Vetrano investigation. Any police work that occurs during an NYPD investigation is recorded in a report called a DD-5. Trivedi said she'd never seen a case with more than 100 DD-5s. The Vetrano investigation had 1,786, and only 129 were made available. The DA rejected Kuby and Trivedi's requests. "They told us to go fuck ourselves," Trivedi said.

**Lefty lawyers:** Rhiya Trivedi, left, and Ron Kuby are representing Chanel Lewis and helped free Prakash Churaman.

The forensic practice by which race is inferred from DNA is called "phenotyping," and it's a relatively new and scientifically contested method. Parabon's Greytak said that the company's report from the Vetrano investigation indicated that the DNA sample belonged to a man of African descent. (As she let slip in our conversation, the report may also have described the sample as being from someone of European ancestry.) The NYPD clearly took that to mean they were looking for a Black

man. But Trivedi argues that racial definitions are not as clear-cut as the NYPD wants them to be, and that the whole premise of phenotyping as an investigatory tool is flawed.

"What does it mean for DNA to be Black?" she asked. "Who's making that determination? And is the NYPD just free to stop anyone [Black] at that point?"

Bradley Malin, an expert in genetics privacy at Vanderbilt University, told me that knowing the

likely "ancestral heritage" of a given DNA sample doesn't necessarily indicate what the person whose DNA it is looks like. "There are plenty of reasons why skin tone could be a lot lighter or could be a lot darker," he said, and "there have been plenty of [cognitive] studies that indicate if you just show an individual skin tone and you ask, 'Are they Black or are they white?,' people get it wrong."

Parabon has not submitted its technology to peer review and treats its DNA tools as trade secrets. "If this is going to be technology that is used to prosecute individuals," Malin said, "then it would be useful to have public scrutiny into whether the approach is reliable."

As far as Trivedi knows, the one time prosecutors attempted to enter Parabon's phenotyping as evidence was in the infamous murder trial of Navy SEAL Eddie Gallagher, and the judge threw it out. Trivedi argues that the use of Parabon in the Vetrano investigation should be "exculpatory or at the minimum subject to cross-examination." She's writing a motion that will request discovery on the DNA report and attempt to show the judge "what the defense would have done had they had a chance" to challenge the science.

That motion will go to Justice Michael B. Aloise, who presided over both of Lewis's trials and demonstrated a favorable attitude toward the prosecution's case by dismissing the defense motion related to the whistleblower letter. If Aloise rejects the motion, Kuby and Trivedi will move forward with an appeal to the Appellate Division, which can order discovery or vacate the conviction altogether.

It's important to point out one thing: The DNA sample taken from Lewis and then matched to the samples from Vetrano were analyzed not by a secretive, private DNA lab but by the city's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, and the OCME said they matched.

In Lewis's trial, the defense pointed out that there were only trace amounts of Lewis's DNA present and that they could have gotten there through secondary transfer, meaning Vetrano could have picked up Lewis's DNA by touching something Lewis had previously touched. In 2012, a man in California was wrongly incriminated in a murder because of exactly that kind of secondary transfer. Studies have shown that one in five people carry traces of strangers' DNA.

This theory is bolstered by the fact that, unlike the DNA found on Vetrano's phone and neck, the DNA found on her fingernails was matched to Lewis's DNA by something called the Forensic Statistical Tool, a process that has since been proved to be unreliable and that the OCME has stopped using. That

**"What does it mean for DNA to be Black? And is the NYPD just free to stop anyone [Black] at that point?"**

—Rhiya Trivedi, defense attorney for Chanel Lewis

would make it possible that Lewis is serving a life sentence because of an everyday, arbitrary transfer of DNA.

The Queens district attorney has always maintained that the DNA match indicated Lewis's guilt. But if the DA is right, that would lead us to a counterintuitive conclusion: Lewis could be both guilty and wrongfully convicted. Because the fundamental question remains: Was the DNA sample from Lewis that the OCME analyzed illegally procured?



ON JUNE 6, PRAKASH CHURAMAN arrived at the Queens County Courthouse believing he was there to get a trial date. By his supporters' count, it was his 98th court appearance since his arrest. Veta Lewis was there too, shielded behind a mask and large sunglasses. She'd been to a lot of Churaman's hearings and rallies. After one event at Queens College, Veta and Churaman's mother went out for pizza at Gino's of Kisseena. In the eyes of many community activists, Churaman's and Lewis's cases are twin symbols of the crimes that the NYPD perpetrates on young people of color in Queens.

Outside the courthouse, one speaker pointed out that "Barry Brown sent another community member, Chanel Lewis, to prison. We are very much in solidarity with Chanel Lewis." Another added, "Chanel is still incarcerated. The same detective. Isn't that a shame? It's a damn shame."

After Churaman's conviction was overturned, the Queens DA offered him a deal: plead guilty to a lesser charge and go free within months. Boldly, preposterously, Churaman rejected the agreement and asked for a new trial. He wanted to fight for a full acquittal. (Kuby and Trivedi, who'd advised him to take the deal, stopped representing Churaman at this point.)

It was a broiling afternoon, but the heat didn't stop Churaman from pulling off an impeccable black-vest-and-tie look. As a news team for the PIX 11 TV station set up, he rounded up a group of supporters to crowd him with homemade "Free Prakash" signs.

As the camera rolled, it became clear that the years since his arrest had made Churaman into a virtuosic defender of his cause. As he talked about his seven years of incarceration and his 16 months under house arrest, he stayed composed. "I was a 15-year-old child that was liter-

ally kidnapped by one of the most notorious police departments in this country," Churaman said. "I witnessed and experienced traumatic incidents that I'm still living with." Nearby, a young man in Reef slides shook the dwindling cubes in his ice coffee and shouted, "Where's Melinda? She gonna speak on it?"

The Reefs man was referring to Melinda Katz, the Queens district attorney, whose office is in the courthouse. Katz, a career bureaucrat, was elected in November 2019 after repositioning herself in the primary as a criminal justice reformer, defeating the progressive public defender Tiffany Cabán by 60 votes. Once in office, Katz fulfilled a campaign promise to establish a Conviction Integrity Unit (CIU), a department within the DA's office dedicated to investigating possible wrongful convictions.

For the last decade, CIUs have been popping up around the country, and they can be effective tools for undoing prosecutor misconduct. But as often as not, DAs use CIUs to brand themselves as progressive but then fail to provide them with enough resources to be effective. According to the National Registry of Exonerations' CIU tracker, 42 units have won a total of 662 exonerations, while another 54 have collectively exonerated no one.

The Queens CIU has overturned seven convictions involving sentences ranging from 15 years to life without parole. A CIU investigation uncovered major malfeasance by Lewis's prosecutor, Brad Leventhal, forcing him to resign after having tried more than 80 cases during his decades-long career at the DA's office.

Activists in Queens have requested that Katz send Lewis's case to the Queens CIU. Generally, CIUs don't investigate cases like Lewis's, in which all traditional legal avenues have yet to be exhausted. But there's no reason a CIU couldn't look at a case before it's gone through appeal. And during her campaign, Katz promised to review the Lewis case.

Ultimately, Katz opted to examine the case internally, without any of the transparency of a CIU process.

In a statement, Katz said, "I have assessed the proof at trial, called for renewed examination of thousands of pages of documents, and consulted experts when reviewing the forensic evidence. Further, I asked my Conviction Integrity Unit to review the most critical evidence—DNA evidence which incriminates the defendant in the murder of Ms. Vetrano. As a result of this painstaking process, I am confident that the evidence supports the jury's verdict."

No details of the review were shared publicly. But Katz's use of the CIU to look at the Lewis case raises questions: How often does the Queens DA enlist the CIU to informally review cases outside of the stated CIU protocols? Can the CIU be an independent entity, or is it subordinate to the DA?

Back at the rally for Churaman, a stream of supporters—from bike radicals to buttoned-up politicians—took turns jogging up the courthouse steps. "I want to express my gratitude to Prakash for having so much dignity in the face of so much

(continued on page 24)



**"I was a 15-year-old child that was kidnapped by one of the most notorious police departments in the country."**

—Prakash Churaman

**Match point:** Chanel Lewis's DNA matched DNA found on Karina Vetrano, but supporters say Lewis was still wrongfully convicted.

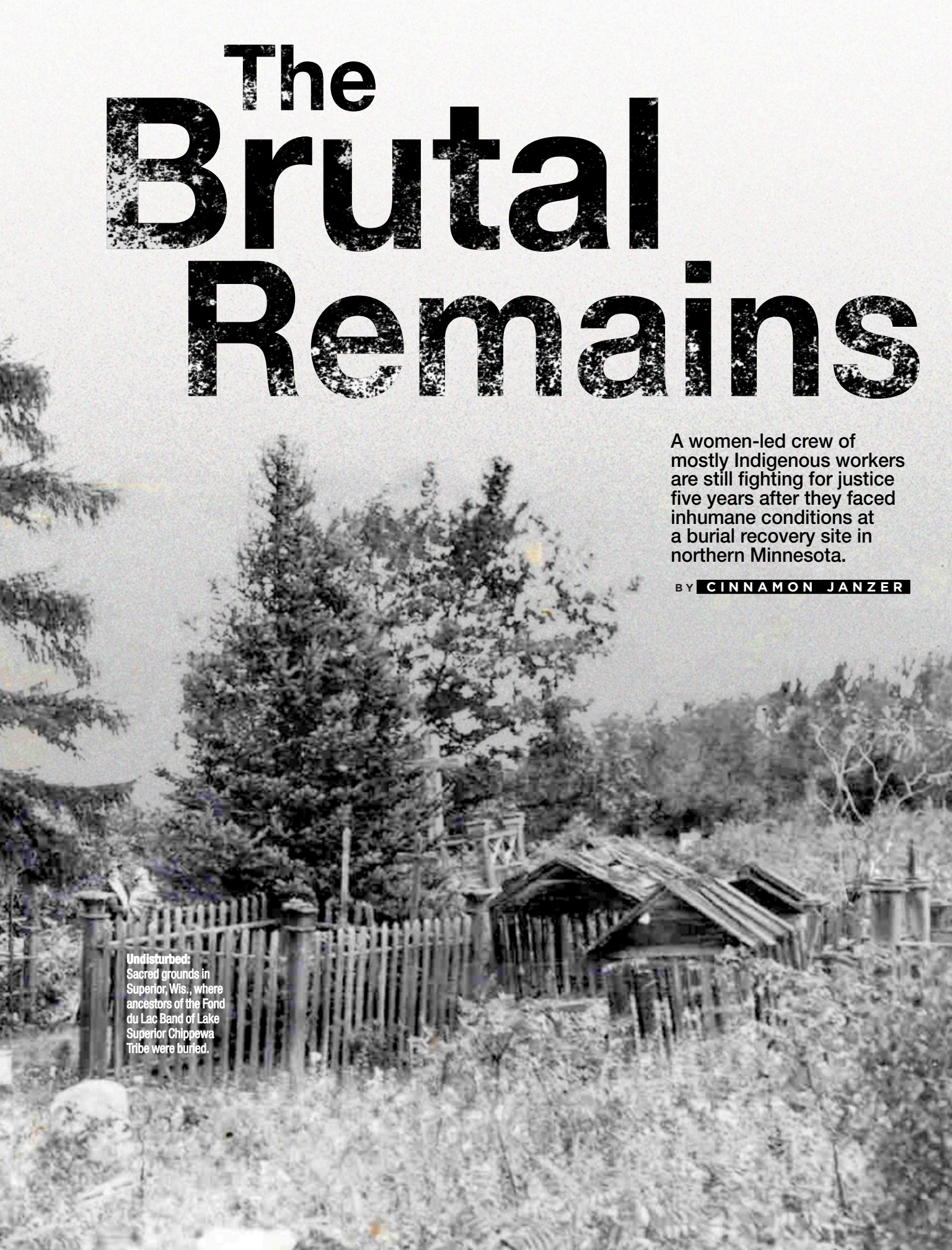




# The Brutal Remains

A women-led crew of mostly Indigenous workers are still fighting for justice five years after they faced inhumane conditions at a burial recovery site in northern Minnesota.

BY CINNAMON JANZER



**Undisturbed:** Sacred grounds in Superior, Wis., where ancestors of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Tribe were buried.



**W**HEN MATTHEW NORTHRUP WAS A CHILD in the 1980s, his dad would drive him around the area near their home in Fond du Lac—a neighborhood in Duluth, Minn., named for the Northrups' tribe,

the Fond du Lac Band of Superior Chippewa—pointing out sites that their people considered historically important. On one such drive, he motioned toward a grassy hill just past Highway 23 along the St. Louis River, which flows into the southern tip of Lake Superior. “Son, all of your ancestors are buried up there,” he said.

In the summer of 2017, Northrup found himself on that hillside, sifting through mounds of dirt with a mesh screen. “There were bones everywhere. I’m still bothered by that,” Northrup said of the remains that were scattered across the site, where the Anishinaabe people had gathered since at least AD 800.

That May, the Minnesota Department of Transportation had disturbed the sacred burial ground during a bridge construction project that had been undertaken without consulting the Fond du Lac Band. In an effort to clean up its mess, MnDOT enlisted the archaeologist Sigrid Arnott to conduct the burial recovery project for which Northrup would soon be hired.

Arnott quickly set out to assemble a staff, and by the end of summer she had hired roughly two dozen primarily Native American workers to join a team that would be led by women. The composition of the group was significant for MnDOT, which had been missing its diversity goals for its contractors and workforce for years.

