

# THE Nation.

EST. 1865

FEBRUARY 20/27, 2023

REMEMBERING  
VICTORY  
NAVASKY  
1932-2023

ÉDOUARD LOUIS'S  
CLASS CHRONICLES  
TARA K. MENON

## Déjà Q

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“Christopher Hitchens once lamented, ‘The only thing I don’t like about Victor is the fact that everybody likes him.’” <5

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IN MEMORIAM / KAI BIRD

# Victor Navasky (1932–2023)



**I** MET VICTOR IN THE SPRING OF 1978, WHEN HE WALKED INTO *THE NATION*'S SPARTAN offices on Sixth Avenue. Three months earlier, I had been hired for a three-day-a-week gig as the editor's assistant by Blair Clark, who had been brought onto the magazine as interim editor. Victor, who was stepping into the editor's post, had intended to hire someone else for the role. But there I was. And I sensed that Victor couldn't bring himself to dismiss me. Instead, he arranged for the other person to begin a long and successful career in book publishing. This was my first experience with Navasky, the fixer.

*The Nation* was a very different place then, occupying part of a narrow corner building downtown. Water pipes hung from the ceiling. The wooden floors creaked. We wrote our copy on ancient Royal typewriters. There was a copy editor, Marion Hess, and an executive editor, Robert Hatch—a wiry, elderly curmudgeon who sat at his desk wearing suspenders. He looked like he'd been there for a hundred years. Bob wrote the magazine's film reviews—and never saw a film he could recommend.

In the wake of the McCarthyite scourge, *The Nation*'s readership had declined to perilous levels. By 1978, the circulation hovered at something less than 20,000—and most of the subscribers were libraries and a bickering collection of aging New Dealers, Adlai Stevenson liberals, elderly lapsed Communists, and the occasional survivor of the 1960s culture wars. The demographics—and hefty deficits—didn't augur well for the future of the magazine.

Happily, though, its survival was Victor's responsibility—and that of Hamilton Fish, our young publisher. My job was to read manuscripts from the slush pile and write up summaries on index cards. I worked 10 or 12 hours a day and rarely took off weekends. I loved it.

Editorial decisions in those years were a mysterious process. Victor mounted a 10-foot-long rectangular corkboard on the wall in his office. This was his method for mapping out what was to go into the magazine week by week. I would write the author's name and article subject on an index card—"Fred Cook on the FBI," for example—and pin the card in a column marking the publication date. Victor sat gnomelike behind his desk presiding over our editorial meetings, attended by the new executive editor, Richard Lingeman, myself, and the literary editor, Betsy Pochoda. It was a largely silent affair. I would stand by the corkboard as Victor and Richard stared at the cards. Sometimes I dared to break the silence by commenting on the merits of a particular article. Victor would nod. Richard would whisper something inaudible. And then more silence. But Victor and Richard were somehow

communicating with each other telepathically. It was scary to witness. Decisions would be made, and the cards were rearranged. It was like magic.

I learned to trust the Navasky magic. After a few years, he helped me find a book agent and sell my first proposal. Years later, he got me to write a cover profile of Jimmy Carter—which led eventually to my presidential biography. Last autumn,

at the age of 90, Victor was gently encouraging me to pitch a new book proposal, this time on Roy Cohn—a scoundrel he once debated on William F. Buckley Jr.'s *Firing Line*. I learned to always do what Victor told me. I liked to joke that he was my rabbi.

What fascinates me about Victor's life is that he was so intellectually ubiquitous. He arrived at *The Nation* in 1978, age 45, already a proven provocateur. As

the editor of *Monocle*, he had published satirical essays on the Kennedys, the CIA, and the Cold War. In 1971, he published *Kennedy Justice*, a critical depiction of Robert F. Kennedy's tenure as attorney general. And in 1980, he published his groundbreaking study of the McCarthy era, *Naming Names*, which won the National Book Award for a general nonfiction paperback. Later there would be a touching memoir, *A Matter of Opinion*, and much later an important book about censorship, *The Art of Controversy: Political Cartoons and Their Enduring Power*.

These books are all impressive works of scholarship. But Victor devoted his life to something even more important to our intellectual





culture: the art of magazine editing. He did so by calmly and thoughtfully courting important controversy—making his readers confront the uncomfortable. Recall that in 1984 he scandalized many of his own *Nation* staffers by publishing a David Levine caricature of Henry Kissinger shuffling a female personification of the world with her head replaced by a globe.

Victor knew some would be offended and that there would be many letters to the editor. That was OK. He was a small-d democrat, but he knew that the editor of a weekly opinion magazine could not take a vote on what to publish and what to censor. That was his responsibility and prerogative.

Neither was he afraid to take risks in the cause of a good fight.

In 1979, he published about 300 verbatim words from former president Gerald Ford's then-upcoming 500-page memoir, *A Time to Heal*. It was a classic scoop—a news story that revealed why Ford had decided to pardon Richard Nixon. But Ford's publisher, Harper & Row, sued *The Nation*, claiming copyright infringement. Citing the “fair use” clause, Victor fought the case all the way to the Supreme Court. And lost. It was bad law—and today the copyright law has been revised to give journalists more “fair use” rights. In retrospect, virtually everyone acknowledges that Victor was right.

Not so with the case of Alger Hiss. Victor's first major contribution to *The Nation* came in the spring of 1978, when he published a long, critical review of Allen Weinstein's book *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case*. The piece poked holes in Weinstein's thesis, pointing out that five of his main

(continued on page 6)

## Negative Charisma

**T**he first piece Victor Navasky published in *The Nation* ran in June 1960 under the byline “G. Mennen Williams”—not a pseudonym, but the name of the Michigan governor who had employed the newly minted Yale Law School graduate as a speechwriter. My own introduction to Victor came in 1979, after Kai Bird told me that so long as I was willing to work for nothing, *The Nation* would be pleased to have me as an intern. My memories from that time are not of a warm and fuzzy or avuncular presence. We interns were basically terrified of Victor, especially since he led through a kind of chemical communication rather than actually telling you things. It was my first brush with negative charisma—and the beginning of a lifelong education.

At some point it emerged that my undergraduate adviser, the philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser, had taught Victor at Swarthmore 25 years earlier—which allowed Victor, who really loved Sidney, to reveal his more tender side. Still, I learned early on that it was a big mistake to confuse Victor's enormous affability with pliability or sentimentality. On the issues he cared about—free speech, the tragedy of the Cold War, and the terrible danger of nuclear weapons—he was unyielding and, when he needed to be, perfectly content to stand alone.

Devoted to his wife, Annie, and their children, Victor also had some unlikely enthusiasms: vodka martinis, good restaurants, literary gossip—any gossip, really—and boxing. And if he liked you, he didn't pull his punches. Maybe that's the reason that out of all the ephemera accumulated over what became a 40-year apprenticeship, the note I cherish most came in response to an article I'd submitted to *The Nation* arguing that Major League Baseball was too important to remain subject to the whims of men like George Steinbrenner and Walter O'Malley and should be nationalized. “This piece is too Marxist for *The Nation*,” he wrote. “Why don't you try *The New York Times*? —Vic.”

D.D. Guttenplan

## One Nation, Under Victor

**I** was 10 when I first heard the name Victor Navasky. My father was throwing *Kennedy Justice* around our living room. He'd worked in the Kennedy Justice Department and thought Victor's book got it wrong.

When I graduated from college, *Naming Names* changed my life by prompting me to apply to *The Nation*'s internship program. In 1980, with Victor as lead professor, I embarked on my journalistic and political education. I'd just started when Victor asked me to come meet the widow of *The Nation*'s former editor, Carey McWilliams. Iris needed someone to help organize her late husband's papers. In my application I'd explained that I wanted to work at the magazine that had fought so courageously for civil liberties during those scoundrel times. I considered McWilliams—and Victor—lead watchmen during (and after) those dark nights.

Years later, when I became editor, with Victor staying on as publisher, I came to realize what an idiosyncratic mentor he was. He was a true believer in independence—of journals, of countries, and of those who sought his mentorship. He trusted you to make up your own mind. There were many days I'd leave his office more confused than when I entered!

Victor believed our job as editors was to decide who should—and shouldn't—be a columnist, how often columns should run, and what the political and cultural mix of the magazine should be, along with the hundreds of other decisions that go into putting a magazine out. There are some decisions on which it is important to have a consensus, he believed, and there are others where it would be a disaster to try.

He was that rare person who was fierce in his convictions yet kind and compassionate in his personal relations. (The longtime *Nation* columnist Christopher Hitchens once lamented, “The only thing I don't like about Victor is the fact that everybody likes him.”)

Over the years, I gathered a small file of my correspondence with Victor. One of his e-mails goes like this: “Katrina—Don't despair. No advice—I think what you are doing is exactly right.” I have no memory of what I was despairing of. What I do know is that Victor's passing is an incalculable loss, to *The Nation* and to the nation. I will miss him.

Katrina vanden Heuvel

## An Enigmatic Knot

**P**aying tribute to Victor is something I like to do, hoping each time to loosen that complicated Navasky knot.

I'll now have another go and look back at a favorite Victor anecdote to see if there's something I missed before. The anecdote goes like this: One rainy rush hour, Vic and I had miraculously scored a cab in the scrum outside Grand Central Station. Just as we settled in, we spied a frantic Barbara Tuchman—historian, Pulitzer Prize winner, and vocal enemy of *The Nation*—flailing about with no taxi prospects in sight. I was undoubtedly amused and thus wholly unprepared for what happened next: Vic opened the door, dragged me out, and offered a befuddled Tuchman our cab, something she later mentioned with astonishment to a few friends who, like everyone else in New York, were also friends with Victor.

I eventually reflected on this episode, concluding that the inane aphorism “No enemies on the left” had a far healthier Navasky version: “No enemies, period.” It was a hard lesson for me to learn, but one that explained how, among other things, Vic was able to keep a fractious *Nation* staff together: The door was open to our sometimes obnoxious behavior, to our unwelcome opinions, but also overwhelmingly to the good stuff each of us might produce. It may also explain how he was able, in his book *Naming Names*, to dissolve some of the New Left disdain for Old Left issues by opening that history to highlight the virtues of courage and loyalty. If Victor came later to feminism than one might have expected, the door was open to Katha Pollitt, and the case was made.

All this in a man who could also be tough as nails, famously about money. But really, he rose above simplifications—both personal and political—and was not just parsimonious, as Bud Trillin famously described him, but also placatory and principled. A complex, enigmatic knot, to be sure, but a rare and inspiring one as well.

Elizabeth Pochoda

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sources denied that Weinstein had quoted them correctly. The controversy raged and still percolates. Victor was not a Hiss believer but rather an agnostic. As late as 2007, he wrote in *The Nation*, “This is a case that will not die. It will not go away. The Cold War is over but this, among other Cold War ghosts, lingers on.” For Victor, it was important to ask why.

What is interesting about the dispute is that with all the heated emotions surrounding it, Victor never personally aroused his detractors' ire. He remained on civil terms with everyone.

Israel/Palestine also aroused controversy, and Victor never hesitated to walk into this minefield. He published Edward Said, Israel Shahak, and many other critics of Israel. But he kept the doors open to his own critics, like Sol Stern and Sidney Zion—old friends who disagreed vociferously with his views but still dined with the Navaskys. Victor was a genial, impish man who never lost his sense of humor. In the spring of 2009, he wrote to me that he had gone to dinner at a steakhouse with Christopher Lehmann-Haupt and Sid Zion, “and we had an hour-long (friendly, sort of) argument about Israel, joined by an obstreperous woman at the next table—so it was three to one against me—who ended by shouting that she hoped I got stuck with the check!”

That was Victor. He loved people and was amused by them even during a good argument. To be sure, he will forever be known as the man who saved *The Nation*—and elevated it to new heights. He did so by nurturing provocative writers and talented editors and artists. He made us think. But he also touched so many of our personal lives with his wisdom, humor, and special magic. He was a mensch. **N**

**W**hen I asked Victor how much *The Nation* would pay me for each column, he really did say, “Something in the high two figures.” And when I asked him to be a bit more specific, he really did say, “We’ve been paying \$65”—which, of course, sounds more like something in the middle two figures. It might have been then that I began referring to him as “the wily and parsimonious Victor S. Navasky.” Or it might have been back in the days when he was editing *Monocle*, a magazine with a pay scale so low that it once sent me a bill for a piece of mine it was running.

So why did I and so many other writers, fully aware of the pay scale, write for him? I think the overriding answer is pretty simple: We liked him. He was hard to say no to. He didn't seem interested in using *The Nation* for self-aggrandizement. He tended to see the good in people, even in hard-core right-wingers. He took well to teasing. I think that may be one of the things I'll miss the most now that the old W. and P. is no longer with us: He took well to teasing.

Calvin Trillin

**I** first met Victor in June of 1974, in his office at Ramsey Clark's US Senate campaign. I was 22. Victor appointed me director of fundraising, the first in a succession of jobs he would assign to me that no one else wanted. Clark famously refused to accept more than \$100 per contributor—an admirable stance, but one that seriously complicated the task of raising money.

Somehow Victor managed the campaign into the general election, where we faced Jacob Javits. Javits convened a press conference at which he read from a letter from an airman who'd been in the same POW camp that Clark had visited on a peace mission to North Vietnam. We lost by six points.

“*The Nation* is for sale,” Victor told me two years later. “I think we should buy it.” I nodded thoughtfully—and then I made the mistake many people have made with him.

“How will I get paid?” I asked. Without blinking, Victor replied, “You'll have to raise it.” It's possible he said “We'll have to raise it,” but I don't think so. Once again, Victor assigned me a job for which there wasn't even a short list. Being publisher of *The Nation*, of course, turned out to be the job of a lifetime.

Hamilton Fish

COMMENT / DAVID CORTRIGHT

# Why Protest Matters

*On the 20th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, we should remember the impact of the anti-war movement.*



ON FEBRUARY 15, 2003, IN HUNDREDS OF CITIES across the world, some 10 million people demonstrated against the United States' impending invasion of Iraq. By many accounts, it was the largest single day of anti-war protest in history. More than a million people jammed London's center, while huge throngs marched in Rome, Berlin, Paris, Barcelona, Madrid, and Sydney. In New York City, hundreds of thousands braved the bitter cold to rally against the war. "The world says no to war" was the slogan and the reality.

A few days after the February demonstrations, the *New York Times* reporter Patrick Tyler wrote that the huge anti-war demonstrations were indications of "two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion." *The Nation's* Jonathan Schell wrote of the movement's "immense power" in winning the hearts and minds of the majority of the world's people.

Yet this vast mobilization of political opposition was unable to halt the march to war. The unavoidable reality, Schell poignantly observed, was that "candles in windows did not stop the cruise missiles." Some believe the protests had no influence, but in my view and that of many others, this is shortsighted. The movement in fact had significant impacts in the United States and internationally, prompting politically motivated decisions that undermined the military mission and contributed to what the US Army's history of the war termed "strategic failure."