In keeping with Indigenous traditions, the workers would practice the tribal ritual of smudging at the start of their day to cleanse their bodies and minds before engaging with the remains; they placed tobacco leaves on the ground as an offering to the ancestral spirits and as a show of gratitude for the nature around them. Then they commenced the emotional and harrowing search, screening the soil pan by pan and gently brushing the remains clean. They handled every bone fragment and bead with care, storing them in cedar boxes as directed by tribal elders and growing closer to one another as the days passed. “When you pull up a baby finger, it doesn’t matter who’s sitting next to you or where they’re from; you bond immediately,” Northrup said. “When you’re doing this day in and day out for 10 to 12 hours a day, it doesn’t matter who you are—white, Black, brown, green, purple—you’re bonded.”

**A**S THAT SUMMER’S SWELTERING HEAT GAVE WAY TO A cool fall, the crew, which had become accustomed to working outside along the roads, had to move indoors to continue the recovery effort through the freezing temperatures ahead.

MnDOT’s answer was a Sprung building, a temporary structure made of tensioned fabric that can be erected quickly and economically and can withstand the harshest weather. “We thought it was great,” Kate Ratkovich, Arnott’s second-in-command on the project, said of the building, which was heated by propane tanks and ventilated by a fan, when the crew relocated there that winter. “We were pulling soil from the hoop houses and screening inside this structure. We had a little lab in the corner where our lab

tech would go through human remains, separating them as needed and cleaning artifacts. It was brilliant and an awesome space to work in at first.”

The crew’s excitement soon waned as problems with the building popped up. The fan pushed the hot air out and rushed icy winter air in. And the team started to experience mysterious health issues.

“My depression and anxiety were skyrocketing,” said Christian Johnson, a member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe who worked on Arnott’s team. Northrup would fall asleep constantly. “All of a sudden, I’d be asleep at lunch. I have mental problems already, but this heightened my despair. I was suicidal,” he recalled. Arnott began feeling unwell too, but she chalked it up to the stress of the job and to living out of a hotel hours away from her home in Minneapolis. “At the end of the day I would drive like three



**Tribal rituals:** Native American crew members would smudge to cleanse their bodies and minds before engaging with the remains.

miles and stop to sleep on the side of the road before having the energy to get to the hotel,” she said. “I had brain fog and forgetfulness, constant nosebleeds, and dark rings under my eyes.”

Concerned about the health of her workers, Arnott requested that the building be inspected. In January 2018, MnDOT sent an industrial hygienist to the site. After Arnott showed him around, the hygienist noted what the building’s carbon dioxide numbers were and said an official report with recommendations would follow.

But the report never came. As days

*Cinnamon Janzer is a Minneapolis-based freelance journalist and copywriter. Her work is dedicated to covering lesser-told stories throughout Middle America.*





turned into weeks and weeks turned into months, Arnott requested the report several times through her contact at MnDOT. Realizing that the agency wasn't going to share it with her, Arnott made a data practices request—Minnesota's version of a FOIA request—which was fulfilled in April, three months after the hygienist's visit. What she read shed light on the symptoms she and her team were experiencing.

The report confirmed that there were high levels of carbon dioxide inside the Sprung building, noting that they reached as high as 3,122 parts per million. The report explained that while that number doesn't exceed the Minnesota Occupational Safety and Health Administration's permissible exposure limit—a number that hasn't been updated since 1992—it was “higher than what is generally accepted as a good practice for indoor levels of CO<sub>2</sub>.” Recent studies by researchers at Yale and Harvard have found that carbon dioxide exposure causes a decline in decision-making performance when levels reach 1,000 ppm, building to an “astonishingly large” drop in mental capacity at 2,500 ppm.

When Arnott and Ratkovich shared the findings with their crew two days later, the overarching sentiment wasn't anger; it was sadness. “It hindered all of us who are Native American from practicing our religion with a sound mind,” Johnson said of the smudging and prayer rituals they routinely engaged in. “You're supposed to do that stuff with a sound mind and open heart,” he continued, but their observances had been interrupted by hypoxia.

**Burial recovery:** The crew screened soil pan by pan, storing fragments in cedar boxes, as directed by tribal elders.

Later that day, Arnott e-mailed the project's liaison from the Fond du Lac Band, MnDOT, and other stakeholders about the building's air quality issues. She outlined how the problem disproportionately affected the predominantly Native American crew, effectively lodging a civil rights complaint. For Native people and racial justice advocates, it's not possible to separate the history of murder and cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples and the abuses inflicted on these groups today. Whether or not the

events leading to their oppression were intentional, the impact on them is the same. MnDOT's response to Arnott was that she could cancel her contract if she was unhappy.

On April 17, after a storm that blanketed the state in 15 inches of snow had cleared, MnDOT informed Arnott that her team could not report for duty until the department determined what to do about the issues she had raised. MnDOT allowed the crew to return to the site

later that month, but the work would be short-lived. On May 11, MnDOT notified Arnott via certified letter that her contract was being terminated, citing as a reason only that it “was not ‘for cause,’ but rather for the convenience of the government.” Where MnDOT claimed convenience, the crew saw retaliation.

Jacob Loesch, the director of the department's office of communications and public engagement, said that “MnDOT terminated the contract in consultation with the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa which faced significant challenges working with Arnott Consulting.” A spokesperson for the tribe told *The Nation* they “strongly supported MnDOT's decision to terminate the contract. Ms. Arnott's conduct at the burial site was disrespectful to the Band.” When asked for clarification on her conduct, the spokesperson did not comment further. But sources that *The Nation* interviewed for this story disputed this claim. An internal MnDOT source involved with the project, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation, described Arnott as well liked by the Native American community. This person said that what MnDOT really wanted was to get through the winter so that the structure's air quality would no longer be an issue. Ultimately, “we should have fixed it,” the source said.

Jim Jones, then the cultural resource director of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council, which was involved with the project, also saw Arnott as esteemed. “I told the [Fond du Lac] tribe this is someone you want to do this work because she cares. I supported FDL making the recommendation for Sigrid to take this job on.” Jones's son Charles, who worked on Arnott's crew and often fell asleep while he was screening soil in the Sprung building, said that the tribe wanted the burial recovery work done correctly above all else. “Ironically, getting it done correctly would have been keeping Sigrid on, because she actually cared,” he said.

**“All of a sudden, I'd be asleep at lunch. I have mental problems already, but this heightened my despair.”**

—Christian Johnson, member of the burial recovery crew

While June 2018 was the official end of Arnott's work at the burial ground, it was just the beginning of the crew's battle to right the wrongs they had experienced there. "We always felt, and continue to feel, that we were discriminated against in terms of how we were treated on-site. And we always knew that it would be a very hard thing to prove," Arnott said.

Years later, after the crew had encountered numerous dead ends, Arnott said federal investigators verbally confirmed their experience, but turning that confirmation into actionable resolutions would prove to be even harder.

**T**HAT MAY, ARNOTT GAVE MNDOT'S office of Equity and Diversity the contact information of crew members who wanted to file complaints about what they'd experienced or to serve as witnesses. Ultimately, Arnott, Ratkovich, and Dave Maki (a subcontractor) filed complaints, but MnDOT didn't respond to any of them. Instead, on May 31, Seema Desai, the Office of Equity and Diversity's director, informed Arnott that a "careful review" had led her to determine that the complaints about mistreatment during the project were "either outside the scope of [MnDOT's] workplace discrimination policy or have already been reviewed by the agency."

Arnott was deflated, but she was busy on a new project and was trying to hire some of her old crew, many of whom had been out of work since the Highway 23 debacle. The crew's desire to hold MnDOT accountable never waned.

The impact of the experience had not faded either. Some of the crew's members, including Northrup and Johnson, had been rehired by the Highway 23 project's new contractor, Hamline University, but then had been demoted, they said, and their pay reduced from \$25 to \$20 an hour.

Rumors that they were troublemakers followed them around the job site. "We were treated like delinquent children. It was humiliating," Ratkovich said. "We were told that if there's any negativity on this site, you will all be terminated. Our jobs were threatened within 10 minutes of us being back on that site." (The Minnesota Indian Affairs Council did not respond to questions regarding this allegation.)

In November 2018, Arnott and her crew decided to continue their search for justice by filing an appeal with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights, the agency charged with upholding the state's civil rights laws. They simultaneously filed a complaint with the Federal Highway

Administration's Office of Civil Rights, which is responsible for ensuring that MnDOT and the other state agencies funded by the FHWA are complying with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. More than two years later, in February 2021, Rebecca Lucero, the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Human Rights, wrote that the agency had found there was "no probable cause" to believe that discrimination had occurred.

This is the same finding that is reached in more than 90 percent of the cases that make it to this phase of the agency's investigation process, according to a February 2020 audit. The audit also found that the department had a backlog of more than 800 cases in 2019; often missed statutory deadlines; had conducted, up until recently, only minimal screenings of complaints; and operated without an effective case triage process.

Although MnDOT has continued to maintain that there were "legitimate non-discriminatory and non-retaliatory reasons for the contract termination," a call from FHWA investigators in the summer of 2021 gave the crew hope. According to Arnott and Maki, the investigators told them on the call that they had found two instances of discrimination by MnDOT. Both were in the form of retaliation after Arnott had raised civil rights concerns—the first when MnDOT halted the crew's work after her complaint and the second when it terminated her contract. (*The Nation* reviewed correspondence between Arnott and the FHWA confirming the discussion of the agency's findings.)

"We thought finally some adults had stepped in and that people were finally going to be held accountable for their behavior," Maki said. The investigators asked Arnott and the crew to come up with a dollar amount for damages that the FHWA could bring to MnDOT in an effort to settle the matter informally—a common practice—which stunned Arnott.

"I always thought this would be some kind of symbolic gesture," she said.

The crew spent weeks combing through old pay stubs to quantify their losses, finding a way to translate their suffering into monetary terms. They finally arrived at a figure—"a couple million split across 13 people," Arnott said—and brought it to the feds. "I was really hopeful," Johnson said. "Something was going to change, and we were going to get paid and finally put all of this behind us."

But since that summer, little has happened. After submitting the settlement request, Arnott said the investigators told the crew that MnDOT

refused to participate in the process. Loesch, the department's communications director, said that MnDOT has cooperated with the FHWA. But Arnott and her team are still waiting for justice.

Despite running into bureaucratic roadblocks, they refuse to give up. "I'm not gonna go away," said Johnson. "I'm going to keep on keepin' on, because it's the right thing to do."

Other avenues for remediation are scant. In Minnesota, "we don't really have a good accountability mechanism for human rights," said David Schultz, an attorney and law professor at Hamline University. "I've noticed a pattern over the years that Minnesota creates a lot of agencies that don't have a lot of teeth."

Things are a bit different on the federal level. The FHWA could issue a public Letter of Finding against MnDOT and withhold critical funding. Doing so, however, would be unprecedented. To date, the agency has only issued Letters of Finding

**"We thought finally some adults had stepped in and that people would be held accountable for their behavior."**

—Dave Maki,  
a subcontractor for the burial recovery work

**Bad air:** A report confirmed that the carbon dioxide levels in the Sprung building where the team worked in winter were "higher than what is generally accepted."





that cover the disparate effects of discrimination, not discrimination itself.

Determined to hold the state accountable for their treatment and lost wages, Arnott and her team have been fighting for redress for the past five years—an arduous process she describes as “death by 5,000 cuts.” Still, the crew has continued to search for support. During the past year they’ve reached out to Governor Tim Walz and Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan, who is a member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe, as well as to Representative Ilhan Omar and Senators Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith. The elected representatives told *The Nation* that their offices reached out to the FHWA on the crew’s behalf to urge it to move more quickly.

A spokesperson for the FHWA told *The Nation* that the agency “takes equity and civil rights seriously” and has investigated the complaint in accordance with regulations and guidance. In a March 2022 letter to Senator Smith, the FHWA wrote that “in February 2021, [the Office of Civil Rights] completed its investigation and shared its draft Letter of Finding report” with various federal agencies, including the Justice Department and the Department of Transportation’s Office of General Counsel. With the crew still waiting for answers nearly a year after the conclusion of the investigation, drawn-out federal processes and ineffective support from elected leaders have only compounded their experience at the burial site.

“It’s like you never really leave Highway 23. We keep trying to make people deal with our human rights complaint,” Johnson said of the group’s efforts to obtain support from state and federal representatives and agencies. “But they keep ducking and dodging us, sending us lip-service e-mails saying that they’ll get back to us, and they never do.” The experience has left him feeling like “they’re just trying to hold out as long as they can so we’ll just give up and go away.”

Ratkovich likens the experience to surviving a sinking ship. “We’ve been treading water for years. Once in a while, someone will hear us out,” she said of the flashes of hope that come when it seems like a government agency or representative might actually help them. For her, each interview is like shooting a bright orange flare into the sky. “That flare is seen, it’s acknowledged, and the plane flies away. There’s a brief moment of relief because we’ve told our story,” she said. “Then we keep waiting for help to arrive, and it never does.”

What Arnott has taken away from the process is more insidious: that the systems designed to protect workers and to defend marginalized communities often perpetuate bureaucratic violence instead, with diversity initiatives serving as the vehicle for injustice. “What does [diversity] do?” she wondered. “In the era we’re in, it just expands the opportunities to discriminate against more people. You get everyone together on this diverse team and then they get to just destroy everyone with impunity. So now I feel like diversity initiatives are actually dangerous.” **N**

(continued from page 19)

bullshit,” one said. Nearby, Churaman’s mother and girlfriend tended to his infant child. Young men who could have been his cousins or the kids he grew up with crowded the stairs.

It was time for Churaman to head into court. For his previous hearing, he said he could bring only eight people, but this time anyone could enter. It was the first inkling that something might be up. Inside the dark wood courtroom, as all the parties shuffled into place, Churaman’s lawyer clapped him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear. Churaman let out a shout, bolted to the back of the room, crouched, and rocked on his heels.