The George W. Bush administration manipulated post-9/11 fears to gain support for the use of force by falsely claiming that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction that could be used by terrorists. As critics countered the WMD deception, public support for attacking Iraq began to erode. Polls around the world showed overwhelming opposition to war.

The White House was frustrated by the lack of international support. This was evident in Bush's conversation with National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice in early January 2003, as recounted in Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack*. The campaign against Iraq "isn't holding together," the president said to Rice. "We are not winning. Time is not on our side." Bush was also worried, Woodward wrote, that "anti-war protests in European cities and in the U.S. would fortify Saddam and make him think the U.S. would never invade."

In Germany, Turkey, Canada, and many other countries, political leaders faced public pressure to reject the US entreaties for participation. Bush's only significant ally was British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who faced domestic criticism for being Bush's "poodle." To assuage the skeptics in his government, Blair persuaded a reluctant White House to seek authorization from the United Nations. When Secretary of State Colin Powell went to the Security Council in February 2003, however, he was decisively rebuffed. Despite its determined efforts to twist arms, the US was only able to muster the votes of the UK, Bulgaria,

and Spain. Rather than face the humiliation of such a paltry showing, the White House withdrew the proposed resolution and proceeded with the attack.

Bush's so-called "coalition of the willing" was a threadbare arrangement that provided little military help. The massive scale of public opposition prevented many countries from joining and convinced most of those that did to limit their role to noncombat duties. The US Army history says the coalition was "largely unsuccessful" at the operational level, with American troops doing almost all of the fighting and suffering 93 percent of the casualties.

The international rejection of the US-led war was significant. It was the first time since the UN's founding that the United States could not get full Security Council approval on a national priority.

A creative dialectic developed between the Security Council and global civil society: The stronger the anti-war movement in Germany, Mexico, and other countries became, the greater was the determination to resist US pressure at the UN. And the stronger the objections at the UN became, the greater was the legitimacy and impact of the anti-war movement.

The ways in which protest influences policy are not always apparent. Movements can win even as they appear to lose. While the anti-war movement did not prevent the invasion of Iraq, it helped set the terms of the debate by insisting on UN approval for the use of force and by convincing key governments to refuse to participate, thereby shaping the war's eventual outcome. The Bush administration was unable to win the larger struggle for hearts and minds at home and abroad. The White House lost the war politically before it ever began militarily.

The same is true today for the Kremlin's war in Ukraine, which, like the US invasion of Iraq, is an illegal war of aggression against a sovereign state. A new global anti-war movement is needed now with the same message as 20 years ago: "No to war." Oppose military escalation. Pursue peace by aiding Ukrainian victims, supporting Russians who reject the war, and demanding international negotiations for the withdrawal of Russian troops. **N**

*David Cortright is the author of A Peaceful Superpower: Lessons From the World's Largest Antiwar Movement (New Village Press).*



# Objection!

## Elie Mystal



## Junk History

*Chief Justice Roberts's year-end report reveals that he thinks he and his extremist cohort are heroes.*

**O**N DECEMBER 31, CHIEF JUSTICE JOHN ROBERTS published his year-end report on the federal judiciary. As is tradition, the report was a short, perfunctory memo that came and went without any lasting impact. By comparison to the State of the Union—during which the president lays out his agenda for the coming year—the court's year-end report strives to stay away from controversy or newsworthiness. Instead, it stays in the safe space of hokey themes wrapped in neat historical anecdotes. It's best to think of it as Roberts's yearly self-portrait.

I always read it, because, like a self-portrait, it provides insights into how the artist sees himself. Last year, the Supreme Court revoked a constitutional right for the first time in US history when it overturned *Roe v. Wade* in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health*. I was curious about how Roberts would portray himself and his court after this widely unpopular betrayal of judicial precedent. His year-end report provides the answer: Roberts thinks he and his cabal of conservative extremists are heroes.

The report didn't address abortion directly, of course. Instead, Roberts opens with a story about the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision as told through the actions of a district court judge, Ronald N. Davies, who applied the decision in 1957 when nine Black teenagers (known as the "Little Rock Nine") attempted to integrate a high school in Arkansas. Roberts tells us about the political pressure put on Davies and the threats of violence made against him should he rule in favor of integration. But Davies bravely held his ground and followed the law.

First of all, telling a story about the civil rights movement through the lens of a white judge is a hell of a choice. But, as we saw with Roberts's decision to gut the Voting Rights Act in *Shelby County v. Holder*, it's not unusual for him to understand the law from the perspective of the white people who make the rules, instead of the Black people who demand justice.

More important, it would be foolish to think that Roberts brought up the history of desegregation by coincidence. Conservatives have long made the argument that overruling *Roe v. Wade* is the kind of bold revocation of precedent that aligns with the court's decision to overturn the segregationist ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. No matter that *Brown* restored constitutional rights

secured for Black people under the 14th Amendment, while *Dobbs* revoked a constitutional protection given to women and pregnant people. In the conservative mind, *Brown* and *Dobbs* are linked, and in both cases, unelected, unaccountable judges are the heroes for standing tall against the popular will.

Having set the stage with this narrative, Roberts pivots to the theme of this year's report, judicial security—which is to say, the safety of the country's judges. He highlights the Daniel Aderl Judicial Security and Privacy Act, which was passed in response to the horrible attack on District Judge Esther Salas, in which a gunman went to her home and killed her son, Daniel Aderl. This law prohibits the sale of judges' personal information by data brokers and allows judges to redact such information from federal websites.

It's a good law, but an observant reader could well see the *Dobbs* decision lurking in the background—again. There were significant protests following the *Dobbs* ruling, including demonstrations outside the homes of both Roberts and alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh. While Congress couldn't be bothered to pass a bill restoring the rights the Supreme Court stripped away, it did act quickly to throw more security the justices' way. And since then, there have been calls to further "protect" the justices by making their financial dealings (and those of their spouses) even less transparent, a move that seems designed more to hide the flow of money to the justices, and their dealings with potential influencers, than to protect their physical safety.

For his part, Roberts appears to support these measures to further insulate the justices from the people they rule over. He closes with: "A judicial system cannot and should not live in fear. The events of Little Rock teach about the importance of rule by law instead of by mob."

Spare me. If we read Roberts as taking a not-so-veiled swipe at the *Dobbs* protesters, then this just feels wrong. It feels wrong to reduce the 61 percent of Americans who think that abortion should be legal, or the 56 percent of Americans who believe the Supreme Court got it wrong in *Dobbs*, to the "mob." Roberts's is the kind of cloistered and elitist way of thinking that comes from a lifetime appointment and a commitment to minority rule.

Moreover, as so often happens when he retells American history, Roberts gets the core lesson of the Little Rock Nine wrong. Their story is not one about the triumph of the rule of law; it's a story about how useless the law and the courts

**As so often happens  
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really are without the might of the military propping them up. Little Rock was not integrated because Judge Davies stood his ground; Little Rock was integrated because President Dwight D. Eisenhower stood his ground and sent men with guns to Arkansas to enforce the court's ruling.

The great irony of Roberts's parable about the heroic dedication of federal judges, then, is that it offers precisely the opposite lesson: It shows how powerless judges are when they are not perceived as legitimate by the other branches of govern-

**Roberts's parable about the heroic dedication of federal judges offers precisely the opposite lesson.**

ment or by the people themselves. And it's that very legitimacy that Roberts and his conservative friends have traded away in their extremist rush to unmake the progress of the 20th century. The Roberts court is one that ignores precedent and makes up facts to suit its agenda, and regularly grants special access to lobbyists and religious fundamentalists looking to push *their* agendas through the court. The Roberts-led judicial system does not live in fear. It lives in the muck.

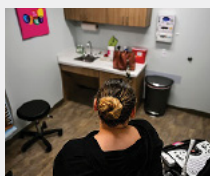
This year, Roberts portrayed himself standing athwart history, yelling "stop"—while completely naked. Most people won't notice, and most of those who do won't tell him, because at this point Roberts and his merry band of archconservative wizards seem allergic to the truth. **N**



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MARY DRUMMER

## Subject to Debate Katha Pollitt



### Artistic License

*Controversy over a painting of Muhammad shown in a college art class points to our troubled relationship with religion.*

**I**HAD NEVER HEARD OF HAMLINE, A SMALL PRIVATE LIBERAL arts university in St. Paul, Minn., until it burst into the headlines after a fracas over a picture of the Prophet Muhammad. In brief, Erika López Prater, an adjunct professor of art history, showed a celebrated 14th-century Persian miniature in her online class, having prepared her students ahead of time. Prater warned them in the

syllabus that pictures of holy personages, including Muhammad, would be shown. (No one complained, she says.) She introduced the class by talking about the history of such images, which some but not all Muslims regard as blasphemous, and inviting anyone who didn't want to see it to turn off their video. No one did, but after class, Aram Wedatalla, a business major and head of the Muslim Student Association, complained to the administration.

In an e-mail to students, David Everett, the university's vice president of inclusive excellence, described showing the picture as "undeniably inconsiderate, disrespectful and Islamophobic." In an e-mail to faculty, Everett and Hamline president Fayneese Miller wrote that "respect for the observant Muslim students in that classroom should have superseded academic freedom." López Prater was told she would not be rehired for the next semester. After a national uproar with assists from PEN America, the ACLU, and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, Muslim organizations weighing in on both sides, and a looming lawsuit from López Prater, the administration backed down. ("Like all organizations, sometimes we misstep.")

In a better world, Hamline would be famous for other things, such as the fact that 40 percent of its undergraduates received Pell Grants (government funding for low-income students) in the 2020–21 academic year. That warmed my heart. Nationally, for public and private colleges, only 33.6 percent of students received Pells in 2020, and, according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the rate is much lower among private colleges. At Oberlin, one of the most left-leaning campuses in the country, only 8.4 percent of students have them. In a better world, we'd also pay more attention to the fact that in 2021 Hamline eliminated its art history major, part of the general starvation of the humanities happening throughout higher education. Still, here we are. I have questions.

Have we really reached the stage where accusations of blasphemy can get a professor fired? Seriously, blasphemy? In a secular college? In the United States? What century is this? When it comes to being offended on religious grounds, anyone can play the game. A Catholic student can accuse his history professor of bigotry for speaking with insufficient respect for the doctrine of papal infallibility. A fundamentalist Protestant can insist that a

biology professor accept an exam answer claiming that dinosaurs and humans coexisted. A Jewish foreign-relations student can insist on an A for a paper claiming that God gave Jews the land of Israel. Left meets right; deference to religion meets the cult of My Feelings.

Speaking of critical thinking, can we stop applying the word “Islamophobia” indiscriminately? “Phobia” is a psychological term that means irrational fear. If you think a Muslim family moving into your neighborhood means tomorrow you’ll be living under sharia law, that’s Islamophobia. Back in 2015, a Texas high school had 14-year-old Ahmed Mohamed arrested as a bomb maker after he proudly showed his teacher a clock he’d made out of a pencil case. That was Islamophobia. It is not Islamophobic to publicly doubt that Muhammad flew to heaven and back on a magical horselike creature or to conclude that the Quran is the work of human beings, not the direct word of God. The same thought process applies to Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Greek myth. Islam is a religion like other religions, and as such should be open to critique and

**It’s hardly racist or bigoted to believe we have the right not to live according to religious beliefs we don’t share.**

dispute. It’s hardly racist or bigoted to believe we have the right not to live according to religious beliefs we don’t share. That would be true even if every single Muslim who ever lived had banned depictions of Muhammad, which they haven’t. In fact, the miniature in question was painted by a Muslim artist for a Muslim ruler.

One of the problems with the way we think about diversity is to assume vulnerable social groups are monolithic and not themselves diverse. Islam is the world’s second-largest religion, and it’s centuries old—the beliefs of some individuals within it shouldn’t be mistaken for

the whole. Some of the strongest critiques of Hamline’s attack on academic freedom have come from Muslims. After the local branch of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the premier Muslim American civil rights organization, accused López Prater of engaging in “hate speech,” the national office issued a statement on the incident that defended her, as did the Muslim Public Affairs Council. “Nothing could be more devotional to Mohammed than depicting him at the very moment of the birth of the religion of Islam,” the journalist Hisham Melhem wrote at ForeignPolicy.com.

Among the Muslim academics defending López Prater was Lake Forest College professor Ahmad Sadri, who wrote in the *Dallas Morning News* that he was offended not just as a scholar of Muslim history but “as a practicing Muslim who loves the Persian visual tradition of illumination and miniature painting. A global understanding of Islam is impossible in absence of the Islamic art, mysticism and poetry that includes portrayals of the Prophet.” On *Al Jazeera*’s website, the Rutgers law professor Sahar Aziz argued that the real problem is “the systematic adjunction of university faculty.” Untenured faculty on short contracts are now the norm, and their relative powerlessness promotes the mentality that the customer—i.e., the student—is always right, especially at struggling institutions like Hamline.

López Prater showed kindness in preparing her students so carefully, not that it mattered. But where does it end? Art history is full of disturbing imagery. Torture, brutality, murder, war, rapes, anti-Semitism and racism and misogyny galore. We need—students need—to look at art in all its beauty and horror and humanity and complexity if we are ever to understand ourselves.

Maybe the best thing that could come out of the Hamline controversy would be for the university to bring back the art history major, and have the administrators audit it. **N**

## In the News/The Editors

# Harvard’s Reversal

On January 5, in a rigorously researched article by Michael Massing, *The Nation* reported that Ken Roth, the former head of Human Rights Watch for over two decades, had been rejected for a resident fellowship at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Carr Center for Human Rights Policy.

The reason: Human Rights Watch—and Roth—had an “anti-Israel bias.”

Or at least that’s what the Kennedy School’s dean, economist Douglas Elmendorf, told stunned Carr Center faculty when they asked why he was vetoing their choice rather than routinely approving it, as he had always done in the past. (Roth had been recruited by the Carr Center.)



Massing’s article raised important questions about Harvard’s commitment to academic freedom, the behind-the-scenes power of its donors, the meaning of diversity, the chilling effect of the school’s decision on junior faculty, and American (and American Jewish) feelings about Israel—and its increasingly right-wing government. The article was an indictment of a powerful institution and its wealthy donors.

After it was published, the ACLU, PEN America, Americans for Peace Now—and, unexpectedly, former Harvard president Larry Summers—swiftly condemned the Kennedy School’s action and called for its reversal. *The Boston Globe*’s editorial board excoriated the university, and 19 Harvard student groups condemned

Elmendorf’s decision and called for his resignation. The story has been picked up by a growing number of media outlets in the United States and worldwide and has gone viral on social media.

Elmendorf maintained his silence. And then, on January 19, *The New York Times* reported that Harvard reversed course. In an e-mail to the Kennedy School community, Elmendorf said his decision had been an “error” and that the school would be extending an invitation to Roth, who noted that “penalizing people for criticizing Israel is hardly limited to me.” *The Nation* commends Harvard’s decision and celebrates the power of independent accountability journalism. Read Massing’s report at [TheNation.com/harvardroth](https://www.thenation.com/harvardroth). **N**



# Should We Start Preparing for the Evacuation of Miami?

## Yes!

DANIEL ALDANA COHEN

## No!

SAMANTHA SCHUYLER

**T**HE MIAMI-DADE COUNTY GOVERNMENT has some clever mapping tools to help people visualize the impending climate risks—rising seas, swelling groundwater, flooded buildings. But too much detail can distract from the bigger picture: Miami is drowning. In 2020, a report from the climate think tank Resources for the Future declared Miami the most vulnerable major coastal city in the world.

Of course, the city's future is uncertain—we don't know quite how much sea-level rise we can still prevent or how well we'll adapt in place. When I visited a few years ago to talk with people about climate change, many told me that they were sick of outsiders parachuting in to tell them they're screwed. I get that. And yet in the coming decades, many of the county's 2.6 million residents will leave. Maybe most of them.

Preparing for Miami's evacuation would help them immeasurably. Just as important, it would force municipalities across the United States to get serious about hosting climate migrants in egalitarian ways.

Climate conversations about moving out of harm's way often use the concept of "managed retreat." People debate how to help communities stay or leave and how governments should buy out groups of vulnerable homeowners. Sometimes tenants get a mention. But the bigger challenge is managed arrival: building huge quantities of green, climate-friendly housing in existing urban and suburban spaces while reconstructing communities to feel even more like home.

The scale will be vast. Matt Hauer, a climate demographer at Florida State University, has shown that millions of Americans will be displaced by rising seas this century, largely from South Florida. Millions already live in areas threatened by wildfire. Even more face a future of unimaginable heat and drought. And worldwide, countless people will flee a "catastrophic convergence" of violence, poverty, and climate change. Much of that can be traced to American imperialism and carbon. In the US, we should aspire to resettle tens of millions of climate migrants in the coming decades.

No one knows how to do this. At a minimum, it will take massive investments in social housing, public transit, community infrastructure like green schools, and unionized care workers to support people living well amid traumatic change.

**T**HE QUIP IS TIRED; WE FLORIDIANS have all heard it. It's the one that goes "Why not just let Florida get swallowed up by the sea?" First, if you haven't recently battled a palmetto bug or nonchalantly kayaked around a gator, shove off; and second, because Florida—Miami especially—could and should be at the vanguard of climate adaptation.

Climate change has already transformed South Florida. "Sunny day floods"—when tides rise at least 1.75 feet higher than average without rain and force water up through storm drains, flooding roads—are happening four times as often as they did in the early 2000s. The rising water table has burst pipes in Fort Lauderdale's sewage system, spilling millions of gallons of raw sewage into the streets. Seawater rise is overtaking the salinity controls in freshwater canals, threatening the potable water. Algal blooms are triggering mass die-offs of sea life and spreading toxins through the air and drinking water.

None of these problems are unique to South Florida. But because the region is on the front line of climate change in the wealthiest country in the world, its handling of these threats can set the tone and timeline for global efforts. Any city's successful experiments in climate action can inspire others, but Miami, with its resources and international status, can be an especially crucial model for the world. As the investigative journalist Mario Ariza writes in *Disposable City: Miami's Future on the Shores of Climate Catastrophe*, "Much hinges on how well—or how poorly—the City of Miami sets an example for managing the problem."

Shortsighted, surface-level adaptations aren't going to save metropolises like Miami; we need to reimagine coastal living. The United Nations estimates that over 1 billion people live in low-lying cities vulnerable to coast-specific climate hazards.

Miami, therefore, has a lot of work to do. So far, the metro area's attempts at resiliency have been green-lighted and financed in such a halting, disjointed, and uncoordinated way that they have resulted in a faulty patchwork of projects. Several schemes to elevate roads in Miami Beach, for instance, did not account for the surrounding properties' drainage capacity, resulting, ironically, in flooded homes. Miami is not even adequately prepared for its most obvious extreme weather threat—rain. The city can

The Debate

And yet, right now, the US doesn't have a just—or even functional—policy for immigrants and refugees. It's still struggling to support Indigenous communities facing displacement from environmental calamities caused by colonial settlers. And the US has handled domestic movements for freedom terribly. In the last century, the emancipatory promise of the Great Migration was savagely curtailed by segregation and mass incarceration. Leading sociologists and scholars of environmental injustice called this racial violence a form of apartheid. Today, a surge in climate displacement threatens to deepen this eco-apartheid.

Miami reveals what's coming. There, community groups, backed by scholarly research, have identified a pattern of “climate gentrification”: developers moving into communities of color that are safer from the effects of climate change, like the historically Black neighborhood of Little Haiti, which sits on higher ground. MacKenzie Marcelin, the climate justice manager at the progressive group Florida Rising, told me that in Miami's working-class communities, climate displacement is a distant worry. “Folks are being pushed out of the areas where they've lived for decades,” he said. “And where do displaced people tend to go? Areas that are affordable but more prone to flooding.”

The organizers and community members that Marcelin works with are focused on the struggle to stay put with dignity. We should support them. We need anti-displacement protections for tenants paired with green investments in their homes and communities. We must also recognize that Little Haitis will

be appearing countrywide, as rich climate migrants push people out to build their emerald enclaves. The wealthy aren't waiting for public permission to plan their next moves.

It's urgent for governments and social movements to start planning for millions of people to land in new places. Prepping Miami's evacuation is a perfect starting point. Its residents are a multiracial, multinational, and multigenerational assemblage that spans the class spectrum. Tragically, many of them are already climate migrants—like Puerto Ricans displaced by recent hurricanes. If cities around the country were forced to plan how they'd integrate arriving Miamians into communities flush with public green investment, they'd get a head start on planning for climate migration generally. This would also trigger conversations about zoning for density, enshrining tenant rights, upgrading infrastructure, taxing the rich, building green banks, and battling racism and police violence.

We can't build a multiracial working-class movement against eco-apartheid by playing defense. The wealthy are on the march. We need to beat them to the higher ground. **N**

*Daniel Aldana Cohen is an assistant professor of sociology at UC Berkeley and the director of the Socio-Spatial Climate Collaborative.*

< ALDANA COHEN

> SCHUYLER

## The Debate

withstand up to three inches of precipitation per hour before the pumps fail and the city is flooded. We've seen a series of hurricanes far exceed that: Harvey, Emily, Imelda. And projections indicate that storms are only intensifying.

One major problem is that Miami's finances are yoked to continued development. Even managed-retreat efforts have been thwarted by developers: A 2019 program, supported by millions in government grants, to buy out areas in Miami that frequently flood was dissolved after developers purchased the targeted properties and began new construction projects. Because there is no state income tax, public works are largely funded through property taxes—resulting in a self-defeating cycle that was compounded by a recent decision by the city to cut taxes to the lowest they've been since the 1960s.

Before we give up on Miami, we should focus on fighting real estate interests, which threaten progress nationwide. Developers and landlords often undermine the changes needed to adapt to climate perils, from wildfires to droughts. Unraveling their political influence in Florida could allow the region to build a functioning public transit system, which will get carbon-spewing cars off the streets. The state needs to restore wetlands and mangrove forests—and rely less on the engineered solutions like seawalls and bulkheads preferred by the companies that construct them. Natural barriers are cheaper and more effective. Prioritizing protection and restoration offers a short-term defense against storm surges and the long-term benefits of carbon sequestration. This may entail relocating people who live directly on the shoreline and restoring the land they leave behind to its natural ecosystems. But it doesn't mean abandoning the whole city.

Of course, Miami residents can't do this if they are held hostage by the state government. In 2021, as Governor Ron DeSantis touted his commitment to conservation, he signed into law SB 1128/HB 919, which prevents local governments from, among other things, pursuing a 100 percent clean energy strategy. The legislation has prevented Tampa from doing just that. For Miami to survive, the state must allow the city to help itself.

At some point, if South Florida doesn't change its approach to navigating climate change, evacuation will be necessary. But by withdrawing from Miami too soon, we will lose a vibrant city that could have become a training ground for learning how to adapt to the planet's future. It's not just South Florida that is facing climate catastrophe; it's Los Angeles, New York City, Mumbai, and many other places. Tremendous human effort created Miami, and if we act soon, that kind of effort can save it too—and show the world how it's done. **N**

*Samantha Schuyler is The Nation's research director and a proud Floridian.*

**It's urgent for governments to start planning for millions of people to land in new places.**

**By withdrawing from Miami too soon we lose a vibrant city that could have become a training ground.**



# Americans Can Finally Have Hair So Thick... “It Will Cover Up Your Bald Spots,” Says Top US Doctor

**Clinical trials show new hair loss breakthrough helps both men and women naturally renourish hair – without drugs, surgery, or side effects**

Thousands are rushing to get a new hair restoration method based on surprising new studies from the University of California.

It is the world's first and only hair loss solution that revives dead hair follicles. And studies confirm it helps men and women regrow a thick, full head of hair, even after years of balding.

Now, with news of this breakthrough spreading like wildfire — the manufacturers are struggling to keep up with overwhelming demand.

That's because, unlike other methods, it is prescription-free, drug-free, and has no side effects. And while hair transplants can cost \$4,000 or more, this new approach costs pennies on the dollar and doesn't involve going to the doctor's office.

Instead, it leverages cutting-edge technology to prevent hair loss, fills in embarrassing bald spots, and **Re-Nourishes** thinning hair — with results you can see and feel in 30 days or less.

As Jeanne F. from San Diego, CA reports: “When my husband began to use this product, all he had on top of his head was fuzz. His hair began to grow after 30 days and now it is about 2 to 3 inches long!”

## Surprising Truth About Hair Loss

It is commonly believed that hair loss is hereditary.

Unfortunately, most people think there is nothing they can do to stop it. However, while many doctors will tell you that thinning hair, a receding hairline, and bald spots are due to your genetics, this is not the whole story.

“While genetics play a role, it's not the main reason you lose hair,” says Dr. Al Sears, the nation's top anti-aging doctor. “And surprisingly it's not just your age, thyroid, hormones, stress, or a vitamin deficiency, either.”

The latest scientific research reveals that hair loss is primarily caused by the stem cells in your hair follicles dying.

“This discovery is a true breakthrough because by reviving these stem cells on your scalp, you can stop hair loss dead in its tracks and trigger new hair growth, even in areas that have been thinning for years,” explains Dr. Sears.

Now, at his world-famous clinic, the Sears Institute for Anti-Aging Medicine

in Palm Beach, Florida, Dr. Sears and his team have used this game-changing discovery to develop a brand-new hair restoration formula that is taking the country by storm.

Sold under the name **Re-Nourish**, it is flying off the shelves with men and women of all ages raving about the results it delivers.

“I have seen a significant improvement in hair growth. Previously, you could see thinning areas at the back of my head and now hair has grown over it,” says Peter W. from Ontario, Canada.

And Susan D. from Fort Pierce, Florida reports, “My hair was thinning. So, I began to use **Re-Nourish** every day on the front part of my scalp. Now I have thicker hair.”

## Appearance of Thick Hair In As Little As 30 Days

Scientists now know that stem cells are the lifeblood of your hair follicles.

Research from the University of California shows they're the reason you're able to grow hair. However, these stem cells aren't always active. In fact, studies reveal they're only active during certain phases of the hair growth cycle.

“Your hair grows in three phases,” explains Dr. Sears. “First, you have the anagen phase, the hair growing phase. Then the catagen phase, when hair gets ready to shed. And finally, the telogen phase, where your hair is pushed from the follicle and falls out.”

As you get older it becomes harder for your hair follicles to complete this three-phase cycle. The results? Your hairs get stuck in the telogen phase. This is when they start falling out and stop regrowing, no matter what you try.

This process doesn't happen overnight, says Dr. Sears.

“At first, your hair dries out, becoming brittle, thin, and harder to style. Then, you start finding hairs on your pillow and down the drain. Finally, you're left with bald spots that age you prematurely.”

Fortunately, **Re-Nourish** puts a stop to this. It revives the dead stem cells in your hair follicles and reactivates your hair's three-phase cycle, triggering new growth in as little as 30 days — even in areas that've been balding for years.



**Breakthrough research proves this discovery helps fill in bald spots, renourishes thinning hair, and leads to the appearance of noticeable growth in as little as 30 days.**

## Reawakens Dead Hair Follicles

For years, scientists couldn't figure out why hair follicle stem cells died.

However, a study from the University of California finally found the answer.

It has to do with T-cells — an important immune cell in your body. The researchers discovered these T-cells are the only way to command hair follicles to grow new hair.

More importantly, they showed that T-cells helped revive the stem cells in your hair follicles — spurring new growth, filling in bald spots and natural hairline.

**Re-Nourish** uses a unique blend of all-natural ingredients. By spraying it on your hair once per day, scientific studies show you can revive dead stem cells and improve the appearance of thicker, fuller hair.

For example, the key nutrient of **Re-Nourish** was tested on a group of severely balding women.

After 6 months, nearly 70% of the women saw significant improvement in hair growth. Their hair was noticeably fuller, thicker, and healthier looking. Most exciting of all, they grew new hair on parts of their scalp that had been bald for years.

In another study, Italian researchers gathered a group of both men and women with thinning hair and applied the core ingredient of **Re-Nourish**. After

12 weeks, they reported a staggering 74% increase in hair growth.

“It's really mind-boggling that my hair started growing back,” says Zan R., another **Re-Nourish** customer.

With results like this, it's no surprise that demand for **Re-Nourish** is soaring. Thousands of men and women are scrambling to get their hands on the limited supply available.

**Re-Nourish** is not currently available in any store at any price. But we've secured a small batch for our readers.

## Try Re-Nourish 100% Risk-Free

For a limited time only, Dr. Sears is offering readers a risk-free trial of **Re-Nourish**.

“It's not available in retail stores yet,” says Dr. Sears. “The Hotline allows us to ship directly to the customer.” Dr. Sears feels so strongly about this product that he is backing every order with a risk-free, 100% money-back guarantee. To take advantage of this special offer, simply call the Sears Toll-Free Health Hotline at **1-800-291-7232** now. Use Promo Code **NATRN223** when you call.

[EDITOR'S NOTE]: Due to recent media exposure for **Re-Nourish**, Pure Radiance is experiencing unprecedented demand. If the phone line is busy when you call, please try again to avoid missing this exclusive one-time-only offer.

# Déjà

BY CHRIS LEHMANN

Today's most dangerous conspiracy theory is the latest in a long line of American paranoid fantasies.

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HE FIRST ACT OF KEVIN MCCARTHY'S TENURE AS house speaker was decidedly ominous: In the early hours of January 7, 2023, he posed for a congratulatory selfie with Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, a far-right GOP colleague notorious for her early professions of faith in the shape-shifting hard-right movement known as QAnon. As she has moved closer to the centers of D.C. power, Greene has downplayed her past Q affiliation, blaming it on excessive Internet engagement. But her equivocations don't explain away her other conspiratorialist and insurrectionist sympathies. Greene has since threatened in an online meme to gun down members of the left-wing Democratic "Squad" in Congress, and she recently introduced Steve Bannon at a Young Republicans event as someone who, along with Greene herself, would have ensured that "we would have won" on January 6, in no small part because the insurrection "would have been armed."