The rest of the process was routine. The assistant DA read out a statement: “The people continue to maintain defendant’s guilt.... Due to defendant’s age now, prosecution in Family Court is no longer an option. As a result, the counts must be dismissed.” The DA was responding to a motion Churaman’s lawyer had filed at his behest raising an “infancy defense.” Because Churaman was a teen when the crime occurred, he should be tried in Family Court. But because he was now an adult, he could no longer be tried in Family Court. What the Queens DA was saying, in effect, was that it had no way to try the case. The judge mumbled through the rest, and then it was over.

It was hard to understand in the moment, but all the charges had just been dropped. Churaman’s wild bet had paid off. He didn’t need to plea-bargain. He wouldn’t be forced to admit guilt. He wasn’t going back to prison. He wasn’t even going back to trial. “Free!” someone screamed into a cell phone. “Completely fucking free!” There were whoops in the hallway as supporters crowded around him. Veta Lewis followed him closely. “Never had no case,” she said. Another supporter shouted, “Chanel’s next, yo. Chanel’s next!”

On the street, Churaman embraced his lawyer and cried. A woman with white hair put her fists in the air and shouted “Whooo!” as if the Knicks had just made the playoffs. Churaman’s primary concern was getting the ankle bracelet monitor cut off. “I’m about to call the sheriff, bro!” he announced. He rolled up his pant leg to reveal the ankle monitor and a sock reading “Good Vibes.”

The PIX 11 camera came back, and a woman in an apron showed up with tiny plastic cups and a bottle of champagne that she handed to Churaman. He grinned and said, “I don’t even know how to pop a bottle!” The phones were filming; little cups were in the air. A few hours after the hearing, Churaman headed to the sheriff’s office, where they did, eventually, cut off that monitor.

**F**OR ALL THEIR APPARENT SIMILARITIES, CHURAMAN’S AND LEWIS’S cases differ widely in their context. Churaman was accused not of committing a murder but of being an accomplice to one. And the victim, Taquane Clark, was a young Black man whose death never received the kind of tabloid attention that Vetrano’s did.

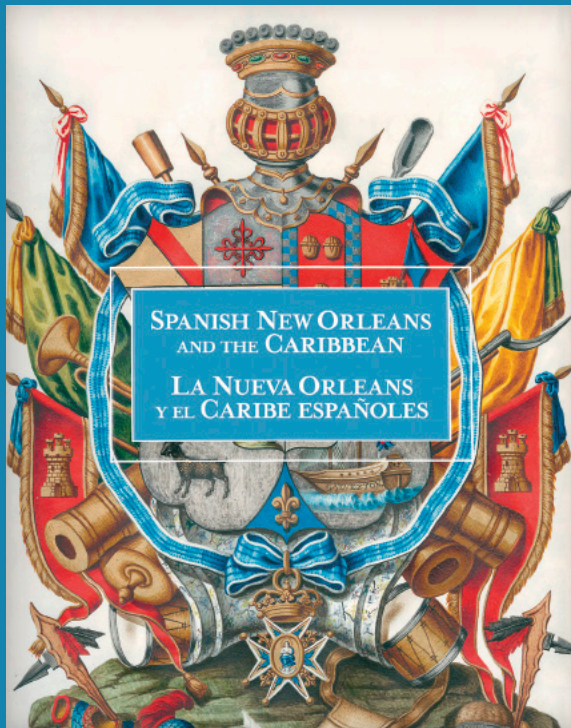
And even if Lewis were to get out on house arrest, he would never be able to fashion himself into a telegenic self-humanizer like Churaman. There are details I could add now, to make you feel like you know Lewis better. Like how he wanted to be a pilot when he was a kid and how he’d have food ready for his mother when she came home from work. But it shouldn’t matter what kind of person Chanel is or what kind of victim Vetrano was. What should matter is whether Lewis was wrongfully convicted. What should matter is that the NYPD used Parabon and that the Queens DA never admitted it.

It’s crucial to remember that, right now, innocence or guilt isn’t the question. Because of the tactics of the NYPD and the Queens DA, this has become a case about how policing and the criminal courts really work in New York City.

“Can you use Parabon in a criminal case?” Trivedi asked. “Keep it from the defense? Never subject it to the light of day? And let a guy do life without parole?”

For now, at least, the answer is yes.

**N**



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# How the GOP Gave Up on Democracy

BY JOHN NICHOLS

**In 2022, a transformed Republican Party displayed a willingness to crush anything that got in the way of its right-wing ambitions, including American democracy.**

**T**HE REPUBLICAN PARTY THAT WILL TAKE NARROW CONTROL OF THE House of Representatives in January 2023 has gone through a dramatic transformation in the two years since Donald Trump and his allies attempted a violent coup to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. The party that was once torn over how to respond to Trump's assault on democratic norms is no more. It was replaced in 2022 by one that did not merely tolerate Trump's election denialism but embraced it by nominating January 6 insurrectionists and apologists for congressional and statewide posts—a strategy so noxious that it cost Republicans key US Senate contests and the “red wave” GOP strategists were counting on. But postelection pundits who imagine that the party will do an about-face and suddenly adopt a more politically rational course are sorely mistaken. The new Republican Party has a base—and many leaders—that does not merely fall for Trump's lies. Republican partisans are increasingly looking beyond the scandal-plagued former president and taking inspiration from right-wing European nationalist leaders with politics rooted in a fascist sensibility that employs racism, xenophobia, and a win-at-any-cost approach to elections and governing. This transformed Republican Party will exploit its control of the House and state posts for a 2024 presidential election in which Trump and a rising generation of ruthless partisans will plot a return to unitary power—with a vision that is dramatically more authoritarian than anything seen in the 45th president's first term.

This is something Democrats need to recognize as they prepare for this next political moment. They won't be governing

with a political party that realistically compares with the very conservative yet still institutionally inclined caucuses that controlled the House on and off between 1995 and 2019. In 2022, the GOP moved past its “semi-fascist” stage and began “barreling toward full-on fascism,” says former US representative Joe Walsh, who was considered among the most right-wing members of the House after his election in the Tea Party wave of 2010. “The country needs to understand that my former political party is fully anti-democracy. It is a fascist political party. It is a political party that embraces authoritarianism,” as evidenced by Republicans at the 2022 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) celebrating European nationalists and domestic insurrectionists. “We've got to move on now and just defeat them.”

A lot of Republicans were defeated on November 8. But the party still won the power, via its new House majority, to derail much of President Biden's agenda. Incoming House Speaker Kevin McCarthy's Republicans did not gain as many seats as they might have achieved as a more conventional, institutionally inclined Grand Old Party running in a more traditional midterm election. But









**“The country needs to understand that my former political party is fully anti-democracy. It is a fascist political party.”**

—Former Illinois representative Joe Walsh

**A rising star** in the House Republican Conference, Texas Representative Chip Roy outlined a strategy to make Joe Biden a lame-duck president.

presidential campaign. But as I watched the 2022 races play out in states across the country, it was clear to me, and to many other longtime observers of the GOP with whom I spoke, that it's taken a far more dire turn. This Republican Party is proudly unapologetic about its excesses; there is an open acceptance that “we’re doing bad things and we don’t care because we think it will work politically.”

The determination that we saw in the none-too-distant past to maintain a veneer of respectability—with admittedly disingenuous efforts to push back against accusations that the party was running overtly racist, crudely xenophobic, and aggressively dishonest campaigns—has been abandoned. As has any willingness to acknowledge that particular candidates, such as the Georgia US Senate nominee Herschel Walker or the newly elected Ohio Senator J.D. Vance, are too toxic to be supported. Thus completes the GOP’s devolution into a party that has fully abandoned its conscience.

Whether the party is described as authoritarian, neofascist, or fascist, the trajectory is clear. “Trump had done everything he could to seize the laurel crown and declare himself an American Caesar,” says Sarah Churchwell, one of the great scholars of American fascism. “He hasn’t given up yet—and, what is more, neither have most of his supporters.” Even as the 2022 results pointed to dozens of races in which Trump’s interventions had saddled the GOP with weak candidates—who in many cases lost what should have been winnable seats—Republican leaders on Capitol Hill, such as House Republican Conference chair Elise Stefanik, rushed to endorse the 2024 presidential bid he announced in mid-November. And while the same pundits who imagined that Trump would be rejected by Republicans

they succeeded in melding concerns about inflation and crime, racial backlash messaging, and a fiercely negative and immensely well-funded campaign to secure victories that should have been unimaginable. In part, this was because America’s rigid two-party system forces an either-or choice on most voters. Such a system creates a situation in which the right can exploit economic and social anxiety to attract voters who don’t necessarily agree with the whole GOP agenda but who want to—in the parlance of former Alabama governor George Wallace’s racist campaigns—“send them a message.”

The message this time is a daunting one, because the party that surfed a wave of resentment over high gas prices and post-pandemic instability is not the GOP of Ronald Reagan, the George Bushes, or Dick Cheney. None of those figures would have stood a chance in the Republican primaries of 2022.

Indeed, Liz Cheney, the standard-bearer of the social and economic domestic conservatism and foreign policy neoconservatism that held sway until Trump came along, won just 28.9 percent of the vote in her Wyoming Republican primary reelection bid.

There is no question that the Republican Party began veering dangerously to the right long before the 2022 midterm election season. This is, after all, the party that welcomed Southern segregationist Strom Thurmond into its ranks during Barry Goldwater’s 1964 “extremism in the defense of liberty”

in 2015 and 2016 are now sure that Florida’s Ron DeSantis has the juice to snatch the nomination from Trump, polls still show Republicans favoring the former president by a wide margin over the governor he decries as “Ron DeSanctimonious.” The mistake the pundits are making is to imagine that most Republicans are eager to move beyond the crude hate-mongering that has characterized that party since Trump banished talk of “the big tent” and started describing anti-Semitic white nationalists as “very fine people.”

Today’s Republican Party gleefully amplifies the language of its once shunned but now broadly accepted ideological mentor, Steve Bannon, the connoisseur of European fascist literature and movements. It embraces an ideology that promises not just retribution for political rivals—and for longtime targets of its vitriol, such as Dr. Anthony Fauci and the liberal philanthropist George Soros—but a wholesale restructuring of federal power.

**E**VEN WITH A NARROW MAJORITY, A Republican-controlled House will immediately stop exercising its oversight powers to get to the bottom of Trump’s coup attempt and will begin attacking the January 6 committee’s investigators and the very notion of accountability. That will be only the beginning of a campaign to make Joe Biden a lame-duck president by rejecting his policy proposals and weaponizing the budget process to deny funding to federal agencies. Outlined in a September “Dear Colleague” letter from Texas Representative Chip Roy, an emerging force within the House Republican Conference, the strategy would reject continuing resolutions in order to block “tyrannical government agencies, offices, programs, and policies that Congress regularly funds through annual appropriations bills.” The theory is that the ensuing chaos will convince voters that only a switch to full Republican power will make the wheels of government turn once more.

If and when Republicans gain control of all three branches of the federal government, they will execute their explicit mission to politicize the government along the lines Bannon has laid out. In his *War Room* radio show and podcast, the veteran Trump whisperer amplifies the messages of the former president’s congressional coconspirators, election deniers, and extremist rising stars, promising that his reelection in 2024 will put “4,000 shock troops” in charge



of reconstructing the federal government as a battering ram for right-wing ambition.

Bannon is not alone in applying the language of fascism to the Republican Party. This is a party that now openly courts European right-wing extremists. Remember that, along with Hungarian strongman Viktor Orbán, one of the stars of the 2022 Conservative Political Action Conference was the Italian politician Giorgia Meloni, the leader of a party that traces its political lineage to the neofascist movement that emerged from the wreckage of Benito Mussolini's World War II alliance with Nazi Germany. Meloni is now Italy's prime minister, a political ascent Texas Senator Ted Cruz hailed as "spectacular." Fox News gushes over her election as "the dawn of a new day."

But, of course, as the title of Sinclair Lewis's 1935 dystopian novel about the threat of fascism in America suggested, it can't happen here.

Or can it?

After Meloni's Brothers of Italy Party led the voting there in September, CPAC's chairman, Matt Schlapp, told Bannon that the party "fits right neatly in the term of what we call 'conservatives' here in America."

The 2022 campaign season saw Republican elected officials such as Florida state Representative Anthony Sabatini unapologetically tweet quotes from Francisco Franco, the fascist dictator of Spain, and proclaim in a speech, "God bless the nationalist populist movement," and US Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, an increasingly influential figure in a House Republican Conference that once decried her extremism, declare her loyalty to the racist doctrine of Christian nationalism, which would shred the US Constitution to eliminate the separation of church and state. Lest anyone dismiss the Georgia congresswoman as a fringe figure, a poll released earlier this year revealed that 61 percent of Republicans shared her sympathy for Christian nationalism. In fact, very few of Greene's positions put her at odds with the party's base. That's certainly the case with her agitation in support of Trump's election denialism; according to a September YouGov poll, only 43 percent of Republicans said candidates who lose elections should concede defeat.

Less than two years ago, when Liz Cheney was still the No. 3 Republican in the House, Greene was an outlier there. Now Kevin McCarthy is promising to restore the committee assignments that Greene was stripped of after a CNN investigation found that she had repeatedly expressed support for executing prominent Democrats. Greene, a Republican favorite who is talked about as a potential running mate for Trump in 2024, meets with McCarthy on a regular basis and said in October that, "to be the best speaker of the House and to please the base,



he is going to give me a lot of power and a lot of leeway." This from a woman who during the 2022 campaign compared her political rivals to feral hogs and then posed with a dead animal she had just shot from a helicopter.