Greene's alliance with the new House speaker is just one facet of her mainstream makeover: She is now angling to make the short list of prospective vice-presidential nominees for Donald Trump's 2024 presidential run. The establishment embrace of Greene is a parable of sorts for the QAnon movement itself, which in little more than six years has sprouted from a shitposting account on the "dark web" of the conspiracy-minded right to a global movement of militant—and increasingly violent—confrontation with the putative forces of liberal globalism, child predation, and satanic power-mongering. Like Greene, QAnon has gone from a vaguely shameful outlying force steeped in unfounded digital speculation to a hiding-in-plain-sight feature of right-wing organizing and messaging. Both the representative from Georgia and the Q movement at large deployed a welter of canny mainstreaming tactics to align themselves with a conservative movement that has long outgrown the distinction between "fringe" and "mainstream."

From last fall's attack on Nancy Pelosi's husband to the occupation of federal buildings in Brazil's capital by Jair Bolsonaro's supporters, QAnon supplies the running spiritual soundtrack to the mood of all-

or-nothing apocalyptic confrontation on the right. It's a puzzling escalation of force for a belief system that began life as a string of anonymous posts on a discussion board claiming to chronicle a pedophilic cabal at the summit of global liberal power. The right's overt and fervent embrace of the QAnon faith is roughly analogous to what would have transpired had, say, Ronald Reagan, at the height of his political influence in the mid-1980s, teamed up with notorious global-cabal-monger Lyndon LaRouche, who wouldn't hesitate to blame the Trilateral Commission and the queen of England for the death of his dog.

This juxtaposition also conjures the deeper problem with the QAnon movement: Its core tenets are so plainly outlandish, and its most prominent adherents, like Greene, so flamboyantly cracked, that it's hard to understand the Q-inflected polity as anything other than a particularly bitter joke aimed at the Enlightenment rationalist conceits of American liberalism—a shitposting hack of our governing software somehow gone dementedly global and viral. But the tenets of Q belief run deep in the American grain.

America has a long history of conspiracy-theory-based movements that initially seem too unhinged to take











## Fifteen percent of Americans—roughly 30 million people—indicated genuine assent to the core dogmas of QAnon.

**Friends in high places:** Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene takes a selfie with new House speaker Kevin McCarthy.

is the digital offspring of the Tea Party movement and birtherism—militant, conspiracy-theory-steeped uprisings that began on the right fringe to similar choruses of dismissal from traditional political gatekeepers and steadily grew into mass mobilizations behind the Trump presidency.

“The very first time I heard of QAnon, an academic colleague had pulled up a chart showing all these arrows and lines of influence, and I was amazed how similar it was to the apocalyptic charts from the late 19th-century millennial movements,” says Matthew Avery Sutton, a historian at Washington State University and the author of *American Apocalypse*, a landmark study of Protestant millennialism. Sutton notes that QAnon’s origins in the shit-posting world of right-wing discussion boards call to mind other paranoid turns in the country’s past that drew on mass hatreds and religious bigotry to fuel their sense of millennial certainty: “There are parallels here with things like the Illuminati, the anti-Masonics, or the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. There have always been these things that are sort of secular but sort of not. They offer something secular people can buy into but religious people can also buy into. It works both ways.”

**P**LACING QANON IN THE CONTEXT OF MILLENNIAL PROTESTANT BELIEF means reckoning with it as something that never really qualified as especially fringe in the first place. To begin with, it involves bypassing the loaded term “cult”—typically a designation for belief systems that spend their full lifespans on the margins of respectable religious observance. “‘Cult’ is a hot word; that’s why people use it a lot,” says Jared Holt, a resident fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, who has

seriously. But amid a wide-ranging distrust of traditional sources of public authority, they have come to acquire a perverse sort of legitimacy for a segment of the citizenry clinging to dogmatic skepticism of a hostile, faithless, and nonwhite social world. The pattern goes back to the nation’s founding: As historians like Bernard Bailyn have documented, the Revolutionary-era mindset of colonial revolt against the crown was steeped in lurid fantasies of the organized British defilement of Protestant virtue. Nineteenth-century anti-Catholic fantasies of libertine monks and priests sexually violating white Protestant women took root in anonymous pamphlets—the bygone equivalent of an Internet discussion board—before burgeoning into mass nativist political movements under the direction of the Anti-Masonic and Know-Nothing parties. Reagan himself, while no LaRouchite, was an enthusiast of end-times speculation and its signature theme of noble Protestant innocence besieged—a

fact that the president’s advisers jealously guarded from the public at a point in Cold War hostilities when the genuine threat of nuclear apocalypse didn’t need a spiritual imprimatur from the leader of the free world.

Against this historical backdrop, QAnon’s apocalyptic fever dreams are less the disease than a symptom—one among countless recent augurs of severe democratic decline and fascist ascension in America. In a more immediate sense, QAnon

followed QAnon from the movement’s inception six years ago on the discussion boards of the “dark web.” But cults tend to pivot around a single strong and charismatic personality—and apart from Trump’s opportunistic flirtations with the Q faithful, the movement is leaderless. Its namesake prophet—a supposed high-placed national security insider in Washington who boasts a “Q”-level security clearance—appears not to exist, and whoever may be impersonating him has long since gone silent.

What’s more, Q adherents don’t necessarily follow the strict preachments and proscriptions of a ritualized submission to delusional practices, as in the Jonestown cult of the 1970s or the Heaven’s Gate cult of the ’90s. Instead, the movement courts and accommodates all sorts of doctrinal innovations from its online base—and in this way echoes the creative syncretism of such counter-hierarchical millennialist movements as early Mormonism and Pentecostalism.

In terms of scale, QAnon is unlike a cult for a counterintuitive reason: It’s too big. Polls generally record broad public sympathy with QAnon at the astonishing rate of 20 percent, according to Will Sommer, a reporter for *The Daily Beast* and the author of *Trust the Plan: The Rise of QAnon and the Conspiracy That Unbinged America*. “When you ask how many subscribe to specific beliefs of QAnon, it’s between 3 and 12 percent. I was talking with someone about the 12 percent figure, and they said, ‘Well, that’s not that much.’ But, you know, that’s millions

and millions of people,” he says. Indeed, a 2021 poll from the Public Religion Research Institute found that 20 percent of Americans—roughly 30 million people—went beyond general sympathy, indicating genuine assent to the core dogmas of QAnon, such as faith in “the storm” as a grisly moment of apocalyptic reckoning for satanic, child-violating liberals. That’s more than the Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu populations of the country combined.

Q followers also make up a sizable portion of the white Protestant evangelical community—the most hard-line pro-Trump demographic in the country. Alongside QAnon’s boom in recruitment during the Covid pandemic, the movement has entered the vanguard of Protestant congregations that furnish frontline culture warriors for the religious right. “My parents, they’re still regular churchgoers,” Sutton says. “When they had





people in their congregation explaining QAnon to them like true believers, my parents thought it was batshit crazy. I didn't know that it had penetrated the evangelical churches to that degree."

The QAnon-evangelical alliance was another nascent feature of the emerging Trump coalition that was always hiding in plain sight. Since the rise of the religious right to political influence in the late 1970s, GOP leaders have courted prominent preachers and denominational leaders for institutional support; this was yet another traditional Republican political norm that Trump short-circuited. "What Trump figured out about the Christian right that no Republican understood before him—he realized he didn't need the A-list preachers," says Jeff Sharlet, the author of the forthcoming book *The Undertow: Scenes From a Slow Civil War*. "Paula White was not an A-list in any sense," Sharlet adds, referring to the Pentecostal prosperity minister who allegedly presided over Trump's rushed election-season evangelical conversion in 2016. "And that's what QAnon is—it's the Christian right for people who don't want to go to church very often. YouTube is their church."

**T**HE EXTREMELY ONLINE ORIGINS OF the QAnon movement on platforms like the late far-right discussion board 8chan are central to how it formulates and distributes its gospel. The movement's intensely digital profile ensures that the steady drumbeat of failed Q prophecies are rapidly discarded and replaced with minimum fuss—and little cognitive dissonance. Without missing a beat, Q believers eagerly translated the gnomish pronouncements of their James Bond-monikered prophet into a prediction that this or that senior liberal cabal member was about to be arrested and executed, or that Trump would be restored to the presidency after the fraudulent 2020 presidential balloting was exposed once and for all. After each forecast failed, the movement simply went off in search of wilder speculative fodder—hence the rapidly multiplying subset of Q delusions, such as the belief that John F. Kennedy Jr. and/or Sr. are still among the living and are poised to return to power in an end-times cloud of glory.

"Since Q is primarily an online movement made up of people who don't use their real names, there's no accountability if predictions go wrong," Holt says. "Are you going to post into the abyss at 8chan and demand an apology from Q? Maybe you can get mad at an influencer, but people are always getting mad at influencers. Also, online audiences unfortunately have goldfish brain. It's very easy to forget that someone sold you a failed prophecy and then go back a week later to the same influencer."



Digital rhetoric can also give a failed prophecy retroactive cover. Instead of appearing to pivot on unfounded speculation, the disappointed forecasts of Q and his following have functioned as a canny form of trolling, devised to confound and misdirect the lackeys of the deep state. "The people who followed Q in the earlier iterations, they called themselves 'digital warriors,'" Holt says. "So if you revisit the failed prophecy from the lens of these people thinking they're in a war, it's something quite different."

"In war, disinformation gets used as a weapon," Holt continues, noting how various military cliques in the Afghan war were able to generate panicked flight among civilian populations with phony images of heavy artillery about to be trained on them. "So if they think they're engaging in this movement as a war, that gives everything a different meaning. Some Q posts contain the phrase 'disinformation is necessary'—you get these things out there to throw off the media and the researchers looking into the movement."

Another, more diffuse mark of QAnon's digital birthright is its steady stream of curiously self-aware wisecracking. Thanks to the movement's roots in the world of digital shitposting, QAnon's characteristic modes of expression still carry a strong undertone of self-undercutting irony—an improbable rhetorical tic for a movement announcing the onset of the apocalypse. "Humor is almost always an element," Sharlet says. "If you ever listen to a Q podcast, they experience themselves as knowing and funny.... If you roam around the Net, you see Q accounts making memes and jokes—that's what they do." The memes that online posters—including one Donald J. Trump—have sent coursing through the Internet abound with kitschy Marvel-style imagery of ultra-buff strongman leadership, while a Q-offshoot group called Negative48 announces itself by blaring the Elvis Presley song "Suspicious Minds" at Trump rallies.

Indeed, the best-known Q adherent—apart from political figures like Greene and retired general Michael Flynn—is the comedian Roseanne Barr. Barr's prime-time ABC sitcom was canceled in 2018 after she posted a racist tweet about Obama White House adviser Valerie Jarrett; before that, she

**MAGA multitude:**  
A supporter raises  
a "Q" sign at a  
Trump rally in  
Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

**"That's what QAnon is—it's the Christian right for people who don't want to go to church very often."**

—Jeff Sharlet



had staged a tasteless, purportedly satiric photo shoot in which she sported a Nazi armband and Hitler mustache while preparing to place a sheet of human-shaped cookies into an oven. Around the time of her attack on Jarrett, Barr was also eagerly tweeting requests for QAnon updates and intel.

**T**HIS FIRST-TIME-COMEDY, SECOND-TIME-FASCISM TRAJECTORY WAS A pronounced motif in the mobilization of another precursor movement to QAnon: the alt-right. The white nationalist Proud Boys brigade was founded by former *Vice* media impresario Gavin McInnes—an allegedly market-savvy ironic provocateur and pop-culture-branding wizard who proved adept at fascist shitposting long before 8chan was a malevolent gleam in the Internet’s eye. The rise of Gamergate—the ugly and abusive misogynist attack on feminist critics of video game culture—was another viral inflection point for the alt-right’s move into the political limelight. Gamergate spilled over into real-world political discourse by employing many of the themes that would go on to define both Trumpism and Q adherence: an unapologetic embrace of rampant fabulizing and shitposting as badges of identity and belonging; an all-out campaign to demonize the press and political opponents as irredeemable agents of subversion and mortal threat; and an eagerness to escalate cultural and political grievances into violence.

**Pointing the way:** Pennsylvania Republican gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano signals to supporters at a rally.

**Trump has long flirted with QAnon’s twisted ideology, occasionally wearing a Q pin as a callout to the movement.**

All along, Steve Bannon—Trump’s former campaign manager and White House adviser, who forged the critical alliance between the alt-right and the Trump campaign—was taking notes. “He saw in Gamergate that you could mobilize these people,” says Viveca Greene, a professor of media studies at Hampshire College who has long tracked the intersection of irony and right-wing politics. “He helped bring on Milo Yiannopoulos—a gay man with a Black partner who never played a game in his life—and he somehow became their mascot.” This early foray into digital-native activism set the tone. “The alt-right realized that somehow they’d have to be more playful—more funny and edgy—than the people who came before them,” Greene adds. “In the same way that Bannon saw Gamergate as this opportunity, Trump is now courting the QAnon movement.”

Trump and QAnon appear all but made for each other. Trump’s mass appeal stems largely from an ethos of incessant political attack, one that permits the baldest sort of bigotry and exclusion to fester at the ideological foundation of his power cult—while also providing the luxury, at moments of overheated rhetoric and overtly authoritarian and violent release, to back away from it all as a joke that goes over the heads of righteous and humorless libs. Just as the historically humor-challenged evangelical right has found a surprisingly wide zone of accommodation with Trumpism, so has it absorbed the eliminationist fantasies of QAnon with nary a theological whimper.

Trump has indeed long flirted with QAnon’s twisted end-times ideology, recirculating Trump-centered Q memes on social media and occasionally wearing a Q pin as a callout to the movement. But the flirtation became much less coy at a rally for Ohio Republican candidates in September: Trump intoned a grim litany of putative Biden-inflicted injuries to the American nation over the movement’s unofficial anthem—a bathetic string-laden composition known alternately as “WWG1WGA” (for the movement’s motto, “Where We Go One, We Go All”) and “Mirrors,” essentially a Spotify version of the same song. (The provenance of this song is under dispute, but as with most things pulsating through the Internet and nearly all things Q, authenticity is very much beside the point.) Trump has also recently used his Truth Social account to elevate some of QAnon’s most extreme and apocalyptic memes and videos.

Trump’s ever more explicit benediction of the movement comes as QAnon is assuming a much more self-conscious political identity of its own. As with Bannon’s embrace of Gamergate, it’s an acknowledgment of a fusion of interests that’s already well underway. Juan O Savin—a Q-affiliated Internet troll—has launched a successful initiative to recruit hard-right candidates, most of whom are confirmed election deniers, for secretary of state or attorney general in five states. The Nevada GOP secretary of state candidate Jim Marchant says that Savin persuaded him to run at a hard-right conference devoted to political strategizing. Savin has also spent a good deal of time honing an (online and off-) impersonation of John F. Kennedy Jr., whose Q-anointed resurrection is on prophetic schedule to coincide with Trump’s restoration to the presidency. “The thing that’s fascinating to me is that with the exception of a few reporters, Savin has been totally ignored,” says Sommer, the *Daily Beast* reporter. While the Q-endorsed slate of election deniers largely came up short in the 2022 midterms, the precinct-level romance between MAGA and Q true believers seems likely to continue unabated, particularly with news organizations hard-pressed to supply in-depth



coverage to local and state primary races.