"What you first act out through make-believe you can later make reality. That final step, that step from play-acting to acting, is much less daunting once you've had sufficient rehearsal, which is what we're witnessing," wrote the Georgia journalist Jay Bookman in a reflection on Greene's none-too-subtle talk of hunting down Democrats. Comparing Greene to the dangerous "true believer" of the post-World War II era that the philosopher Eric Hoffer wrote about, Bookman observed, "Greene is such a fanatic, as are many others in the rising New Right who are riding racism and hatred and fear, who hint openly at the necessity for violence if the change they seek cannot be produced through the ballot box. Speaking personally, I am not ready to see this world with all its shortcomings come to a sudden end. But such fires, once ignited, can be difficult to suppress."

Bookman was not alone during the run-up to the midterms in recognizing a turn on the part of the GOP toward a more overt and threatening extremism than had been seen before. Where there had once been robust debate within the party about Trump's actions, the dissenters are gone—retired in the case of former House speaker Paul Ryan and traditional inside-the-Beltway conservatives; defeated in the case of Cheney and others who defied Trump after the January 6 attack on the Capitol; and dragooned into submission in the case of party hacks like McCarthy who do not want to lose their positions. "The intimidation actually works. We've seen this before in democratic societies," said Miles Taylor, a former Trump administration official. "You know where we've seen it. We've seen it in the Weimar Republic in Germany, before the rise of Hitler. It's not hyperbole to draw those comparisons, because we saw very similar behavior happening that was founded on, guess what, on a big lie. On a big political lie that led to that type of violence." Matthew Dowd, a former senior adviser to the Republican National Committee who served as chief strategist for George

Donald Trump and Republican partisans are plotting a return to power with a vision more authoritarian than anything seen in his first term.

**This Republican Party is proudly unapologetic in its excesses. There is an open acceptance that "we're doing bad things and we don't care."**





Committee poured almost \$3 million into incendiary commercials that interspersed images of Barnes with crime scenes and messages repeating a bogus claim that he wants to release 50 percent of the state's prison population immediately. "As if Barnes told people to create crime, which is ridiculous," said Calena Roberts, the Wisconsin field director for the Service Employees International Union, who participated in a "Pull the Racist Ads" protest outside the office of the incumbent in the race, Republican Senator Ron Johnson. "Then they used his picture—they're changing the color of his skin. You use the original photo, then you darken it up. It's all about race." (Barnes lost by around 26,000 votes, out of 2.6 million cast.)

W. Bush's reelection campaign, said just weeks before the midterms, "I'll remind people, too, of a history lesson that in 1930s Germany, there was a candidate and there was a party that said they were going to do something about inflation. And they did something about inflation. Inflation went away, but so did the democracy in Germany in the 1930s up until 1945."

Dowd was a little shaky on his economic history. Germany's period of hyperinflation was in the early 1920s; by the early 1930s, the issue was mass unemployment. But his point about economic instability creating an opening for fascism is well understood by anyone who has studied the era. So, too, are the tactics of contemporary Republicans who have brought a new level of sophistication to the age-old strategy of employing anti-immigrant and racist tropes to demonize opponents. In 2022, this form of campaigning was everywhere.

"They're out-Willie Hortoning the Willie Horton ads," Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison told me in October, referring to the crude "soft on crime" ads George H.W. Bush used to attack Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis in the 1988 presidential election, which were once considered the lowest form of racialized campaigning. Locked in a tight reelection race that he ultimately won by around 20,000 votes, Ellison, who is Black and was the first Muslim elected to Congress, and who had organized the successful prosecution of the police officer who murdered George Floyd, faced an onslaught of such commercials. "Keith Ellison's been anti-cop forever," declared the ads. The images of violent crimes that flashed on the screen with shadowy pictures of Ellison were, in many cases, more than a decade old—from before he was elected attorney general—and from as far away as Florida. What sleazy group paid for the deliberately dishonest and inflammatory ads? The corporate-funded Republican Attorneys General Association, which had raised more than \$26 million for attack ads by mid-October.

**Republicans ran racist, xenophobic ads without apology—and without accountability for the billionaires and corporate donors funding them.**

In neighboring Wisconsin, mailings from the state Republican Party included images of the Democratic US Senate candidate Mandela Barnes with his skin clearly darkened. TV ads labeled Barnes, the first African American to serve as the state's lieutenant governor, as "different" and "dangerous," while the National Republican Senatorial

It was all about race, and it was everywhere in the 2022 campaign. Republicans ran racist and xenophobic ads without apology—and without any accountability for the billionaire donors and corporate interests that funded them. Indeed, suggested Joe Walsh, they did so gleefully. "I hear it from them every day. Where it used to be 'We have to do things untoward to defeat Dems,' now it's 'Fuck, yes, let's do dirty, bad, illegal shit. Who cares? It'll help us win.'" And it's not just Republican operatives saying it; it's Republican donors who long ago made their peace with Trump and Trumpism. They may prefer their strongmen to wear suits and ties, as DeSantis does, but they'll accept tax cuts from anyone.

When a candidate stumbles badly, even when revelations about that candidate's past point to jaw-dropping hypocrisy, the win-at-any-cost mentality kicks in. That's what happened when Herschel Walker's Georgia Senate campaign was rocked by the news that the anti-choice candidate had paid for at least one abortion. Walker compounded the crisis by lying about it. But none of that seemed to matter. Religious right leaders rallied with Walker. Dana Loesch, a former spokesperson for the National Rifle Association who remains a key conservative influencer, declared, "It doesn't change anything for me."

"I don't care if Herschel Walker paid to abort endangered baby eagles," Loesch said. "I want control of the Senate."

Winning has always been the point of electoral politics. And racist appeals are nothing new. But when a win-at-any-cost strategy is systematically implemented, not by rogue candidates or consultants but by political operations that are overseen by party leaders in the Senate and funded by the wealthiest individuals and corporate interests in the United States, that's a strategy. And it's common in autocratic movements.

**Win at any cost:** Republican partisans rallied behind Herschel Walker, no matter how big the crisis surrounding the candidate.

“This political movement is supported by a minority of people in the country,” explained Steve Schmidt, a former presidential campaign strategist for John McCain. “But that minority controls all of the institutions and the levers of power at the local, county, state, national levels of one of the two political parties. So a minority movement filled with extremists that wants political power sees a route to achieving it through a majority election that cloaks the minority extremist cause. You have some people who look at what’s happened with Herschel Walker and say, ‘It doesn’t matter at all, because he’s a vessel by which we can ride to power.’ And in this case, increasingly, the inference is ‘Once we’re in there, we’re not giving it up.’”

Schmidt is honest about the fact that he and others like him played a role in the transformation of the Republican Party—not least with McCain’s decision to make former Alaska governor Sarah Palin his vice presidential nominee in the 2008 campaign. But Schmidt has since been sounding the alarm bells with a passion that exceeds that of many Democrats. When we spoke during the 2022 campaign about today’s GOP, he warned about “all of the elements that have to come together for an autocratic movement.”

“What do you need to have a cult of personality? Right away, you need two things: You need charismatic leaders, and you need followers. But that’s not enough,” Schmidt said. “You need financiers. You need the billionaire class.... You need the propagandists. You need the cynicism of the elites.... When you put all that together in a coalition for power, history teaches us that things can go off the rails, that evil can be committed.

“We’re in this moment of profound gaslighting, insanity,” Schmidt added. “And there is a lack of a focused, fierce, oppositional better message.”

**S**O WHAT WILL THE oppositional message be? It has to involve more than the Democratic Party tripping over its own messaging and stumbling over its own strategies, which we saw frequently in 2022. Against some of the worst Republican candidates in history, Democratic candidates still couldn’t thread the needle. And they won’t do so going forward if they avoid the reality of the Republican Party’s devolution.

“Two of the hallmarks of a fascist political party are: One, they don’t accept the results of elections that don’t go their way. And two,

they embrace political violence,” Representative Jamie Raskin reminded us in September. He was talking about the January 6 attack on the Capitol. But less than two months after Raskin expressed his concerns, Trump and other prominent Republicans were peddling conspiracy theories about the attack on Paul Pelosi, the husband of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, in their home.

Democrats need to be prepared to discuss the devolution of the Republican Party, just as they need to ask themselves: “What are the hallmarks of an anti-fascist party?”

The party must be prepared to speak—as former vice president Henry Wallace did almost 80 years ago—about “the danger of American fascism.” And it must be about the business of addressing the economic, social, and racial injustices of the moment, not merely because it is the right thing to do morally but because it is the right thing to do politically. This was clearly illustrated by John Fetterman’s successful run in Pennsylvania, which turned out to be the only Democratic bid this year that flipped a Republican-held seat in the Senate.

Democrats and their allies need to start framing the fight in broader, more idealistic, and more hopeful terms. They did better than expected in 2022, as voters in many states rejected election deniers and win-at-any-cost Republicans. They can do better still in 2024 by refusing to compromise with extremists and by calling out the corporate and media elites who give aid and comfort to authoritarians. They must proudly assert the rule of law in official quarters. But they must also mobilize across the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and class for a bolder vision of the America that must be.

We’ve been too weak in our enthusiasm for democracy, too slow to recognize that Wallace was right when he wrote, “Democracy to crush fascism internally must demonstrate its capacity to ‘make the trains run on time.’ It must develop the ability to keep people fully employed and at the same time balance the budget. It must put human beings first and dollars second. It must appeal to reason and decency and not to violence and deceit. We must not tolerate oppressive government or industrial oligarchy in the form of monopolies and cartels. As long as scientific research and inventive ingenuity outrun our ability to devise social mechanisms to raise the living standards of the people, we may expect the liberal potential of the United States to increase. If this liberal potential is properly channeled, we may expect the area of freedom of the United States to increase. The problem is to speed up our rate of social invention in the service of the welfare of all the people.”

The hour is late. But the authoritarians who now steer the Republican Party and those who compromise with them are a minority in our politics—as the results on November 8 confirmed. Thanks to gerrymandering and billionaire money, they now have control of the House. But it is not fated that they will take charge in 2024. The pro-democracy majority has been too confident in the belief that it can’t happen here. Now that majority must rise up and declare it *won’t* happen here.

**“Two hallmarks of a fascist political party are: Don’t accept the results of elections, and embrace violence.”**

—Maryland Representative Jamie Raskin



**Marjorie Taylor Greene** used to be an outlier in Congress. Today, very few of her positions put her at odds with the Republican Party’s base.





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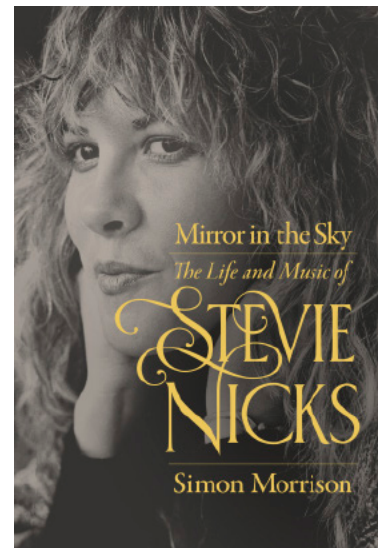
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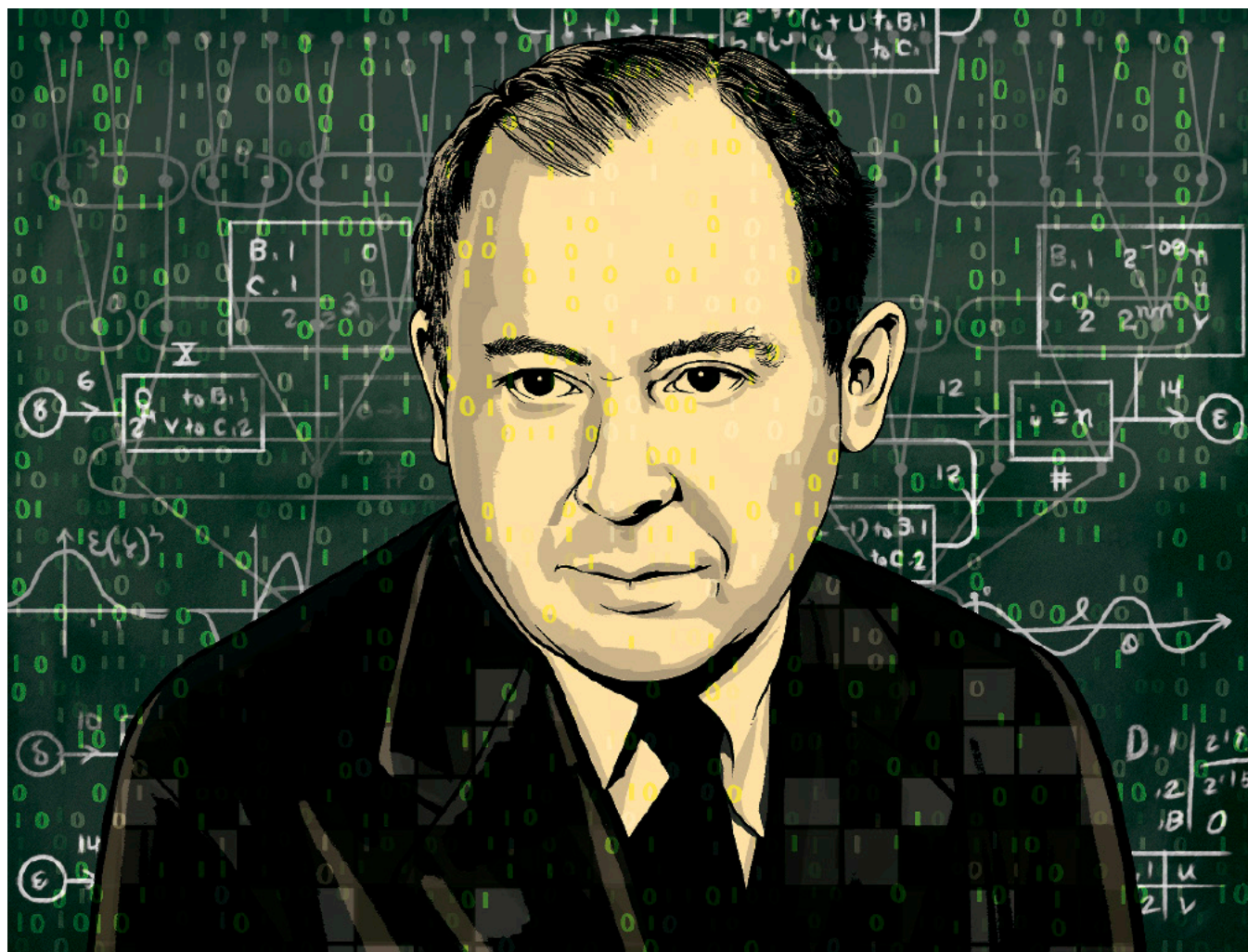
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## Fortress of Logic

*How the game theory of John von Neumann transformed the 20th century*

BY DAVID NIRENBERG



UNLIKE HIS MUCH MORE FAMOUS COLLEAGUE Albert Einstein, John von Neumann is not a household name these days, but his discoveries shape the possibilities of life for every creature on this planet. As a teenager, von Neumann provided mathematics with new foundations. He later helped teach the world how to build and detonate nuclear bombs. His invention of game theory furnished the conceptual tools with which superpowers today decide whether to wage war, economists model the behavior of markets, and biologists predict the evolution viruses. The pioneering programmable computer that von Neumann and his employer, the Institute for Advanced Studies in

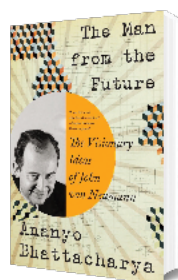
ILLUSTRATION BY LILY GIAN

Princeton, N.J., completed in 1951 established “von Neumann architecture” as the standard for computer design well into the 21st century, making first IBM and then many other corporations fabulously wealthy.

Von Neumann was not only a wildly insightful scientist; he was also prescient about the threats that some of his discoveries posed to the planet. “What we are creating now,” he said to his wife Klári after returning home from bomb work at Los Alamos in the spring of 1945, “is a monster whose influence is going to change history, provided there is any history left.” He then changed the subject to the computing machines of the future and became even more agitated, foreseeing disaster if “people [could not] keep pace with what they create.” Klári gave him some sleeping pills and a strong drink to calm him down, but von Neumann’s fears did not go away. “Can We Survive Technology?” was the question that he asked the readers of *Fortune* magazine in 1955, predicting (among other things) “forms of climatic warfare as yet unimagined.”

*The Man From the Future*, Ananyo Bhattacharya’s new biography, attends to von Neumann the scientist and von Neumann the prophet, and to many other von Neumanns as well: husband, father, friend, and colleague. From his birth in Budapest in 1903 to his death in Washington, D.C., at the age of 53, the book offers us a striking portrait of a man who contributed as much to the technological transformation of the world as any other scientist of the 20th century. Along the way, *The Man From the Future* also explains the science and why that science still matters.

Popular scientific biography is a difficult genre, because its heroes often speak a language that is hard for mere mortals to understand. Some of von Neumann’s colleagues joked that he was “descended from a superior species but had made a detailed study of human beings so he could imitate them perfectly.” In fact, not only von Neumann but a whole group of extraordinary Hungarian Jewish scientists who emigrated to the United States during the war were sometimes referred to as “the Martians,” on account of their extraordinary abilities (and thick accents). Bhattacharya proves to be a skilled translator from “Martian” to human. His descriptions of the scientific questions are always engaging and generally illuminating—a real achievement, especially given the variety of topics that intrigued von Neumann. The book carries us from field to field, from set theory and the logical foundations of mathematics at the beginning of his career, through the quantum revolution in physics and the computing revolution in calculation, to game theory and its implications for strategists (think *Dr. Strangelove*) and economists (think *A*



**The Man From the Future**  
*The Visionary Life of John von Neumann*  
By Ananyo Bhattacharya  
W.W. Norton.  
368 pp. \$30

*Beautiful Mind*), to the influence of von Neumann’s late work in fields like neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and theories of self-replicating systems (whether genes or machines).

The tour is as rapid as the questing mind of its subject—imagine traveling to Kruger National Park, the Taj Mahal, Easter Island, and the Dome of the Rock all in one week—and every stop is fascinating, though some of the scientific subjects, unsurprisingly, are better covered than others. Through it all, there runs a simple and elegant explanation of von Neumann’s greatest strength: In the words of the mathematical physicist Freeman Dyson, who overlapped briefly with von Neumann at the Institute for Advanced Study and was in some ways his successor, “Johnny’s unique gift as a mathematician was to transform problems in all areas of mathematics into problems of logic.”

Mathematics was not the only field to which von Neumann applied that gift. In fact, he transformed nearly all of the problems that interested him throughout his life into problems of logic. To put it in his own words, chosen by Bhattacharya as the book’s epigraph: “If people do not believe that mathematics is simple, it is only because they do not realize how complicated life is.” Over and over again,

from his early paper establishing a new approach to mathematics’s foundations by building on the axioms of logic and the concept of the “empty set” to his later contributions to economics and the social sciences, von Neumann proceeded by reducing problems of intractable complexity to ones of logical simplicity. Bhattacharya suggests that this was true even of his child custody arrangements, citing Marina von Neumann Whitman, whose fascinating autobiography *The Martian’s Daughter* speaks of her father’s “lifelong desire to impose order and rationality on an inherently disorderly and irrational world.”



hat lifelong desire emerged early. János (von Neumann’s Hungarian name) was born into a Jewish family that had become prosperous by pioneering catalog sales of hardware and farm machinery. His father, Max, a doctor of law turned banker, “believed in the life of the mind,” as John’s brother Nicholas put it, and insisted that his children learn ancient Greek and Latin as well as French, Italian, and English. János mastered all of these (on his deathbed he could still recall large portions of Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War* in the original Attic), but some abilities, such as multiplying two eight-digit numbers in his head when he was 6, astounded more than others. His prodigious mathematical talent was noted as soon as he started high school, and he was immediately sent, as a young teen, to the University of Budapest, where three top mathematicians undertook his education. Von Neumann was 17 when he published his first paper, and he was still 17 when he took on the challenge issued by the great David Hilbert, then the elder statesman of mathematics, to find a logical basis for the field that would be free of any possibility of paradox. “If mathematical thinking is defective,” Hilbert had asked, “where are we to find truth and certitude?” In 10 short pages, von Neumann set out to build a fortress of logic capable of defending mathematics, deploying set theory to articulate a new definition of ordinal and cardinal numbers that avoided the paradoxes and complexities that had plagued all earlier definitions. It remains the standard today.

Von Neumann’s doctoral dissertation in 1925 took on another

David Nirenberg is the director and Leon Levy Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study.



foundational project: the systematization of all of set theory, a task he achieved with a single page of axioms from which vast palaces of mathematics could be built. A few years later, in 1928, he applied a similar approach to developing a theory of parlor games. In this early work of “pure mathematics,” one can already see the insights he would deploy decades later in creating an architecture for computing machines that could, on the basis of a minimal set of logical instructions, inputs, and outputs, carry out any conceivable set of computations. In his *Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata* (published posthumously in 1966), von Neumann went even further, describing the conditions under which, with no more than eight parts (four structural and four dedicated to logical operations), complex creatures could emerge capable of executing any type of computation and even of replicating themselves. One of the glories of Bhattacharya’s book is that it makes abundantly clear how von Neumann’s early explorations into the deepest foundations of pure mathematics became the springboard for his contributions to so many other fields, from quantum physics to economics, from theories of computing to theories of biological life.

Bhattacharya guides us through all of these discoveries and the uses to which they were put, providing us with a vivid sense of the impact this singular figure has had on scientific thought. Each of von Neumann’s insights is approached more or less the same way: as a cue ball shot into a waiting rack of brilliant minds, its force knocking them into insightful paths and fantastic pockets of discovery. This model of writing about science has the advantage of narrative clarity and power, but it has some shortcomings as well. One of these is that, by concentrating so heavily on the genius of individuals, it misses the important role that institutions—from schools and universities to corporations and national governments—play in making discovery possible.

It is indeed exciting to follow the extraordinarily energetic von Neumann from one intellectual encounter to another, seemingly propelled by chance meetings at train stations and courageous voyages across a war-torn Atlantic. But we should not forget that those encounters took place within the vast network created by two government agencies scarcely mentioned in the book: the National Defense Research Committee and its successor, the Office of Scientific Research and Development, which coordinated nearly all US research related to

World War II and in the process initiated a new age in the history of science.

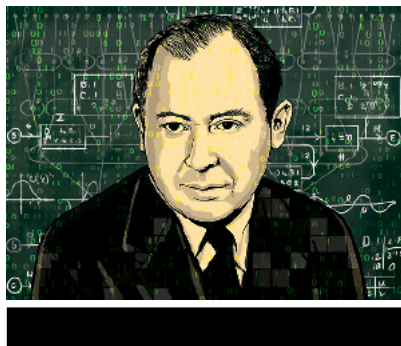
Similarly, the institution that employed von Neumann (as well as Einstein, Kurt Gödel, and numerous others who people Bhattacharya’s pages) from 1933 until his death in 1957 appears in the book primarily in envious caricature (“the Institute for Advanced Salaries”) or as an obstacle to von Neumann’s more applied ambitions. But his creativity would have looked very different had he not found refuge in that particular institution, designed to attract the best minds from across the globe regardless

of religion, gender, nationality, or race; to let them pursue their interests in whatever direction they wished; and to ensure that the results were made freely available to the world. The Institute for Advanced Study funded von Neumann’s computer. It insisted on what we today call “open access,” sending regular reports about its progress to hundreds of research centers in the United States and abroad, and it shared von Neumann’s commitment to not patenting the results. How different would the history of computing have looked if von Neumann’s programming architecture had been developed for the military, for a corporation, or for a university more intent on securing intellectual property rights than on promoting

the free exchange of ideas? *Life* magazine was being hyperbolic when, in 1947, it called the Institute for Advanced Study “one of the most important places on the earth.” But it was right in suggesting that research institutions and their values matter, given how much they shape our possibilities for learning, for discovery, and for the circulation of knowledge.

Perhaps the most significant shortcoming of Bhattacharya’s approach is that his celebratory tone sometimes precludes serious critical engagement with the ways in which our world has been profoundly altered by the ideas he is writing about. This is most evident in his treatment of von Neumann’s pioneering work in the social sciences, the 1944 book *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, written in collaboration with the economist Oskar Morgenstern. Like von Neumann, Morgenstern was a product of the collapsing Austro-Hungarian Empire, although from its aristocratic rather than its Jewish corners (his mother may have been the illegitimate daughter of Emperor Friedrich III). As an economist, his quest was—to borrow the title of a paper he published in 1935—to achieve a science capable of “Perfect Foresight and Economic Equilibrium.” When Morgenstern presented that paper in Vienna, a mathematician in the audience suggested an article he thought might prove helpful: von Neumann’s “On the Theory of Parlor Games,” which outlined a set-theory approach to strategic choices in games like poker. As Morgenstern read the article, he began to wonder: Could theories of strategic choice by players in a game be extended to the choices of agents in an economy? Morgenstern started “to read a lot of logic and set-theory” and to write papers with titles like “Logic and the Social Sciences.” But it was only after he’d emigrated to the United States in 1938 that he received what he called “a gift from heaven,” namely a meeting with von Neumann.

Thus began the collaboration that produced *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. The coauthors state their goal plainly: “We hope to establish satisfactorily...that the typical problems of economic behavior become strictly identical with the mathematical notions of suitable games of strategy.” Before reading further, let’s pause to make sure we under-



**Von Neumann was not only a talented scientist; he was also prescient about the threats some of his discoveries posed to the planet.**

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stand the massive implications of this claim. If you assume that the behavior of economies is built out of the desires and choices of individuals, then establishing “strict identity” means demonstrating that “the motives of the individual”—that is to say, basic aspects of human psychology—are entirely reducible to “mathematical notions.” This reduction is what von Neumann and Morgenstern set out to provide.

Invoking the example of physics, they begin by creating a radically simplified model, an economy of just one isolated individual who, following Marx and other earlier economists, they named after Robinson Crusoe, the shipwrecked sailor of Daniel Defoe’s famous novel. They then describe

the axioms, the “assumptions which have to be made” in their model, about “the behavior of the individual, and the simplest forms of exchange.” Here are some of those assumptions: First, the individual

seeks to “obtain a maximum of utility or satisfaction” of various desires and wants within the given constraints. How do we know that the maximization of utility is a universal law of human nature? No reason is given. Next assumption: “Utility or satisfaction” must be quantifiable or at least rankable; otherwise it could not be maximized. But why should we think that desires are quantifiable or rankable, either by human agents or by the economists studying them? The axiom is not forced upon us by our psychological experience or empirical observation. It is necessary so that economics can become a mathematical science, much as in physics time needs to be thought of as the real number line, not because this corresponds to your sense of time (or Einstein’s, or Marcel Proust’s), but because it makes important aspects of modern physics mathematically tractable.