The political media's failure to track such movement-level figures is another asset that Q adherents and their allies have exploited throughout the Trump years. "I've dealt with this for five years now," Sommer says. "And you know, it's very similar to what led up to Trump's win: a real desire to not recognize what's happened to the GOP and its voters. After Trump lost the 2020 election, there was this chorus that said, 'Well, there's no way Q recovers from this.' And you check back like a month later and these guys are still at it. It's difficult, I think, to be a straightforward Beltway reporter and be forced to cover Marjorie Taylor Greene and keep saying, you know, 'She's aligned with all these crazy beliefs.' There's a real need to believe that the fever is breaking."

INSTEAD, THE FEVER IS SPREADING. NOT only is QAnon becoming more political; the Trump-led conservative movement is also becoming more explicitly religious in both form and content. The barnstorming ReAwaken America Tour that Michael Flynn and Roger Stone are headlining to protest ongoing public health measures to combat the Covid pandemic looks and feels like a revival crusade—right down to baptisms performed on-site for newly recruited true believers. The crusade has booked a rally stop at Trump's resort compound in Doral, Fla.—the same site that Trump tried, while president, to name as the venue for the 2019 G7 summit. The slate of speakers for the Doral rally includes two Q-aligned figures, one of whom professes to reveal that "a 1,400-year-old Satanic cabal controls the world."

Christian nationalist and Q-sympathetic political leaders like the failed Pennsylvania gubernatorial candidate Douglas Mastriano signal a militant, antidemocratic turn in religious-right campaigning and strategizing. Video and audio recordings released last September captured Mastriano praying for the MAGA forces of righteousness to "rise up with boldness" and "seize the power" just days before the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol—an event that was rife with Q symbolism and participants, since it promised to be the overture to the movement's long-awaited "storm" of cosmic judgment.

This convergence of right-wing religion and politics onto the same undifferentiated rites of tribal belonging is poised to lead the conser-

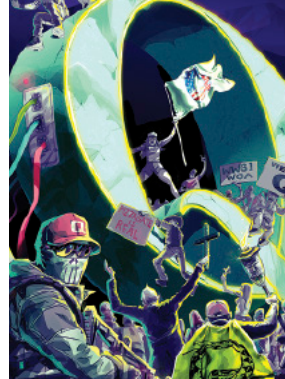
vative movement into strange new frontiers—not uncharted territory, by any means, but a departure from the path taken by prior millennialist movements in the United States. Ever since the original compact between the evangelical right and the traditional business establishment of the GOP launched the Reagan coalition, the restive ranks of end-times believers have hungered for an undiluted Revelation-based politics of the right. That longing arguably found its most sustained and potent expression in the blockbuster *Left Behind* series, apocalyptic thrillers written by the evangelical preacher Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, which revolved around an Antichrist firmly embedded in the deep state as the secretary general of the United Nations.

But with QAnon, that fantasy of end-times secession on the evangelical right seems to be coming to pass—albeit in ways that LaHaye himself would never have dared prophesy. For starters, the Q turn in millennial prophecy is aimed squarely at the seats of American power. "The interesting shift is that in all those previous Christian conspiracy theories, there was always an enemy ruling, but it was always outside the US," says Sutton, the historian of Protestant millennialism. "It was Rome, it was Hitler, it was Saddam Hussein during the first Iraq war. But now they're within the United States. And, obviously, I think that has a lot to do with electing Obama. You let a foreign Muslim become your president, and you're no longer Christian."

Then, of course, there's the core panic at the heart of the Q myth: the vilification of a political opposition with a blood libel—the irredeemably evil, nay demonic, drive to traffic, torture, and sexually violate children. That notion was mainstreamed during the peak of Covid in 2020, as the anodyne #SaveTheChildren hashtag permitted locked-down netizens to toggle back and forth between the world of nonprofit child-rescue initiatives and the lurid death chambers of Q-obsessed YouTube influencers. This mashup of moral panics, bizarrely enough, is now the stuff of Republican electoral consensus—even as some of its more fervid promoters, such as the unhinged former CBS News correspondent Lara Logan, continue forfeiting public platforms as they spread the Q gospel. "So much of the Q stuff has become the mainstream GOP position: that cabals steal elections, that Democrats want to exploit children," Sommer notes, referring to the various culture war crusades ginned

up around racially inclusive and gay- and trans-friendly curricula in public schools. "It's succeeded beyond all hopes, so that now it's become axiomatic on the right that Democrats are killing and sex-trafficking children."

And with that success come new reveries of influence—and perhaps that recurring fantasy of national secession. It might be that the appeal of Q-branded politics among evangelicals goes back "to feeling like the politicians they were supporting were always using them," Sutton says. "It could be that they sense they're big enough and powerful enough to declare independence."



**Not only is QAnon becoming more political; the Trump-led conservative movement is also becoming more explicitly religious.**

**Spreading the gospel:** Attendees are baptized at the ReAwaken America Tour at the Spooky Nook Sports Complex in Manheim, Pa.





# The Activist on the Inside

She's deep in the federal bureaucracy. And yet of all the members of Joe Biden's administration, Jennifer Abruzzo has arguably sparked the biggest changes for American workers.

BY **BRYCE COVERT**

**Shaking things up:** Jennifer Abruzzo, the general counsel of the National Labor Relations Board, "seems to think like an organizer," says urban studies professor Samir Sonti.



**T**HE GENERAL COUNSEL OF THE NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS BOARD, A federal agency founded in 1935 to protect the right of private employees to organize in order to improve their working conditions, doesn't come off as either a frumpy bureaucrat or a firebrand. Jennifer Abruzzo has the look and demeanor of a fun art teacher. Her shoulder-length curly hair and thin-rimmed glasses frame a face that could be 45 or 65 (she's 59). On the day I met her in her corner office, she was wearing a navy-blue jumpsuit with a green scarf in place of a tie and bright magenta nail polish. A bookshelf running along one wall is filled with huge accordion folders stuffed with papers, and a framed illustration of Ruth Bader Ginsburg displaying the words "Women belong in all places where decisions are being made" sits atop it. As we talk, she sips from a large mug that identifies her as the "Best Grandma Ever." A credenza next to her desk is lined with family photos. She travels to the Carolinas to babysit her son's two kids. She remembers the birthdays of everyone she works with.

It would be easy to underestimate her. But ask people who know her what she's like and the same words keep coming up. *Energetic. Innovative. Hardworking. A force of nature.*

On the campaign trail, Joe Biden championed the rights of workers, promising to be "the most pro-union president you've ever seen." But to get the votes of centrist Democrats, Biden's signature Build Back Better plan was stripped of most of the provisions meant to help workers, including one that would have given the NLRB more teeth. When tens of thousands of rail workers recently threatened to strike over their demand for paid sick days, Biden blocked them from walking off the job. Advocates expected swift action on urgent workplace issues when Marty Walsh, a former union leader and mayor of Boston, became the secretary of labor. Thus far, he's achieved little. Of all of the members of Biden's administration, it's arguably Abruzzo who has brought about the most significant changes for American workers.

The NLRB, a 1,200-person agency with a nearly \$300 million budget, enforces the National Labor Relations Act, the landmark 1935 law that codified the right to form a union in the United States. Its general counsel acts as a prosecutor, going after employers that violate the law. Unlike Walsh, who is a member of Biden's cabinet and thus has both a megaphone and the president's ear, Abruzzo isn't even the leader of her agency, which itself is buried deep within the federal bureaucracy. The NLRB is led by a five-member board.

Under Republican presidents in recent decades, the NLRB has been weaponized against workers and in favor of bosses. Under Democrats, general counsels have shied away from pursuing sweep-

ing changes, typically finding themselves in the spotlight only when they are being criticized. Abruzzo's tenure has been different. As soon as she assumed her position, she started writing memos outlining her agenda: to speed up the unionization process; to hit back against "captive audience" meetings, in which employees are forced to listen to anti-union rhetoric; and to do everything she can to penalize employers who break the law. She's gone far beyond what observers thought a general counsel could do. Her small frame and subtle demeanor belie her intense confidence in what she's doing. "I feel very justified in all of the positions that I have taken," she tells me.

"I feel that this agency is fully doing its job."

The question is whether it will keep doing its job once she's gone.

**A**BRUZZO GREW UP IN THE Jackson Heights neighborhood of Queens in New York City. Her father, a control systems engineer at Con Edison, and her mother, an X-ray technician at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital, provided Abruzzo and her two siblings—another would be born after she left for college—with a comfortable upbringing. Both of her parents, who still live in Jackson Heights, were union members, and Abruzzo "saw the benefit of strength in numbers," she says. "We had more than many in the neighborhood, and I believe that was in large part due to the negotiated wages and benefits that my parents were able to get."

Abruzzo has been working since she was 13, she says, starting with a job at a cardiologist's office. In college, she temped, including working at *Sports Illustrated* and for Kurt Vonnegut's wife, Jill. The Democratic NLRB general counsels who came before her were educated at Yale and Northeastern (Richard Griffin) and Brown and Tulane (Lafe Solomon). Abruzzo attended two SUNY schools, Binghamton and Stony Brook, and got her JD from the University of Miami.

Michael Fischl, a law professor at the University of Connecticut, met Abruzzo when she enrolled in his summer evidence class at the University of Miami. "She was tired," he recalls. She was a divorced single mother who worked in the HR department of an investment bank and went to law school at night. Most students in those night classes were there to get a degree and move on—to the next job, the next opportunity. But Abruzzo was "moved" by the education, Fischl says.

There was no night course in labor law. But Fischl, a labor lawyer, taught a class on evidence, and he used cases from labor law as examples. "It was clear she got into that," he says. At a time when even lefties were skeptical of unions, "Jennifer was the rare person who...got right away the idea of worker voice and collective bargaining." Abruzzo ended up working for him for a semester, and the two

**"We are a neutral, independent federal agency, but we enforce a pro-worker statute."**

—Jennifer Abruzzo



eventually became friends. When Fischl heard that there was an opening at the NLRB regional office a year after she graduated, he called Abruzzo. “He basically said, ‘You’re going to apply and you’re going to take this offer if it’s offered to you,’” Abruzzo recalls. “No ifs, ands, or buts.”

She got the job and started in the Miami office in January 1995, working with clients “from all walks of life,” she says. She has been at the agency ever since, except for the three and a half years she spent as special counsel for strategic initiatives at the Communications Workers of America during the Trump years. She steadily rose through the ranks in Miami, and after her son graduated from high school, she made the move to the NLRB’s headquarters in Washington, D.C., in 2006. “I did feel like I could—and wanted to—make a broader impact,” she says.

**T**HE NLRB IS NOT A HOUSEHOLD NAME, AND ITS HEADQUARTERS REFLECTS its obscurity. Unlike, say, the centrally located Securities and Exchange Commission building, whose glittering rounded windows are a familiar sight to passengers leaving Union Station, the NLRB’s headquarters is a squat building far from the White House or Capitol Hill, with no outward indication that it houses a government agency. It’s a workhorse, much like Abruzzo herself, especially now. The agency’s funding has been frozen for the past nine years, even as union elections and unfair-labor-practice filings have skyrocketed.

**The early years:** The NLRB of the 1930s (its board members are pictured here in 1937) was “particularly imaginative” and “committed to actively encouraging unionism,” says Samir Sonti.

Abruzzo moved to the general counsel’s office when it was headed by Acting General Counsel Lafe Solomon, who was appointed by President Barack Obama in 2010; the next general counsel, Richard Griffin, asked her to serve as his deputy. Abruzzo’s long tenure at the agency is part of what has allowed her to be so aggressive as general counsel. “She really came into the job at full speed,” says Wilma Liebman, a senior research associate at Harvard Law School who served as chair of the NLRB from 2009 to 2011.

But while Abruzzo has worked in the bureaucracy throughout her career, “she seems to think like an organizer,” says Samir Sonti, an assistant professor at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies. It’s not common to see someone with that kind of background set out to remake the agency they’re appointed to lead. “You don’t typically

succeed in the federal bureaucracy by shaking things up,” Fischl says. “It’s people who are cautious and careful who get rewarded.”

Abruzzo is shaking things up, but she’s doing so deliberately, combing the agency’s history to find precedents that favored workers. It’s a strategy that can be pulled off only by someone who knows the agency inside and out. “Because she is able to draw on agency tradition and is so conversant in agency processes,” Fischl says, “she’s zeroing in on ways that, at least within the agency, are going to make a difference for a long time to come.”

If Abruzzo is adamant about anything, it’s that the NLRB is meant to serve workers. “We are a neutral, independent federal agency, but we enforce a pro-worker statute,” she says. So when she took the reins as general counsel, her first order of business was to review precedents “with that mandate in mind, with our goal of ‘We are here to protect workers’ rights in this country.’ That’s our job.”

Abruzzo hasn’t been content merely to undo the damage that Donald Trump’s administration inflicted on the NLRB; she’s also been willing to challenge long-accepted practices. “I’m going to push the board to reconsider precedent that I feel doesn’t comport with our mission,” she says.

One of the reconsiderations that hit the labor world like an earthquake was outlined in her first memo to NLRB attorneys laying out the types of cases she wanted them to file. Until 1969, if a union could show that a majority of workers had signed cards stating that they wanted to join, the employer was obligated to recognize the union and start bargaining unless it had “good faith doubt” about the union’s majority support. That was established in a 1949 ruling of the NLRB called *Joy Silk Mills, Inc.* But that changed with the Supreme Court case *NLRB v. Gissel Packing Co.*, after the agency’s associate general counsel erroneously claimed during oral arguments that the NLRB had abandoned the *Joy Silk* doctrine. The Supreme Court echoed that claim in its decision. From then on, if an employer refused to recognize a union even though a majority of workers had signed cards, the union has been forced to run what often becomes a lengthy and difficult election overseen by the NLRB. Eventually the board officially abandoned *Joy Silk*. In the years that followed, there was a huge spike in workers alleging that their employers illegally intimidated them during the unionization process.

Abruzzo wants to reverse that precedent. In that first memo, she told her staff that she was seeking cases in which an employer had refused to recognize a union despite the fact that a majority of workers had signed cards and, citing *Joy Silk*, “the employer is unable to establish a good faith doubt as to majority status.” In such cases, she can argue that the employer is obligated to

**“If we had not had Covid, had not had the Trump administration, she wouldn’t be able to do what she does.”**

—Kate Bronfenbrenner, Cornell University



recognize the union based on the majority of signed cards. If the employer refuses, the case is eventually heard by the board, and Abruzzo has the opportunity to make her arguments in favor of the *Joy Silk* doctrine in front of it. Such a case is already sitting with the board, awaiting a decision. If the board agrees with her, it will set a binding precedent for all workers.