To give you a flavor of the argument, let me put yet another assumption in the more formal terms favored by von Neumann and Morgenstern: Given any two objects of desire ( $u$  and  $v$ ), the subject can always say which one she prefers, or else that she has no preference. And what of cases where there are more than two options on the table, as there so often are? For any three or more commodities, objects, or imagined events—call them  $a$ ,  $b$ ,

$c$ , and so on—all rational agents who prefer  $a$  to  $b$  and  $b$  to  $c$  will also prefer  $a$  to  $c$ . This assumption is called the “transitivity of preference,” axiom 3:A:b in *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. The meager justification: “Transitivity of preference [is] a plausible and generally accepted property.” With this axiom about humanity in hand, von Neumann and Morgenstern proclaim that “a primarily psychological group of phenomena has been axiomatized.”

Bhattacharya agrees. He offers a clear and accessible description of *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, avoiding formalism and using examples like the choice between watching TV or ordering take-out in order to narrate how “von

Neumann quickly invented a revolutionary theory that allowed an individual’s likes and dislikes to be assigned a number on a ‘happiness’ or utility scale, just as a thermometer reading gives the tem-

perature of a bowl of soup.” But can human happiness be measured like a bowl of soup’s temperature? Bhattacharya appears to endorse this view, moving from description to celebration without once passing through criticism: “Von Neumann,” he writes, “had achieved the supposedly impossible—a rigorous way to assign numbers to nebulous human desires and predilections.”



et in making questions of human desire strictly identical to numbers, Bhattacharya, like von Neumann, has forgotten a basic truth about the relationship of logic to the complexity of life. In the words of an earlier logician and philosopher of astounding talent, Charles Sanders Peirce:

An engineer, or a business company...or a physicist, finds it suits his purpose to ascertain what the necessary consequences of possible facts would be; but the facts are so complicated that he cannot deal with them in his usual way. He calls upon a mathematician and states the question.... It frequently happens that the facts, as stated, are insufficient to answer the question that is put. Accordingly, the first

business of the mathematician, often a most difficult task, is to frame another simpler but quite fictitious problem...which shall be within his powers, while at the same time it is sufficiently like the problem set before him to answer, well or ill, as a substitute for it.

Every mathematical rendering of objects that are not purely mathematical is a simplification, an “as if,” and that “as if” should always come with a caution. When you produce or encounter such a logical simplification, do not forget to ask: How “sufficiently like” is the similitude to the object of study? And how do I decide whether the difference is for good or ill? A great deal hinges on the answers to those questions, not least when the simplification on offer is of the human psyche.

Rather than ask these questions, however, Bhattacharya moves on to explore some of the more extreme applications of game theory, such as “gaming nuclear war.” This chapter is important: Bhattacharya’s explanations of the role of the RAND Corporation in strategic modeling, of John Nash’s generalization of the theory to noncooperative conflicts and  $n$ -person games, and of the emergence of gamelike models for cooperation and conflict such as the “Prisoner’s Dilemma,” all help us to understand how game theory became and continues to be a key decision-making tool of military strategy and international relations. But the more basic questions are never asked: Can a strict identity between human psychology and mathematical notions be established? And what is at stake in the answer?

No biography can do everything, so let us imagine what a more critical engagement with the *Theory of Games* would look like. One might notice, for example, that unlike the case in physics, von Neumann and Morgenstern’s goal of “prediction by theory” in economics remains almost as far out of reach today as it was when the book was written some 70 years ago. Or one might ask whether their transitive and axiomatized man rings truer to our experience than the novel from which they drew his name, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719. From beginning to end, that book’s eponymous hero is presented as a weather vane, unable to order, maintain, or even recognize his preferences. Years of shipwrecked self-

reflection on his desert island do not erase the fluctuating nature of Crusoe's desires and aversions, as here, near the end of the novel:

From this moment I began to conclude in my mind that it was possible for me to be more happy in this forsaken, solitary condition than it was probable I should ever have been in any other particular state in the world; and with this thought I was going to give thanks to God for bringing me to this place. I know not what it was, but something shocked my mind at that thought, and I durst not speak the words. "How canst thou become such a hypocrite," said I, even audibly, "to pretend to be thankful for a condition which, however thou mayest endeavour to be contented with, thou wouldest rather pray heartily to be delivered from?"

Speaking for myself, this moment feels familiar: a moment in which one becomes aware of the inadequacy, inconstancy, contradiction, and even self-deception of one's most intimate desires and convictions of happiness. Such conflicts within the self are often the very subject of literature and biography. Which is simply to say that in addition to explaining and even celebrating the powers of von Neumann's logic, *The Man From the Future* might also have pointed out that in many important aspects of his thoughts and desires, Defoe's Robinson Crusoe is not von Neumann's axiomatized man, and neither are we.

**T**o understand why this is so important to remember, we need only return to the problem that so agitated von Neumann in 1945 as he considered the future of the technologies he was unleashing: "It would be unethical for the scientist not to do what they know is feasible," he declared, "no matter what terrible consequences it may have." So how could "people keep pace with what they create" in order to avoid those terrible consequences? Von Neumann returned to that question in his 1955 *Fortune* essay "Can We Survive Technology?," in which he asserted that changes in weaponry, communications, and climate meant that the world needed

new political forms and ideals if it wished to avoid catastrophe.

The only recipe for surviving technological change, von Neumann concluded, was relying on "human qualities." But what are those qualities? What is "human" about them? And how can they help us achieve the political forms and ideals necessary to ensure our survival? Von Neumann and his powers of logic did not address those questions. On the contrary, he encouraged us to imagine a strict identity between mathematics and the human, and he gave us the tools to extend one particular kind of human activity—games of strategy—into ever-greater domains of life. Today, game theory and its computational algorithms govern not only our nuclear strategy but also many parts of our working world (Uber, Lyft, and many others), our social lives (Meta, TikTok) and love affairs (Tinder), our access to information (Google), and even our sense of play. Von Neumann's ideas about human psychology provided the founding charter for the algorithmic "gamification" of the world as we know it. By concealing the distance between logic and the complexity of being rather than minding the gap, his axiomatized "psychology" heightened the very dangers he feared.

What does minding the gap look like? The first step is simply to notice that there is one, as J. Robert Oppenheimer did in 1960, a few years after von Neumann's death. "What are we to make of a civilization," he asked, "which has always regarded ethics as an essential part of human life, and...which has not been able to talk about the prospect of killing almost everybody, except in prudential and game-theoretical terms?" Oppenheimer had collaborated with von Neumann for many years, first leading the Manhattan Project, which produced the atom bomb, and then as director of the Institute for Advanced Study. This did not prevent him from realizing the dangers of reducing the human to a series of axioms, or from

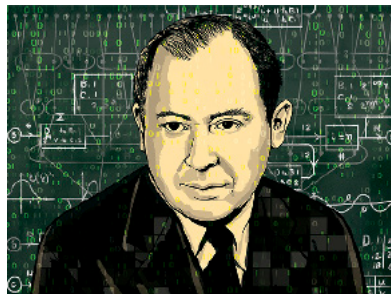
despairing—like Cassandra—of the possibility of making his warnings heard.

I suspect that both von Neumann and Bhattacharya would agree that we need logic and technology, but that we also need a better understanding of the human if we are to survive. If the human is not entirely reducible to logic or algorithm, then that understanding cannot come from mathematics and technology alone. What quests for knowledge can produce it? What kinds of inquiries,

collaborations, and research institutions are necessary if humanity is to "keep pace"? *The Man From the Future* does not ask these questions, but it may provoke others to do so.

I write these pages in the director's office at the Institute for Advanced Study, where von Neumann spent the bulk of his career. I am sitting at a desk that once belonged to Oppenheimer, who served as director from 1947

to 1966. The office itself hasn't changed much since Oppenheimer and von Neumann's day, though since I am a historian and not a mathematician or a physicist, I have added more bookshelves to supplement the blackboard favored by my predecessors. Perhaps there is a metaphor in the furniture, one capable of generating the "human qualities" that von Neumann thought so critical if we are to "survive technology." We need the bookshelves to interact with the blackboard. We need to engage the Robinson Crusoe of von Neumann and Morgenstern's economics with the Robinson Crusoe of Defoe's novel; Oppenheimer's "ethics" with game theory's algorithms; the drive toward logic and axiom with a recognition of those parts of the human psyche that cannot be reduced to noncontradiction or strict identity. We need institutions capable of generating such engagements between the different ways of discovering the human, and we need disciplines open to such interactions. Bhattacharya's book serves to remind us that this fundamental need is as urgent today as it has ever been.



**We need institutions capable of exploring the many different ways one can be human.**





## Bleeding Hearts and Blind Spots

*What the story of the Grimke family tells us about race in the United States*

BY KELLIE CARTER JACKSON

**E**VERYONE'S FAMILY HISTORY IS COMPLICATED. NEARLY everyone has an estranged sibling, a drunken uncle, a contentious aunt, or a well-kept secret trauma. With DNA testing and genealogy websites, everyone is almost guaranteed to find a cousin, a half-sibling, or even a parent previously unknown to them. During

American slavery, the bloodlines of slaveholding families were particularly fraught. Without technology, "Mama's baby and Papa's maybe," as the saying goes, could be kept hidden. When an enslaved child had red hair, freckles, and the same dimple or gait as their biological father, everyone noticed, but they never discussed these relationships. Behind the family portraits, genetics told everything. The irony among slaveholders and their enslaved descendants was that light skin

meant little. Slavery did not discriminate: The children of white masters could be bought, sold, beaten, or sexually assaulted. Interracial relationships did not bring people together in an era of slavery; rather, they kept them apart.

The family history of the Grimkes features many of these complications. In a single family tree, there were generations of slaveholders, enslaved people, abolitionists,

and free-born Black descendants. There was wealth and poverty, inherited money and self-made men. The Grimke family tree encompassed the spectrum of bondage and freedom. In *The Grimkes*, the historian Kerri Greenidge offers a powerful and unique account of this family's history—an account that offers tales of slavery, violence, loss, resilience, and redemption.

Greenidge is an exceptional storyteller. She, too, hails from a family of thinkers and writers who have used their genius to create and foster new conversations regarding old problems or marginalized people. In her previous book, *Black Radical: The Life and Times of William Monroe Trotter*, Greenidge explored the challenges of the civil rights milieu with a long-overdue biography of one of the most popular yet understudied Black voices of the early 20th century. William Monroe Trotter was an editor for the *Guardian*, the Boston-based Black newspaper, and a longtime political agitator. With her new book, Greenidge returns to New England as well as to the Grimkes' hometown of Charleston, S.C. Her story is one about race, region, class, and belonging—within a family unit as well as in one's country—but it is also about the circuits of abolitionist activism and Black political rights that spread from the South to the North and vice versa. Spanning more than 200 years, *The Grimkes* offers a history of slavery and elitism, activism and apathy, complicity and courage, that is comparable to Annette Gordon-Reed's Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*. It offers a glimpse into all the inner workings of interracial families grappling with slavery, sexual assault, and racial divisions. It also offers a story of the Black Grimkes, trapped by their link to one of the more famous surnames in the North and the South and feeling the pressure to live up to the family's exceedingly high standards.

**P**ERHAPS the most famous of the Grimkes were the celebrated sisters Sarah Moore Grimke, born in 1792, and Angelina Emily Grimke, born in 1805, who grew up in one of the largest slaveholding families in Charleston. Their father, Judge John Faucheraud Grimke, had 14 children and owned hundreds of enslaved people, which made him extraordinarily wealthy. Judge Grimke believed in the institution of slavery and in

the use of violence to maintain it. Brute force was the Grimke way, and it was passed down to his sons, who beat and whipped their enslaved human property, even those who shared a bloodline with them.

Sarah Grimke expressed at an early age her abhorrence of slavery. As an adult, she persuaded Angelina to leave the South with her, and the pair moved to Philadelphia and then to Boston, where they fought for the end of slavery and for women's rights. The Grimke sisters were often praised for abandoning the family business; they gave public lectures and wrote antislavery essays. Angelina married the abolitionist leader Theodore Dwight Weld and had her writings published to acclaim in William Lloyd Garrison's leading antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*. Most notably, Angelina wrote "Appeal to the Christian Women of the South," imploring Southern women to petition their state legislatures and church officials to abolish slavery. Together, Sarah, Angelina, and Theodore penned *American Slavery as It Is in 1839*, which became a bestseller in abolitionist circles.

The Grimke sisters were opposed to slavery, but as was the case with some white abolitionists, Greenidge notes, their cause "rarely included a recognition of the lives of the enslaved.... Black people themselves were mere objects within the constellation of sin that surrounded [them]." In this way and others, the Grimke sisters were confounding. They were outspoken regarding abolitionism and women's rights. They took to the lecture circuit, railing against the injustices of slavery and, to some extent, patriarchy. But they also did not see Black people as equals, even if they saw slavery as an abomination, and they were not always willing to confront the violence inflicted on their Black neighbors. Greenidge opens her book with the horrific story of a white mob attacking Black people in Philadelphia in 1834. During the riot, Black homes and businesses were destroyed and Black churches were reduced to rubble. For three consecutive days, more than 600 white men terrorized the city's Black residents. No one was spared, neither the young nor the old. A Black man named Daniel Williamson, believed to be a former slave of George Washington, was dragged from his home and kicked mercilessly. He was 95 years old. This was not the first time Philadelphia had exploded in violence against Black communities. In 1820 and 1829, and again in 1835, 1838, 1842, and 1849, anti-Black and anti-abolitionist mob attacks and campaigns of violence turned the city into a ticking time bomb for Black residents. Yet during the 1834 riot, the Grimke sisters said not a single word in recognition of the racial



### The Grimkes

*The Legacy of Slavery in an American Family*  
By Kerri K. Greenidge  
W.W. Norton.  
432 pp. \$32.50

violence that destroyed Black life in their city. Nor did the sisters ever fully confront their own complicity in their family's slaveholding. They never discussed their own role as slaveholders or attempted to center the voices of the enslaved. Although they didn't intervene when the violence was taking place, they certainly could have. Their refusal to acknowledge and make amends for their actions—or lack thereof—was not a hypocrisy limited to themselves. Many white liberals, then and now, have bleeding hearts and blind spots.