No recent general counsel has touched *Joy Silk*. “She knew that that’s where things went wrong,” Fischl says. “It was something that only a longtime insider who had watched these cases from up close could know.” If Abruzzo succeeds in reversing the precedent, it would achieve a core provision of the 2009 Employee Free Choice Act—a bill that ultimately died—and make unionizing significantly faster and easier.

Another issue she’s taken on is captive audience meetings, in which employers force workers to listen to anti-union messages. Unions get no equivalent access to workers. Kate Bronfenbrenner, the director of labor education research at Cornell University, has found that captive audience meetings are one of the most common anti-union tactics used by employers, and that they’re effective: From 1999 to 2003, unions had a 47 percent win rate when captive audience meetings were held during NLRB elections, compared with 73 percent when they weren’t.

In a memo issued in April, Abruzzo announced that such meetings violate the National Labor Relations Act because they infringe on an employee’s right to refuse to listen to employer speech about their collective bargaining rights. “It’s an unusual interpretation and a new interpretation,” Bronfenbrenner says. But, she adds, that doesn’t mean it’s not valid.

Abruzzo has also sought injunctions—emergency measures asking a court to intervene quickly on behalf of workers before a charge can be fully litigated before the board—against employers that she has alleged are violating their workers’ right to organize during a campaign. Such measures aren’t typically used by general counsels. But under Abruzzo’s guidance, the NLRB has issued five injunctions against Starbucks for alleged union busting, including one that required the company to rehire the Memphis Seven, a group of employees who were fired while organizing a union. She has also encouraged NLRB attorneys to file injunctions against employers who threaten to fire workers or shut down stores in response to union drives.

Abruzzo has gone after employers not just to secure back pay and reinstatement after a worker is illegally fired, as is commonly done, but also for “consequential damages”—compensation for, say, penalties incurred by a worker if they couldn’t pay their bills on time. The National Labor Relations Act doesn’t allow the NLRB to levy fines on employers who violate the law, so making employees whole is the only remedy. This was “a tremendous priority for me,” Abruzzo says. She wanted to remind employers that in any settlements, “we’re not going to nickel-and-dime workers. We’re going to [get] them what they’re owed fully.” She also wants employers, rather than unions, to shoulder the costs of running a second election if the first one is tainted by violations of labor law.

The NLRB of the 1930s was “particularly imaginative,” says Sonti, the CUNY professor. “It was committed to actively encouraging unionism—not just providing a sanction for it but facilitating it.” Its ambition faded slightly after the Democratic Party under President Franklin Roosevelt suffered big defeats in the 1938 midterms, but the agency remained strong until Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Reagan “pioneered” the practice, Sonti says, of appointing pro-management consultants to the board to actively work against union rights, the approach taken by Republican presidents ever since. And even under Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, the board was nothing like what it had been. “Abruzzo is trying to act in the spirit of those earlier days,” Sonti says. “She’ll certainly rank among the most pro-labor NLRB officials in history, right up there with the early ones.”

**“There’s a long history of Congress retaliating against the board when it uses its powers to the utmost.”**

—Kate Andrias, Columbia University

**On watch:** Under Abruzzo’s guidance, the NLRB issued an injunction against Starbucks that required it to rehire the Memphis Seven, a group of employees who were fired while organizing a union.

**A** SIGNIFICANT WAY IN WHICH ABRUZZO DIFFERS FROM HER DEMOCRATIC predecessors is that she has come into her role in a different climate. A reenergized labor movement has coincided with an energetic general counsel. The massive wave of strikes that swept through hospitals, schools, warehouses, and grocery stores in the early years of the pandemic has been followed by a surge of union campaigns at well-known brands such as Starbucks, Amazon, Apple, and REI. In 2022, 71 percent of Americans had a favorable opinion of unions, the highest share since 1965. “If

we had not had Covid, if we had not had the Trump administration,” Bronfenbrenner says, “she wouldn’t be able to be who she is and do what she does.”

It’s not as if earlier Democratic appointees didn’t want to make an impact. But “the pushback was so hard they weren’t able to succeed,” Bronfenbrenner says. In 2011, Lafe Solomon issued a complaint against Boeing alleging that it had violated the NLRA by transferring a production line to a nonunion facility in South Carolina in retaliation for a strike in Washington. In the aftermath, Solomon was hauled in front of Congress and



## "Jen is doing her best with incredibly weak tools. It just shouldn't be this hard."

—Sharon Block, former NLRB member

**Retaliation:** In 2011, the NLRB's acting general counsel, Lafe Solomon, was hauled in front of Congress after issuing a labor complaint against Boeing.

was sent to South Carolina to testify. Senator Lindsey Graham put an indefinite hold on President Obama's nominations to the NLRB, and the Republican-led House passed a bill to bar the agency from filing a case over plant locations. Though Democrats voted against that bill, they showed "less than full-throated support" for Solomon, says Fischl, for taking on what was a "clear-cut case of an unfair

labor action." Liebman, the former NLRB chair, remembers a Clinton-appointed board chair who sought to issue new rules, only to have Congress threaten to cut the agency's budget in half, forcing him to withdraw. When Liebman was chair, she faced threats to defund the agency entirely. "There's a long history of Congress retaliating against the board when it uses its powers to the utmost to protect workers," says Kate Andrias, a law professor at Columbia University.

Abruzzo is working in a very different political environment. Republicans claim she shows "flagrant disregard of applicable case law and precedent," and now that the GOP is in control of the House, Republican members can hold investigations and even try to get Abruzzo thrown out of office. They'll almost certainly try to whittle down the agency's budget even further. But Democrats are now more likely to support unions, and President Biden is eager to maintain his pro-labor image. And having worked closely with past general counsels who faced right-wing attacks, Abruzzo is likely to be more prepared to take the heat.

The biggest challenges she faces in enacting her agenda are structural. An NLRB general counsel enjoys real power: She has more or less unfettered discretion as to which cases to bring and how they should proceed. "People used to joke, 'What's the better job, being chairman of the board or general counsel?'" And most people would say, "Being general counsel," Liebman observes. "She sets out the agenda and what's going to come to the board." That agenda matters more than in some other agencies: Because workers have no private right of action, if the NLRB general counsel decides not to pursue a case on their behalf, they can't take it to court themselves the way, say, they could with a complaint at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

But what the general counsel can't do is set binding precedents that shape labor law; that's up to the board, which acts as a sort of court. It is likely, given that a majority of its members were nominated by Democrats, that the board will endorse her view—but it's not a certainty. And because Abruzzo acts as a party to the cases the board hears, she can't communicate with its members directly to persuade them to go along with her reading. "There's this wall between us," Abruzzo says. "I cannot try to informally persuade them one way or another." Another complication is that the pipeline of cases is narrow: The vast majority are settled before they reach the board.

This is a far cry from how most other agencies work. If Labor Secretary Marty Walsh wants to change a policy or rule, he can promulgate a new regulation. The board, by contrast, usually has "to wait for the right case to come up with the right parties to raise the issues in the right way," says Sharon Block, a professor at Harvard Law School, who served on the board under President Obama.

"It's a more reactive mode of policy-making."

It's reactive, and it's slow. The board is required to issue a decision in every case that comes before it, but there are no requirements for how quickly it must act. Board members must gain agreement from a majority to issue a decision. And while the board has the power to reverse its own precedents, it must do so in a way that's not arbitrary and capricious, in order for it to stand up to judicial scrutiny.

Even so, the NLRB watchers I spoke to agreed that this board is taking a long time to issue decisions, particularly on high-profile cases. It has proposed a rule that would make it easier to hold franchisers like McDonald's and its franchisees accountable as "joint employers" of the workers in their restaurants. In mid-December, the board issued a decision finding that employers who violate workers' rights owe them compensation for all "direct or foreseeable pecuniary harm," including out-of-pocket medical expenses and credit card debt—just as Abruzzo has sought. But there haven't been any other "blockbuster" decisions yet, Sonti says. The board issued 123 decisions in 2021 and 155 last year. In the 1980s, the board often decided over 100 cases a month.

Things could get even slower. The board is currently composed of three members appointed by Democrats and one by a Republican, with one seat vacant. The vacancy has slowed down the board's decision-making even further. And Biden appointee Gwynne Wilcox's term will expire this summer. If Republicans block the appointments to replace Wilcox and fill the current vacant seat,

the board won't have the members required to form a quorum and thus won't be able to issue decisions, a stalemate that occurred earlier under George W. Bush and Obama.

Then there's what will happen when the power eventually shifts in Washington. "The board is famous for what's known as 'policy oscillation,'" Liebman says. Of all the federal agencies, the NLRB swings most wildly when a different party assumes power. Take, for example, the question of

whether graduate students at private universities are employees who can unionize: Since 1972, the board has said no under Republican presidents and yes under Democratic ones. If a Republican president is elected and appoints a new board majority, that majority will almost certainly undo much of whatever Abruzzo accomplishes during her tenure, particularly on big-ticket items like *Joy Silk* and captive audience meetings. "We can basically assume a new





board will not agree with that,” Liebman says.

And then there are the courts. After the board decides a case, the losing party can take the decision to the Court of Appeals. The consensus among left-leaning labor-law experts is that Abruzzo is being careful and strategic and has the law on her side. “She’s really on strong legal ground and attempting to fulfill the promise of the act,” says Andrias, the Columbia professor. Helping matters in theory is that the NLRB is supposed to be granted a good deal of deference from the courts as long as it can prove that it has made a reasonable interpretation of labor law.

But if a case makes its way to the Supreme Court, the current constellation of justices, dominated by conservatives and suspicious of federal power, may not care. “The Supreme Court and some of the more conservative lower courts have been less willing to exercise deference to agencies more broadly,” Andrias says. For example, the Supreme Court recently ruled that agencies can only take action on “major questions” when Congress has specifically authorized them to do so. And this is not to mention the current court’s hostility to workers’ rights. “The odds of the courts’ overruling her are still high,” Bronfenbrenner says. “Everything she does is going to be knocked down.”

Some critics aren’t waiting for Abruzzo’s agenda to wind its way through the board and the courts before trying to strike it down. In July, a group of staffing firms filed a lawsuit seeking to block her from litigating cases based on her memo on captive audience meetings, claiming that her guidance violates their First Amendment rights.

Abruzzo, for her part, is remarkably unflappable on this topic. “I do not worry about what courts may or may not do,” she says. “I do not feel constrained at all.”

**T**HESE HEADWINDS ARE WHAT MAKE labor advocates desperate to see Congress pass legislation like the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act to bolster and modernize union rights. Not only would that bill codify what Abruzzo is trying to do on her own, such as prohibiting captive audience meetings and codifying joint employer liability, but it goes even further, such as allowing the NLRB to levy fines on companies that violate labor law. “Absent some kind of statutory change,” Liebman says, “I don’t think we can be too optimistic

about some of these things, even if the board adopts them, remaining set in stone.”

Without such changes, Abruzzo can’t do much to help increase the pitifully low share of American workers who belong to unions—10.1 percent at last measure—and she has limited power over whether and when unionized workers get contracts. “Jen is doing her best with incredibly weak tools,” says Block, the Harvard professor. “It just shouldn’t be this hard.”

But Abruzzo, of course, knows all of that. She’s using the tools in front of her. And those tools can make a meaningful difference for as long as she’s the person wielding them. Abruzzo may benefit from the current enthusiasm about unionizing, but her actions also feed it. “When the government shows that it intends to

protect workers’ rights...that helps encourage more union activity,” Andrias says. “Even if it’s not a permanent change in the law, to the extent that she’s able to protect workers’ rights [so they] are able to win unions and win contracts, that can be really transformative.”

Perhaps one of the most important outcomes of Abruzzo’s agenda in the short term is simply that it sends workers a message: that these are their rights and that she’ll have their back if they exercise them. “This shows workers that the administration really means what it says,” Liebman notes. When workers know the government is there to support them, they may feel more emboldened to struggle through the challenges inherent in forming a

union. “Seeing somebody stand up and say that the federal government is on your side when you want to stand up for yourself, that you’re not doing it alone, is just incredibly important,” Block says. It “inspires them to keep going.”

“My goals have always been and continue to be to educate,” Abruzzo says. “Not only about [workers’] rights, but that there’s an agency here that exists to protect those rights.” Shortly after Abruzzo moved to NLRB headquarters, she and another employee at the time, Peter Ohr, created the agency’s first outreach program, which still exists. “That’s outlived the various swings and administrations,” she says, adding that she’s “heartened” by the swell of organizing among workers right now: “That’s the greatest thing for me to see, and I hope that our outreach efforts are helping.”

Abruzzo has also inspired “excitement about government, a government body, among young people, which doesn’t happen very often,” Bronfenbrenner says. Sonti is in a WhatsApp thread with labor lawyers in their 30s known as the Abruzzo Appreciation Society. Fischl has more students, particularly women, interested in labor law than ever before. Abruzzo has paved a path for future NLRB general counsels to take, if they’re brave enough. “Jennifer has expanded the range of possibility, and there’s no putting that back in the box,” Fischl says.

“I’ve been at this for a long time, and I’ve never witnessed a moment like this in my career,” Liebman says.