Greenidge spends large portions of the book revealing the inner lives of the Black Grimkes and their relationships with their white relatives, including the sisters. Back in South Carolina, Sarah and Angelina's brother, Henry Grimke, was a prominent slaveholder and lawyer. When his white wife died, Henry took on Nancy Weston, a mixed-race enslaved woman, to serve as his common-law "wife" and fathered three children, Archibald, Francis, and John, with her. Though he promised to free them all and could have done so legally, Henry never did. On his deathbed, he willed Nancy and their three sons to his oldest white son, E. Montague Grimke. "Montague was a brute," according to Archibald. He beat his half-brothers relentlessly as children and as teenagers. Only after the Civil War ended did the

Black Grimke brothers secure their freedom. All three were sent to be educated at the HBCU Lincoln University. When Sarah and Angelina realized that their brother had Black children, they made efforts to locate them and help them gain a footing in life. But they also never let them forget it. The sisters charged their nephews with being selfish, greedy, and lazy, even though Archibald and Francis earned graduate degrees from top schools and became successful—indeed, part of the country's Black elite—despite their past enslavement. Their lives were nothing short of remarkable.

Archibald achieved perhaps the greatest prominence among the brothers. He graduated from Harvard Law, worked as an attorney, and later became the American consul to Santo Domingo. He took on a leadership role in the NAACP and was very much the "race man" society expected him to be. He would also impose his high standards of excellence on his only child, which strained and at times contaminated their relationship.

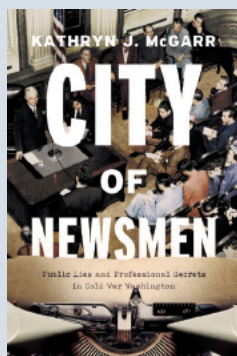
For his part, Francis was educated at Princeton Theological Seminary and led the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, the largest Black church in Washington, D.C., and he was also active in helping to establish the NAACP. He married Charlotte Forten, the granddaughter of the wealthy Black Philadelphia sailmaker and abolitionist James Forten. Charlotte was a third-generation abolitionist and very accomplished in her own right: She spoke several languages and was the first Black woman to graduate from Salem State Normal School in Massachusetts. During the Civil War, she became good friends with Robert Gould Shaw, the leader of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, and served as a nurse tending to the wounds of Black soldiers. After the war, she traveled to the South Carolina Sea Islands to teach formerly enslaved people. Charlotte and Francis had one child, but she did not survive past infancy.

Born into slavery before becoming self-made men, the two older Black Grimke brothers mistakenly believed that their free status, family name, education, and even their fair skin would shield them from the harshness of white supremacy. But as Greenidge shows, they eventually became disillusioned with the Republican Party, and they also attempted—unsuccessfully—to fight segregation among the holders of federal

*Kellie Carter Jackson is the Michael and Denise Kellen '68 Associate Professor of Africana Studies at Wellesley College and the author of Force and Freedom.*



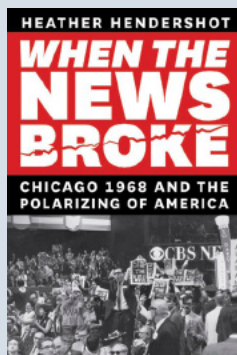
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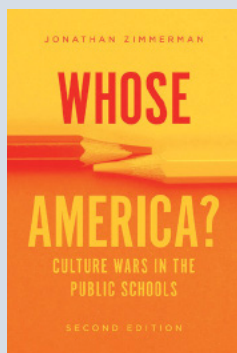
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office under a Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson. They also failed to garner support to combat racial discrimination against Black soldiers. For all of their success, neither brother could fully return to the South, either. They learned that successful Black leaders became the targets of white supremacist violence, such as the Wilmington Massacre or the murder of Frazier Baker, a federally appointed postmaster in Lake City, S.C.

Greenidge also details the pressures they felt in upholding the family's name and its reputation for achievement. Archibald's only child, Angelina Weld Grimke (known as "Nana" to her family and friends), was plagued by the public scrutiny and her father's demands to be exceptional. Her family prevented her from doing anything deemed unworthy of her status and class. Marriage became all but impossible, particularly as Angelina showed affection for other women. As an adult, she chose never to marry or have children. She poured much of her passion into her writing, including her well-known play *Rachel*, one of the first plays written by a Black woman, which discusses such themes as racism, depression, and the horrors of lynching. Angelina had a brief moment to shine during the Harlem Renaissance, but for the majority of her life she could not find happiness. She never fully understood—and yet still carried—the ghosts created by the hardships that her father and uncles had suffered during slavery. "The past is the past," Archibald once told her. "Haven't I give you a life of perfect harmony for which the past is no longer relevant?" But for Angelina, the past was always relevant. She wanted to know how her father and uncles had managed a life that was born out of rape and enslavement. How did they navigate their traumas, their losses, and even their successes? Nana could not reconcile herself to the fact that despite all of their striving and achievement, the Black Grimkes had not yet attained freedom—which is to say, true liberation.

**F**amily histories can be unsatisfying, because they can sometimes leave readers with more questions than answers. For older generations, the past was often something no one wanted to relive; shame and stigma held people hostage to their grief. Moreover, writing a family history like *The Grimkes* can be difficult. For starters, there are the

many shared names among both women and men; there are the nicknames used by all and the first names that go virtually unmentioned outside of official documents. But Greenidge is masterful at keeping all of the various Grimkes' narratives intact and accessible. It is impossible to mistake a Black Grimke for a white one in her book—the demands on their lives were utterly different. What is significant and even powerful about the Grimkes' story are the questions it raises about how to facilitate the healing of racial trauma. Every member of the family needed to grapple with the harm they caused or endured and the limitations placed on them. Greenidge doesn't have all the answers, but she shows us what will not work, and that example is just as useful as knowing what will.

Ranging over centuries of American history, *The Grimkes* is both timely and sadly timeless. Greenidge argues brilliantly that her book is a story of "the limits of interracial alliances when it comes to the eradication of deeply entrenched white supremacist violence and policy." As a country, we have not managed to join forces along racial and economic lines to create lasting, structural progressive change for those who need it the most. Money, success, and respectability cannot heal the wounds of racial trauma. Greenidge's book is almost a cautionary tale: The Grimke sisters and their white descendants were still trapped by their racial myopia and cognitive dissonance as it related to their family and the world they wanted to shape. With many white abolitionists, emancipation was the sole and ultimate goal. But abolition was not enough, because as many Black people understood, emancipation was just the beginning of equality, citizenship, and reparations, not the end.

Francis Grimke once said, "Race prejudice can't be talked down, it must be lived down." I agree. I might also add that activism is not hereditary. Each generation must be raised to understand that care and progress have to benefit everyone. There needs to be a constant reminder, because families and society at large would rather forget. Greenidge's rich historical text, with its thoroughly researched genealogy, reads like a novel, offering us, for the first time, a deep yet wide-ranging portrait of this complicated family, in black and white. *The Grimkes* is family history at its finest. In many ways, it represents the story of America itself: the good, the bad, and the forgotten. **N**



# Myths of Doom

*Can the origins of today's right be traced to the 1990s?*

BY JOHN GANZ

**I**N 1992, THE MOOD IN THE UNITED STATES SHOULD have been triumphal. The country appeared on the verge of reigning supreme: The Soviet Union had fallen, and the rusting tyrannies across the Eastern Bloc were turning to democracy. The US military had recently pummeled petty dictators in Panama and Iraq, exorcising the ghosts of Vietnam. And although China had avoided the fate of the USSR by brutally crushing dissent in Tiananmen Square, the country was embracing the American way—or at least its markets—and emerging as an eager trading partner. But going into the election year, the United States was surly, restless, preoccupied with grim fantasies of decline and collapse, and fearful of being overtaken by old foes and new rivals.

A brutal recession, the result of a bubble in real estate development caused by financial deregulation, only cast further

doubt on the notion of a “peace dividend” at the end of the Cold War. With the end of that conflict, declining arms production put thousands out of work, and scenes reminiscent of the Great Depression could be witnessed in many US cities, with crowds lining up for food or meager employment. Radio talk shows broadcast a constant stream of invective and complaint. Voters cast about for alternatives

to the two parties. The previous decade had begun with Ronald Reagan’s superficial sunniness and optimism; now a new decade was beginning with gloom, doubt, and the reappearance of monsters with names like “populism,” “nationalism,” and even whispers of “fascism.”

At the vanguard of the cortege of national disappointment and disillusion was the conservative movement and the hard right of the Republican Party. One might expect the vanquishing of the Soviet Union to have provided some satisfaction to a party that had organized itself around a militant anticommunism for four decades, but the hard right experienced the so-called “Reagan Revolution” as anything but, just a series of modest reforms swamped by the continued dominance of the Democrats in Congress and the cultural hegemony of establishment liberalism. “Reagan gave conservatism a beachhead in Washington, but he didn’t follow through,” *National Review* senior editor Joe Sobran wrote. “The libs have sold the Administration on the myth which Reagan’s victories should have demolished: that Republicans thrive by adopting ‘moderation.’”

Even worse to many conservatives was the presidency of George H.W. Bush, whom the right had viewed as ideologically suspect and politically unreliable, a remnant of the well-to-do mainline Republicanism that had dominated the party prior to the conservative ascendancy. It did not matter how much Bush attempted to placate those to his right rhetorically or in practice, by elevating Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court or by vetoing what he labeled the “quota bill,” the Civil Rights Act of 1990; he was not one of them and was increasingly seen as an enemy. In 1991, Bush would even sign a compromise version of the Civil Rights Act, enraging the right and triggering Pat Buchanan’s primary challenge.

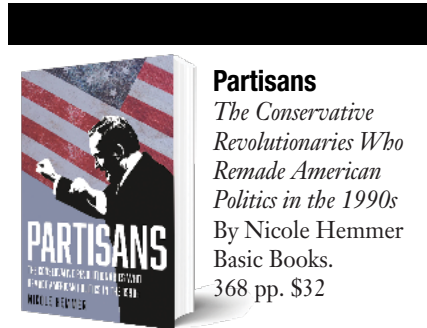
The right-wing movement searched for political avatars for its next incarnation, such as the populist protest candidacies of former KKK wizard and neo-Nazi David Duke in Louisiana. After failing as a Democrat, Duke successfully whipped up an insurgency of disaffected lower-middle-class whites in the state against country club Republicans and the national GOP, toppling the mainstream Republican incumbent governor in the primary. Buchanan was intrigued by Duke’s success: “The



way to deal with Mr. Duke is the way the GOP dealt with the far more formidable challenge of George Wallace. Take a hard look at Duke's portfolio of winning issues and expropriate those not in conflict with GOP principles," he wrote in his nationally syndicated column. "In the hard times in Louisiana, Mr. Duke's message comes across as Middle Class, meritocratic, populist, and nationalist." While Buchanan sought to retool Duke's race politics for a presidential run, Newt Gingrich was developing his own confrontational and provocative parliamentary style to challenge the seemingly unshakable Democratic majority in the House of Representatives. The conservative vanguard correctly read the mood of the country as "pissed off" and began to organize a politics to harness that energy.

The grassroots reactionary movements of the so-called New Right in the 1970s and the Tea Party in the 2000s are often the go-to moments used to explain Trumpism and the neo-McCarthyite hysterias over "CRT" and "gender ideology"; but the middle period of the 1990s, coming as the United States transitioned into the post-Cold War age, has begun to generate more interest and arguably represents the origin point of the present right wing far more than either of these periods. Nicole Hemmer's *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s* makes such an argument and marks the beginning of a serious, public-facing investigation of an time that is so far only half-recalled, relegated to a haze of nostalgia and just-so stories that are treated as political wisdom. The 1990s are often remembered by liberals as an era of good feelings, national prosperity, security, and comity before the trauma of 9/11, but Hemmer's book reminds us that it was an important period of political upheaval that has also been strangely easy to miss or downplay.

**H**emmer is both a historian and a journalist. She teaches at Vanderbilt University and is a columnist for CNN. Her 2016 book *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* made an essential contribution to the study of the American right beyond the topic of conservative media, helping to deflate myths such as William F. Buckley's purge of the John Birch Society from the movement. In her telling, Buckley made a show of shunning the fringes of the conservative movement, but the denunciations actually hurt *National Review* more than the renegades: Many subscribers and donors canceled their support for the magazine in anger. She also provided some counterintuitive insights, such as identifying the weakness and near collapse of the conservative media at the moment of Reagan's victory. By paying attention to grassroots



### Partisans

*The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s*  
By Nicole Hemmer  
Basic Books.  
368 pp. \$32

publications and radio broadcasts, and not just the official organs like *National Review*, Hemmer offered in *Messengers of the Right* an important history of the organic intellectuals of the conservative movement, the mediating cadre between elite and mass constituencies. The conservative movement often likes to picture itself as the bearer of "ideas" that originated in the sanctum of the *National Review* offices, then spread across the country and eventually brought about Reagan's victory, while at the same time claiming that the movement's leadership had judiciously cast out the wing nuts. But Hemmer showed in her book that the movement's origins traced back to fringe elements it would rather we forget: the isolationist America First Committee of the 1940s, an association that would become a political embarrassment after the war.

Like *Messengers*, *Partisans* is a history of the staff of the conservative movement, but as the title suggests, it centers more on the role of professional Republican politicians like Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan than on movement media figures or intellectuals like Rush Limbaugh and Sam Francis, although some of its most insightful sections are

about the media. Hemmer begins the book with a "puzzle": how to account for what she calls the "evolutionary leap" of the right in the 1990s. If Reagan had won so decisively thanks to his upbeat tone, positivity, and optimism, his position on free trade and his invocations of American democracy, why did the conservative movement almost immediately begin to move away from his formula in both style and substance? Why, when the country seemed to prefer a Clintonian politics of comity and compromise, did the Republicans rush headlong into fierce partisanship? And, finally, how did the Republicans turn from the party of Reagan into the party of Trump?

Hemmer proposes multiple answers. First, there's the fact that Reagan, despite being a conservative ideologue, was always a bit of an outlier in terms of affect: His dopey optimism, hope, and pragmatism put him at variance with the pessimistic, dour, and uncompromising tone of the movement generally. The New Right was very quickly disappointed in Reagan and never liked or trusted Bush at all. So, to a certain degree, the era of partisanship in the 1990s can be understood as a return to form: The paleo-conservative revolt followed through on

the aggressiveness of the New Right and returned to even older sources in its invocation of "America First" and the prewar old right. Second, there's the end of the Cold War, which had

created consensus and discipline within both the conservative movement and the country at large. Without the threat of the Soviet Union, the right was free to pursue factional struggle and focus on domestic enemies.

Hemmer also points to the more fragmented media environment created by the birth of cable TV and radio talk shows: Rather than having to appeal to the broadest possible public, right-wing messaging could remain subcultural and still find a mass audience. She notes a shift as well in political objectives, with the presidency put aside for the conquest of Congress, a move that required a mo-

**The 1990s are often remembered by liberals as an era of good feelings.**

## Scientific Discovery Stuns Doctors

# Biblical Bush Relieves Joint Discomfort in as Little as 5 Days

*Legendary “special herb” gives new life to old joints without clobbering you. So safe you can take it every day without worry.*

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 54 million Americans are suffering from joint discomfort.

This epidemic rise in aching joints has led to a search for alternative treatments—as many sufferers want relief without the harmful side effects of conventional “solutions.”

Leading the way from nature’s pharmacy is the new “King of Oils” that pioneering Florida MD and anti-aging specialist Dr. Al Sears calls “the most significant breakthrough I’ve ever found for easing joint discomfort.”

Biblical scholars treasured this “holy oil.” Ancient healers valued it more than gold for its medicinal properties. Marco Polo prized it as he blazed the Silk Road. And Ayurvedic practitioners, to this day, rely on it for healing and detoxification.

Yet what really caught Dr. Sears’ attention is how modern medical findings now prove this “King of Oils” can powerfully...

### Deactivate 400 Agony-Causing Genes

If you want genuine, long-lasting relief for joint discomfort, you must address inflammation. Too much inflammation will wreak havoc on joints, break down cartilage and cause unending discomfort. This is why so many natural joint relief solutions try to stop one of the main inflammatory genes called COX-2.

But the truth is, there are hundreds of agony-causing genes like COX-2, 5-LOX, iNOS, TNK, Interleukin 1,6,8 and many more—and stopping just one of them won’t give you all the relief you need.

Doctors and scientists now confirm the “King of Oils”—Indian Frankincense—deactivates not one but 400 agony-causing genes. It does so by shutting down the inflammation command center called Nuclear Factor Kappa Beta.

NK-Kappa B is like a switch that can turn 400 inflammatory genes “on” or “off.” A study in Journal of Food Lipids reports that Indian Frankincense powerfully deactivates NF-Kappa B. This journal adds that Indian Frankincense is “so powerful it shuts down the pathway triggering aching joints.”

### Relief That’s 10 Times Faster... and in Just 5 Days

Many joint sufferers prefer natural solutions but say they work too slowly. Take the best-seller glucosamine. Good as it is, the National



*The active ingredient in **Mobilify** soothes aching joints in as little as 5 days*

Institutes of Health reports that glucosamine takes as long as eight weeks to work.

Yet in a study published in the International Journal of Medical Sciences, 60 patients with stiff knees took 100 mg of Indian Frankincense or a placebo daily for 30 days. Remarkably, Indian Frankincense “significantly improved joint function and relieved discomfort in as early as five days.” That’s relief that is 10 times faster than glucosamine.

### 78% Better Relief Than the Most Popular Joint Solution

In another study, people suffering from discomfort took a formula containing Indian Frankincense and another natural substance or a popular man-made joint solution every day for 12 weeks.

The results? Stunning! At the end of the study, 64% of those taking the Indian Frankincense formula saw their joint discomfort go from moderate or severe to mild or no discomfort. Only 28% of those taking the placebo got the relief they wanted. So Indian Frankincense delivered relief at a 78% better clip than the popular man-made formula.

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Because of clinically proven results like this, Dr. Sears has made Indian Frankincense the centerpiece of a new natural joint relief formula called **Mobilify**.

### Great Results for Knees, Hips, Shoulders and Joints

Joni D. says, “**Mobilify** really helps with soreness, stiffness and mild temporary pain. The day after taking it, I was completely back to normal—so fast.” Shirley M. adds, “Two weeks after taking **Mobilify**, I had no knee discomfort and could go up and down the staircase.” Larry M. says, “After a week and a half of taking **Mobilify**, the discomfort, stiffness and minor aches went away... it’s almost like being reborn.” And avid golfer Dennis H. says, “I can attest to **Mobilify** easing discomfort to enable me to pursue my golfing days. Definitely one pill that works for me out of the many I have tried.”

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bilization of the base through confrontational tactics. (This mobilization would have lasting effects, we would later see, as the right took not just Congress but also statehouses and the courts.) Lastly, Hemmer suggests that the institutional infrastructure of the right-wing world created powerful career incentives that encouraged extreme partisanship among its ranks rather than consensus-building: "The partisans...seized the uncertainty of the rapidly evolving political landscape to accumulate political power, wealth, and fame. Though they made their political homes in a variety of institutions—think tanks, cable networks, Congress, political organizations—they all worked to develop a politics not just conservative but antiliberal, that leaned into the coarseness of American culture and brought it into politics, that valued scoring political points above hewing to ideological principles." The new media environment further rewarded their outrageousness.

**H**emmer makes a very compelling and persuasive case for the explosion of partisanship in the 1990s, but one wishes that the overall social context was more developed in her argument. While the right is certainly a subculture and succeeded largely by shoring up its own ranks rather than by persuading majorities, the "partisans" did not play only to internal audiences: Something about their bitter mood resonated with that of the country at large. It would be helpful to know in greater detail why and how the end of the Cold War led to such a sour and paranoid mood in the country that figures like Gingrich and Limbaugh were able to take advantage of. Even though the catastrophist sentiments percolating in the public were often vague discontents rather than explicit ideological positions, the right was able to successfully establish itself as the vehicle for anger in general. The figures in question were not solely fixated on partisan struggle: They had a national vision, albeit one that was dark and pessimistic. What made it persuasive to so many?

While *Partisans* provides valuable reconstructions of the careers of familiar figures like Gingrich and Limbaugh, some of the strongest parts of the book revolve around lesser-known characters and largely forgotten episodes and

processes. For instance, a chapter on Helen Chenoweth, the Idaho representative who came to Congress in the Republican Revolution of 1994, is particularly illuminating. Chenoweth's political life began when she was radicalized by the Wilderness Act of 1964: The law prevented her and her then-husband from cutting down trees in order to build an airport in rural Idaho. As Hemmer writes, Chenoweth's political career was characterized by the "entanglement of personal profit and political ideology." She worked as a lobbyist for the state's extractive industries and had deep ties to the rural militia movement, then inflamed by the tragedy at Ruby Ridge. She brought fringe conspiratorialism into Congress, asking about the existence of "black helicopters" and inveighing against the United Nations and the "New World Order" in committee. She continued to offer moral support to the militias even after the Oklahoma City bombing. Chenoweth, a divorced single mom, combined this extremism with a spunky pseudo-feminism that, along with her outrageous antics, endeared her to the national press. Compared with figures like Lauren Boebert and Marjorie Taylor Greene, Chenoweth appears relatively lucid and staid, but she provides a paradigmatic example of how the Republican "mainstream" increasingly absorbed the fringe and how this was in some cases an extension of, rather than a threat to, its role as the party of business.

A chapter that centers on the comedian Bill Maher's cable talk show *Politically Incorrect* and its conservative guests gives another angle on how the subculture became mass culture. *Politically Incorrect*, which began its run in 1993 on the still relatively obscure Comedy Central, combined satire and panel show commentary and strove to be outrageous and titillating, courting controversy above serious debate. And unlike the Christian right's crusade against the modern world or right-wing radio's drive-time diatribes, Maher participated gleefully in raunch culture, introducing a political style that shared right-wing cultural concerns about political correctness even as he professed a certain liberalism that mocked the likes of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. It was the perfect platform

for rising young conservative pundits like Laura Ingraham and Ann Coulter, who represented a new, stylish, more chic and urbane brand of hard-right conservatism than, say, Phyllis Schlafly's performance of devout Catholic motherhood. While Limbaugh brought conservatism to its natural constituency in the suburban petite bourgeoisie, *Politically Incorrect* and the cable shows that aped it also made it a palatable ideology for disaffected, city-dwelling Gen Xers eager to shake off the hypocrisies and banalities of liberalism as they

knew it. Hemmer makes a convincing case that *Politically Incorrect*'s massive success created a model for the introduction of glibber and more opinion-centric commentary on cable and network TV that foregrounded entertainment over news. This media environment favored the style of the partisans, who were willing to behave churlishly for the cameras. This attention economy dominated by contrarianism and sour clownishness has only intensified in the Internet age.

**P**artisans will become an essential book in the library of anyone trying to understand how we became dominated by the right's combination of utter cynicism and ideological rigidity and how right-wing extremism came to be woven into the mainstream of American life. The paradox of the book and the period it deals with is that the right achieved and consolidated its political and cultural hegemony not by attempting to seek the middle ground but by doubling down on some of its most radical positions.

Perhaps, in a sense, what was accomplished in the 1990s was not so different from Reaganism after all, which packaged conservative ideology in the forward-looking optimism of the New Deal era and nostalgia for the stars of the Golden Age of Hollywood. It successfully integrated itself wherever it could—even by playing the foil or heel—in America's myth-making apparatus, the media and the entertainment industry. Why the right's myths of doom and decline began to resonate so deeply is still an open question. **N**

**The new media environment further rewarded the right's outrageousness.**



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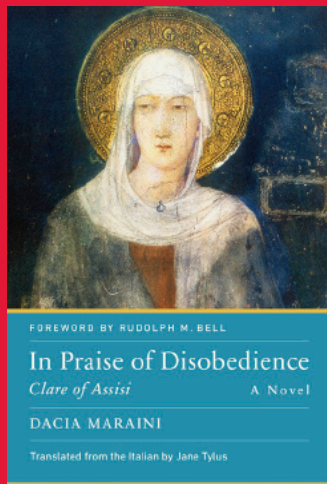
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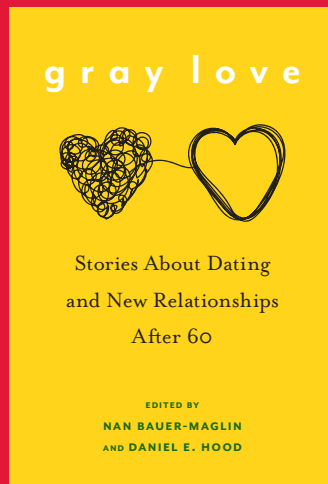
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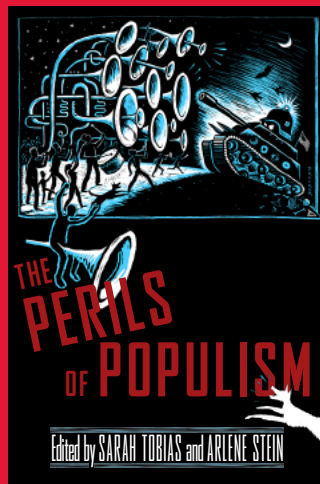
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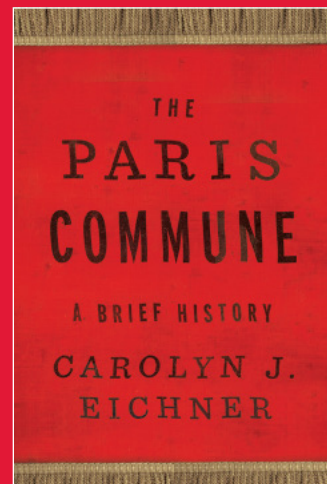
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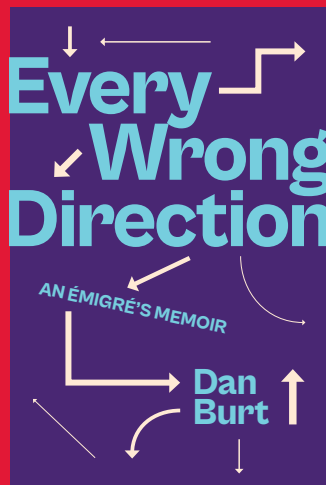
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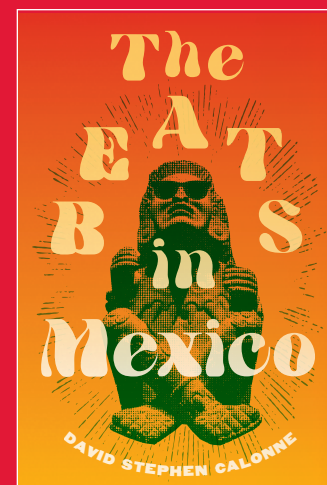


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