Federal agency appointees typically try to avoid being in the line of fire. But Abruzzo’s tenure at the NLRB proves that when appointees get ambitious and take risks, there’s a lot they can do. “You have got to be willing to push aside all the naysayers,” Bronfenbrenner says. “It shows that if you have the guts and the smarts, you can make some change.” **N**

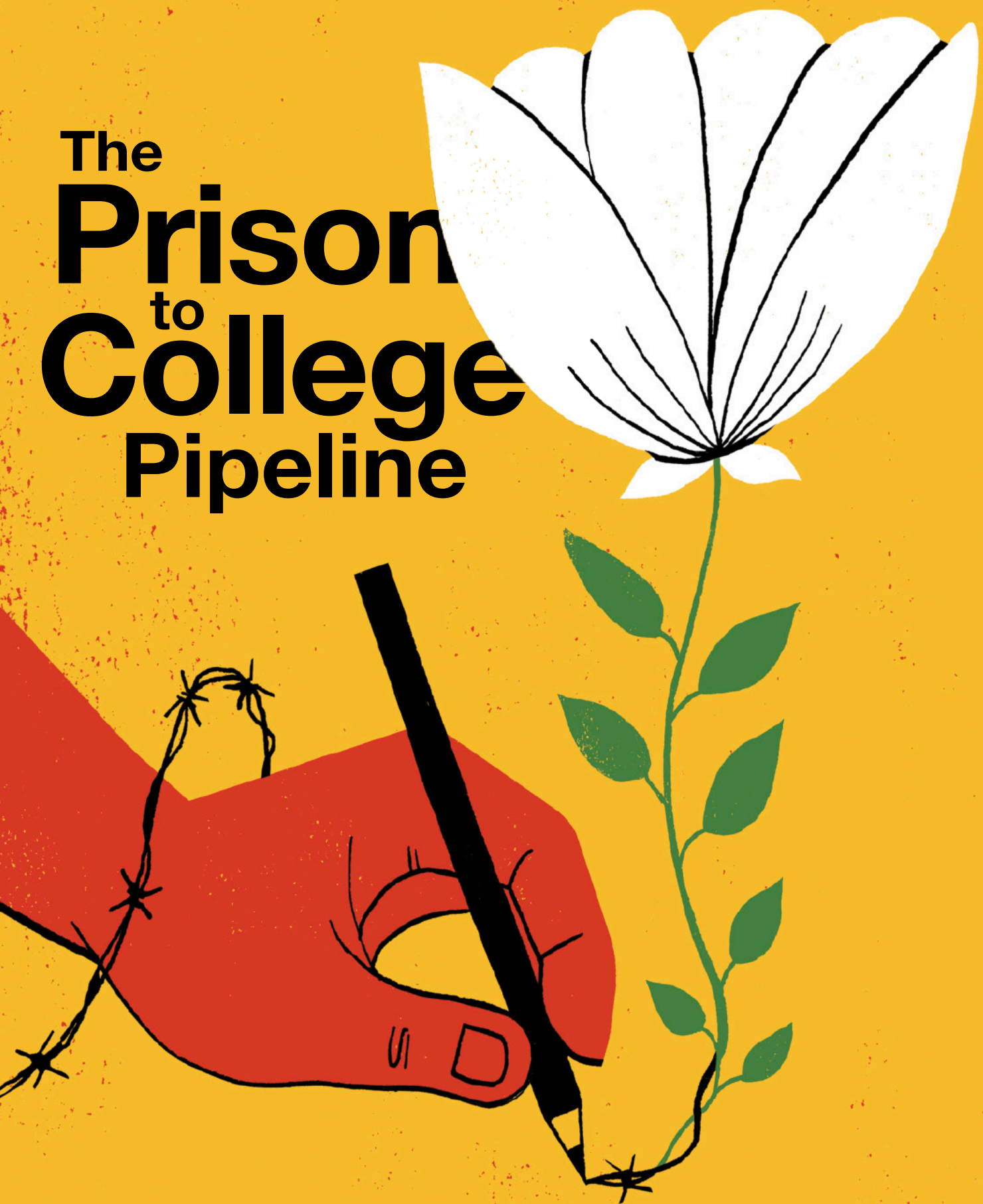


**Pro-union president?** When tens of thousands of the country’s rail workers threatened a strike, Biden, seen here with Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, blocked them from walking off the job.

**“I do not worry about what courts may or may not do. I do not feel constrained at all.”**

—Jennifer Abruzzo

The  
**Prison**  
to  
**College**  
Pipeline





## Universities aim to support a growing number of formerly incarcerated students with housing.

BY GAIL CORNWALL

**O**N AN UNREMARKABLE NOVEMBER MORNING, JIMMIE CONNER IS hunched over his laptop at a dining table in an open-concept kitchen flooded with light. The fourth-year student at California State University, Fullerton, lives in the John Irwin House, a residence for formerly incarcerated students just over four miles from the CSUF campus. The house, in a pleasant Orange County neighborhood with a park, a reservoir, and horse stables, is furnished in a modular style. Two chairs by the fireplace sit ready for one-on-one tutoring, a cluster of ottomans nearby can accommodate a study group, and spaces to hunker down with a book or notes abound: a couch by the front door layered with pillows and blankets, a desk tucked into a corner, a fire table on the patio, and a backyard. Before living here, Conner was at a halfway house, and for the 14 years before that, he was in prison, most recently at the California Men's Colony.

The walls of the John Irwin House are more window than anything else, like another space at CSUF designed for formerly incarcerated students: the library's "study and hangout place," with its sparkling floor-to-ceiling panes, formally known as the Center for Hope and Redemption. Amid all this glass, Conner feels a bit like Cinderella—lucky to be getting an educational experience that's a perfect fit for him.

Colleges and universities are expecting an influx of students like Conner soon.

The vast majority of incarcerated people are currently ineligible to receive Pell Grants, federal financial aid for low-income students. But that decades-long ban will end this summer, thanks to legislation passed in 2020. Nicholas Turner, the president of the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonprofit focused on criminal justice reform, estimates that more than 767,000 people will be able to apply for funds to pursue a credential or a degree through an in-prison education program. At least 95 percent of the people

in American prisons are eventually released, with more than 600,000 released each year. These numbers make it clear that the United States will soon have many more people re-entering society prepared to attend classes on a college campus.

A significant percentage of these new students will face such substantial barriers that they won't return for a second semester. That's a loss for society, for formerly incarcerated

individuals, and for the college communities to which they would otherwise have made valuable contributions.

It's a loss that the John Irwin House has a track record of forestalling. Since the residence's opening in 2018, 21 CSUF students have been given safe, secure housing with wraparound services provided by formerly incarcerated staff members who reinforce a culture of striving and mattering. Twenty of the 21 have either graduated or remain in school, and several are pursuing advanced degrees. The model has been so successful that colleges and universities around the country are exploring plans to reproduce what one staff member calls a "revolutionary" housing solution.

*Gail Cornwall is a former public school teacher and lawyer who now works as a mother and freelance writer in San Francisco.*

**"M**Y PARENTS DIDN'T gangbang, but my brothers did," says the 32-year-old Conner, recounting his childhood in Compton, Calif., as he sits at the sleek desk in his pristine bedroom. His brothers encouraged him to focus on school instead, he says, but "you see them with girls and cars and money and think, 'Hey, this must be the lifestyle.'" He adds, "Differential association—I learned that in one of my criminal theory classes." He joined their gang when he was 10, already knowing everyone's name and how to throw up signs.

His first arrest was at age 12. A couple years later, he was present at a shooting. Under the old felony murder rule, which California reformed in 2019, Conner was charged as if he'd pulled the trigger. He didn't want to take the plea deal, but he couldn't say "It wasn't me" without being labeled "a rat or whatever," he says. Plus, the loved one who fired the shot would have faced life in prison if the case had gone to trial. So Conner took the deal and, at age 14, was sentenced to 17 years behind bars.

The majority of people sent to prison enter without a high school diploma or a GED certificate, yet almost 70 percent of those who are incarcerated hope to obtain a postsecondary credential. Ultimately, less than 4 percent of them graduate from college, compared with the nation's overall rate of 29 percent, according to a 2018 report. Meanwhile, roughly two-thirds of well-paying jobs are projected to require a bachelor's degree or higher by 2031, as the US labor market's share of unskilled employment continues to decline.

Project Rebound, the California State University program that runs the John Irwin House, was established in 1967 to support formerly incarcerated students at San Francisco State University. It now spans 15 CSU campuses, where it offers academic counseling, opportunities to network, financial advice, tutoring, a community, help in accessing campus resources, financial aid, and more. At CSUF, 106 students participate, bringing the total to more than 300 since 2016. Eight of them live in the John Irwin House, named for Project Rebound's founder.

The proponents of programs like



Project Rebound often cite recidivism numbers to justify their existence, and they're right: Higher education significantly reduces the likelihood that a person will be sent back to prison. Formerly incarcerated people who participate in postsecondary education programs are 48 percent less likely to be incarcerated again than those who do not—and with each degree they attain, the rate drops. For Project Rebound participants, the recidivism rate is less than 1 percent; for John Irwin House residents, it's zero.

But recidivism is just one measure. College degrees are also linked to higher rates of engagement in activities like voting and volunteerism. Those who hold them are less likely to live in poverty, rely on public assistance, or be in poor health, and these effects are passed down through generations. For people who have been incarcerated, college graduation translates to higher wages, more hours worked, and lower unemployment. Though a degree doesn't erase the stigma of a criminal

pressures that make academic success difficult.

Instead of getting a car, Conner accepted an invitation to dinner at the John Irwin House, where, unbeknownst to him, he was vetted to ensure that he'd left "prison politics" behind. As a resident there, Conner would be expected to contribute a third of his take-home pay as rent each month. Two-thirds of that money would go toward the house's upkeep, and the rest would be put in a savings account, to be returned to him when he moved out.

To help free him from a correctional mindset, Project Rebound wouldn't test Conner for drugs or tell him when to eat meals or turn off his lights. He would have a curfew, but one that allowed him to attend evening classes and discussion groups (11 p.m. on weekdays). He knew he'd also have to maintain a GPA of 3.0 or higher, attend workshops, and participate in Project Rebound's community service programs. What Conner didn't realize he'd be signing up for was a new extended family.

**"There are 48,000 consequences, but all you need is one community to help pick you up."**

—Ramarilyn Ralston,  
executive director of Project Rebound at CSUF

#### Feeling at home:

Jimmie Conner, a Project Rebound participant, is an undergraduate at CSUF studying business.

record, it can shift an employer's focus from seeing the candidate as a liability to seeing them as someone with potential.

When he was incarcerated, Conner spent a lot of his time reading, but at first he had no intention of enrolling in anything. He was just chasing down a fascination he'd harbored from third grade until he was put in handcuffs in middle school: space. "Anything that involved astronomy, physics, I read it," he says. A peer in the prison noticed his reading and signed him up for a GED class. Conner was skeptical, but once he had that certificate in hand, "I was like, 'Yeah, I gotta get more of these. I gotta get into college.' I became a crackhead to education."

Conner made a case for transferring to the California Men's Colony because it offered community college courses. "To us, it was like Harvard," he says. There, his grades were good enough that he qualified for release one year early. In the months that followed, Conner lived in a halfway house, working a warehouse job and taking classes at Los Angeles Trade-Technical College, with the goal of transferring to CSUF. But when he was accepted, Conner knew it would be too expensive to take an Amtrak train and a bus each day from his parole-approved housing 30 miles away. So he told Project Rebound staff, with whom he'd been in touch since writing them a letter from prison, "I'm gonna get a car. I'll just sleep in my car."

Housing challenges like Conner's are hardly unusual. Study after study lists housing as a primary barrier to educational access for formerly incarcerated students. Formerly incarcerated people are nearly 10 times more likely to be homeless. They are often prohibited from living in public housing or on campus. Landlords tend to deny their applications. Some are forced to crash in costly motels or couch-surf.

While housing designed for formerly incarcerated people does exist, it often isn't ideal for students: Transitional housing tends to be located far from campus, often in high-poverty neighborhoods, and comes with requirements that conflict with class times and make it hard to learn (such as blackout periods on electronic devices). And for those who live with family, there can be a host of

**R**OMARILYN RALSTON IS NOW THE EXECUTIVE director of the CSUF branch of Project Rebound. But back in 2016, she was hired in part to answer the mail. Weeks into the job, Ralston announced, "We need a house," because so many of the applicants' letters mentioned housing insecurity. She wanted to house "people who are deserving of a quality life," she says, but "most of all we wanted them to have a community of people who understood how things sometimes can go the wrong way....

There are 48,000 collateral consequences [of incarceration] that exist to trip you up, but all you need is one community to help pick you up."

In 2017, Ralston had been the one to pick up James "JC" Cavitt, who came running into her office as an undergraduate on the verge of quitting his first job on campus. Cavitt had been assigned to read e-mails, make edits, and forward the revised information, but since he was straight out of prison, he says, "I didn't

know how to operate e-mail. I didn't know what an attachment was." Ralston gave him a crash course, and Cavitt—who has since graduated and received a master's degree—says his life trajectory was forever changed. He now works as the program director for CSUF's Project Rebound and is pursuing a PhD at a private university nearby.

But Cavitt wouldn't have felt comfortable asking Ralston for help had he not known





that she'd spent 23 years in prison on herself—one more than he had. He says college administrators and faculty rarely understand the “trauma of incarceration [or] the unique needs of our population.”

One of those needs is a dedicated space to escape the well-documented stigma of incarceration on college campuses. This protective effect is especially important for Black men like Conner and Cavitt. Studies have noted their “double disadvantage,” and Conner has lived it: When he went jogging between classes at CSUF, people would cross the street to avoid him.

Cavitt says that he, too, has gotten looks that communicated: “What are you doing here?” It's a question that formerly incarcerated students, who are often in the grip of impostor syndrome, tend to ask themselves. But there's an evidence-backed antidote to that malady: a sense of belonging.

Students who feel they belong tend to be more engaged; they enjoy school more, achieve at a higher level, and are less likely to leave without a degree.

But belonging can be hard. Conner had trouble relating to his peers' precollegiate experiences. Most are at least 10 years younger, so when they were watching Disney's latest release or playing soccer at recess, he was in prison learning how to fashion a knife from a CD case. At 18, he witnessed a man being stabbed repeatedly right in front of him with an improvised plastic blade. Why? Because the man smelled like a stick of deodorant he wasn't supposed to use.

Having lived through countless violent, unpredictable incidents like that, “I didn't really like talking to people,” Conner says. When he first got to school, he kept to himself. At the house, he'd stay in his room. “You're stuck in a cage all the time. You come home, and you put yourself in another cage unknowingly.”

Research shows that formerly incarcerated students can have difficulty building social connections and asking for help, because of the way incarceration erodes social trust and contributes to increased rates of PTSD. “People might think that's a maladaptive response, but inside, that's a survival mechanism,” says Yehudah Pryce, who lived in the John Irwin House as an undergraduate before completing a master's degree and a doctorate in social work.

Conner's housemates understood, and they knew what to do: “They'd tell me, ‘Come out! Say hi to people!’” He did, and he learned that he could breathe around them—“like an exhale,” he says. Conner watched one of his housemates

sit and study for hours at a time, “with his headphones on, typing away. That's who we idolized; that's who we wanted to be like.” So they mimicked him.

The men would cook for one another and, when work and school schedules allowed, watch TV or play video games. But when Cavitt visited during midterms and finals, “the house would be eerily silent,” he recalls. “They'd be like, ‘Nope, don't bother me right now, I'm studying.’”

That vibe was “sort of like osmosis” to Charles Jackson, 58. After he moved last fall, Jackson says, “my grades, my studying, everything has gotten better.” This is a common experience. Cavitt says the average GPA of Project Rebound participants is significantly higher than CSUF's as a whole, and the average GPA of house residents is higher still. Eighty-eight percent of CSUF students who weren't scheduled to graduate returned to school last fall; 96 percent of John Irwin House residents did. Of the house residents who have graduated, five out of six went on to pursue graduate degrees, and all of them are currently employed.

But wouldn't living in a dorm also provide this kind of academic osmosis? For many formerly incarcerated students, that isn't an option, for various reasons. Most dorms are available only nine months a year, and living on campus is prohibitively expensive. Many formerly incarcerated students don't have family wealth, are required to pay court-imposed restitution, or, because of their age, have less time to pay off student loans. People who look “out of place” are also more likely to have their ID checked or have campus security called on them.

Moreover, dorms aren't conducive to the requirements of probation and parole. The day after Jackson moved into the house, he says, his parole officer knocked on the door to request a drug test “and said, ‘Here. Here's a cup.’” If that happened at a dorm and a set of earbuds later went missing, who would people suspect? And other people's partying poses a risk: A roommate's pills or a whiff of marijuana in the hall can be cited as a parole violation.



**Study space:** The Center for Hope and Redemption inside Pollak Library at California State University, Fullerton.

**“The house would be eerily silent. They'd be like, ‘Nope, don't bother me right now, I'm studying.’”**

—James “JC” Cavitt, program director for Project Rebound at CSUF



None of these concerns come into play at the John Irwin House. Residents don't feel the need to look over their shoulders, to watch out for police helicopters or naysayers. Pryce says the ability to let his guard down or to pay just \$80 for rent, because that's a third of what a dishwashing job brings in, "was just such a weight off me...knowing that I didn't have to come up with some money scheme." It left more focus for studying, but also, he says, "I think more highly of myself that I'm worthy to be here." And mentoring and encouragement are available 24/7. For all these reasons, he says, "that housing component—it's just a total game changer."

But would it be enough for Conner? He wanted to major in business and move to Silicon Valley after graduation, but in his first semester he failed a required math course. Then he found out his mom was dying. He took the class again and did his best while managing hospice care. He failed again.

Then his mother died, and Conner was devastated. "That was a lot of pressure," he says. "I got my brother calling me from prison every single day, and I'm the decision-maker. I gotta help pay for the funeral." It was all too much. Something had to go. So one day in 2020, Conner let Cavitt know that he was done with Project Rebound and would be moving out of the house.

**No gatekeeping:** At CSUF, 106 students participate in Project Rebound. Eight of them live at the John Irwin House.

"I saw my little brother just literally crumble," Cavitt says. They talked about the logistics of living elsewhere, including costs like electricity, water, trash, and Wi-Fi that Conner hadn't considered "because he'd been incarcerated pretty much all of his life." Cavitt had lost his own mother the year before, and they talked about grief and how it can exacerbate a person's tendency to withdraw. Cavitt remembers leveling with him: "I said, 'Little brother, you're doing it again.... You are pulling away instead of leaning into the community that is here to help you and support you and wrap their arms around you through this difficult time.'"

Conner was given a bitter pill, Cavitt says, but he swallowed it.

**"I think more highly of myself. That housing component—it's just a total game changer."**

—Yehudah Pryce,  
former John Irwin House resident

**W**HEN THE EXPANSION of the Pell Grant program goes into effect next school year and more Americans leave prison ready to begin or complete bachelor's degrees, few campuses will be ready.

The small number of colleges that run education programs in prison tend to cobble together housing for those who enroll in classes on campus after their release, often through referrals or in graduate student housing or "dry" dorms. The Prison Education Project at Washington University in St. Louis puts students in touch with sympathetic landlords who are willing to overlook their lack of a credit history through "an informal, pick-up-the-phone pipeline," says Kevin Windhauser, the program's director. A few other universities give them housing subsidies, which is essentially what CSUF does for female Project Rebound participants faced with housing insecurity, since they tend to be custodial parents.

But most colleges provide no housing support designed for these students. Research indicates that only around one-third of California's colleges offer any services tailored to formerly incarcerated students, let alone housing, and that 72 percent of those are community colleges. Turner, of the Vera Institute, says the national numbers are surely much lower, since "what's happening in California is the leading edge."

But more Irwin-style housing is on the way. The nonprofit Thrive for Life has run a house for formerly incarcerated students in New York City since 2019, including some enrolled at New York University and Columbia, and it's forging partnerships with additional schools, such as Marquette University, which plans to open a house in Milwaukee next fall. Project Rebound is in the process of opening new houses at Sacramento State and Fresno State, and Renford Reese, a professor at Cal Poly Pomona and the founder of the Prison Education Project, has developed plans for lots he owns in Pomona. If he finds an investor, his projects will serve approximately 60 formerly incarcerated students taking classes at Cal Poly Pomona, Pitzer College, and Mt. San Antonio College.

Julie O'Heir, the director of the Prison Education Program at Saint Louis University, is attempting to replicate the Project Rebound model there but cites two primary impediments—finances and staffing—that boil down to a budgeting issue. At CSUF, rent from the residents covers a tiny portion of the John Irwin House's operating expenses. Brady Heiner, an associate professor who founded the Project Rebound program at CSUF and has served as its executive director, says that to establish proof of concept, the house initially relied on philanthropic investments from several foundations.

After four years of running the John Irwin House out of a rental home, Heiner and others brought the program's success to the attention of state legislators. In 2021, California allocated \$5 million to Project Rebound. Part of CSUF's piece of that pie—supplemented by money



from the school's capital fund, a private donation, and a matching gift—went toward buying its current home.

However, that onetime lump sum “is not enough to sustain us over the long term,” says Heiner, who is now the interim executive director of the overarching CSU Project Rebound Consortium. To keep the John Irwin House open, Project Rebound will have to keep fundraising.

Those who study the issue find this state of affairs frustrating. Melissa Abeyta, an assistant professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and a cochair of NASPA's Formerly Incarcerated Students and System Impacted Families Knowledge Community, says: “Across the nation, we have universities with Greek houses. Why would this student population not be deserving of similar residential halls?”

The practice of affinity housing is well established, and many colleges have a program like the First-Generation Living Learning Community at the University of Texas at Austin “for first-generation college students to connect on a deeper level.” Members of sports teams often live together, and the University of California, Berkeley, offers extensive co-op housing with, for example, a building for vegetarians. In other words, colleges and universities know how to do affinity housing.

And “they have the money,” says Stanley Andrisse, an assistant professor at the Howard University College of Medicine who runs the nonprofit Prison to Professionals and its transitional house for formerly incarcerated scholars in Baltimore. “It's about whether they have the interest or the willingness.”

Abeyta observes that, partly because they don't understand the benefits, “some college presidents are very uncomfortable with the idea of having formerly incarcerated students on campus.” A 2022 study, citing Abeyta's work, concluded that formerly incarcerated Latinx students possess a unique mix of knowledge and abilities drawn from their time in prison and on the streets. Abeyta has called these assets “carceral capital.”

Andrisse has it. Before he became a research scientist, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison on three felony convictions. “I made a good amount of money selling drugs, and those same skills that got me locked up, I'm still using those skills to secure million-dollar grants,” he says. Project Rebound participants say professors rely on them to start classroom discussions and persuade younger students to attend office hours and tutoring. Formerly

incarcerated students also serve as role models of what Ralston calls “grit and grind.”

“They are additive to our campus, just like our veterans,” says CSUF's president, Framroze Virjee. Virjee supported the John Irwin House from the beginning, and the first time he visited it, he cried. “There but for the grace of God goes any one of us,” he says, describing “amazing people who got caught up in things.”

When one house resident was close to dropping out, Virjee scheduled a standing phone call with him every night at 7 o'clock for three months. “Literally one of the best days of my life,” Virjee says, was when “I got to hand him his diploma as he crossed the stage.”

**A**FTER CONNER LEFT FOR class on that unremarkable November morning, Lance Swann drove over to the John

Irwin House to share some good news. The 31-year-old junior, who teaches classes at Ironwood State Prison on the side, had moved out in August. He rented a room in a house for a few months to establish a rental history, and now he'd been offered his own lease in “a pretty nice area of Anaheim.”

Cavitt jumped to his feet, wrapping the younger man in a bear hug. The jubilation lasted for a minute or two, and then Cavitt asked to see the document. “Let's review it,” he said. “Because landlords can sneak some stuff in there. Same thing when you go in—first thing you do is take pictures.”

When Cavitt arrived at the house a few hours earlier, Conner had been there studying. “That would have been the worst decision ever, if I'd have left Project Rebound,” Conner told me. “It would be a whole different me. Maybe I would have got in trouble again.”

Instead, Cavitt recalled, Conner “began to thrive”: He opened up and became “more vulnerable about his feelings and emotions, stuff he had repressed for years.” He also started reaching out to professors and going to office hours. “I'm advocating for myself, speaking up,” Conner confirmed.

These days, the two men talk mostly about grad school. Conner has his sights set on at least one more degree.

“I'm watching this man grow into his own, right before my eyes,” Cavitt says.

When they run into each other in early December, Conner is on his way to campus to tutor another student. “From Project Rebound?” Cavitt asks.

“Nah,” Conner responds, just a classmate who needed help.

“Wait a minute, who are you?” Cavitt teases.

“When did you start doing this?”

Conner doesn't know exactly who he's becoming, but he does know who to thank. Being around people like Cavitt, he says, makes him think, “Damn, I can do this.” The rubber bands on his braces flash CSUF orange as he says, “It's crazy how good my life went.”



**“They are additive to our campus, just like our veterans.... There but for the grace of God goes any one of us.”**

—Framroze Virjee, CSUF president

**Moving on:** James “JC” Cavitt gives Lance Swann a bear hug after learning that the younger man had been offered a lease for his own apartment.



*This story about Project Rebound was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.*



## Parents and Sons

*Édouard Louis's chronicles of class*

BY TARA K. MENON



WHEN HIS DEBUT NOVEL CAUSED A SENSATION in France, Édouard Louis was just 21. *The End of Eddy* (originally published in 2014 as *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*) was an unflinching account of Louis's difficult childhood

as a gay boy in Hallencourt, a postindustrial village in northern France. In this world, the men were monstrous alcoholics, the women were trapped in miserable marriages, and the children were too many. Louis chronicled a community ravaged by addiction and violence and abandoned by the state. He described the working class at its worst: These men and women weren't just tired and hungry; they were resentful, callous, and racist. To make life even tougher for luckless

ILLUSTRATION BY JULIE BENBASSAT



little Eddy Bellegueule (Louis's birth name), they also proved to be viciously homophobic.

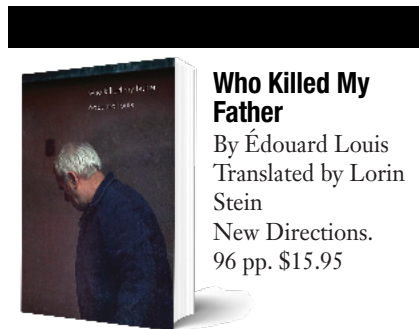
French critics were divided in their judgment of *The End of Eddy*—some revered it, others reviled it. But they were united in their fascination. The poverty Louis described was so wretched that some questioned the book's veracity. (His response: "Every word of this book is true.") The Parisian elite had not only forgotten about the rural working class; they refused to be reminded of its existence.

Louis's sophomore effort, *History of Violence* (2016), a harrowing account of a brutal sexual assault by a Kabyle (Algerian) man that he met on the streets of Paris, cemented his status as one of France's preeminent novelists. Praised for its "raw honesty," the novel recounted both Louis's rape and the subsequent post-traumatic stress in relentless detail. As in *The End of Eddy*, Louis dissected his most private experiences to probe pressing societal issues: class, race, sexuality, immigration, and the penal system.

Since then, Louis has found both critical and commercial success around the world—topping best-seller lists, winning prestigious literary honors, being profiled in influential newspapers and magazines. Two of his works have been adapted for the stage; in 2022, he starred as himself at an august Brooklyn theater.

Another writer may have disappeared into the prizes and parties of the metropole. Yet even if, as Louis himself acknowledges, he has adopted the manners and customs of the elite, he refuses to adopt their indifference. Instead, admirably, he has used his influence to remind his new friends about people like his parents. Along with the philosopher Didier Eribon and the sociologist Geofroy de Lagasnerie, Louis has established himself as part of a new group of bold and uncompromising voices on the French left; the three men, together and separately, write and speak often and urgently about the needs of France's working class. Louis doesn't just write novels; he pens manifestos, attends rallies, and participates in protests. In 2018, he cut short a trip to the United States to join the *gilets jaunes* protesters in the streets and to defend them in the press. Much of this activity, both literary and extracurricular, is documented on social media. Lagasnerie has defended his and Louis's social media activity as more than just a millennial indulgence: "On Instagram, we seek to produce a different aesthetic of intellectuals: more real and more exciting." If de Beauvoir and Sartre were around now, Lagasnerie seems to imply, they'd be posting pics of the squad too.

In two new books, *Who Killed My Father* (translated by Lorin Stein) and *A Woman's Battles and Transformations* (translated by Tash Aw), Louis continues to mine the personal to write about the political. Like his first two books, they

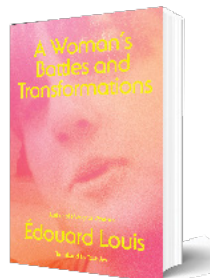


### Who Killed My Father

By Édouard Louis  
Translated by Lorin Stein  
New Directions.  
96 pp. \$15.95

### A Woman's Battles and Transformations

By Édouard Louis  
Translated by Tash Aw  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux.  
112 pp. \$20



are written in the first person, yet Louis does not occupy center stage here. In these slim, searing volumes—one billed as a nonfiction, the other as a memoir—he shifts his attention to his parents. Although their stories are told in the same confessional style, the voice is more mature—more educated, more meditative, and more militant. *The End of Eddy*, despite its author's new name, was filtered through the eyes of little Eddy Bellegueule; the narrator of Louis's two new books is the Bourdieu- and Marx-reading graduate of the École Normale Supérieure.

Both *The End of Eddy* and *History of Violence* were celebrated as works of gay autofiction, and Louis was hailed by many critics as the descendant of Proust, Jean Genet, and Edmund White. But *Who Killed My Father* and *A Woman's Battles and Transformations* belong to a different tradition: the literature of class defectors.

Like Annie Ernaux's *A Woman's Story* and *A Man's Place*, Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, and Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* (all books lavishly praised by Louis), they tell the story of his working-class parents from the perspective of their mournful and now mostly bourgeois son. Louis's sexuality remains essential to both books, but class is now paramount.

**I**ndeed, in *Who Killed My Father* and *A Woman's Battles and Transformations*, Louis explicitly tackles a challenge that has long plagued writers of social realism: how to portray individual members of the proletariat but also make them representatives of their class. In these books about his parents, Louis abandons the inward first-person narration of his autobiographical debut and instead alternates between the distant "he" and "she" and the confidential "you." The restrained third person allows Louis to write without sentimentality and thereby demonstrate his commitment to dispassionate social scientific investigation, but the intimacy of the second person complicates this. Following Annie Ernaux, Louis shows that his determination to analyze events like an objective sociologist is always coupled with a yearning to remember like a forlorn child. He also eschews the techniques that novelists tend to rely on to represent interiority and instead describes mental states in sober, unadorned prose, as in this passage on his father:

You never got over the separation from my mother. It destroyed something inside you. As always happens, being apart made you realize how much you loved her. After the breakup, you became more sensitive to the world. You got sick more often. Everything hurt. It is as if the pain of the separation had opened up a wound and everything around you—your world in all its violence—came rushing in.

*Who Killed My Father* and *A Woman's Battles and Transformations* are not works of psychological depth. But that is part of the point: With the diligence of an ethnographer, Louis presents his parents from the outside. He carefully inventories the emotions that overpower the indigent—shame,

Tara K. Menon is an assistant professor of English at Harvard and a junior fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows.

anxiety, dread, despair—and chronicles the material conditions that cause them.

The formal experiments of these books make for gripping, but sometimes also jarring, reading. In Louis's defense, he is trying to solve a problem that is perhaps unsolvable when it comes to narrative fiction: Even Thomas Hardy couldn't make Tess Durbeyfield simultaneously a tragic heroine and a typical milkmaid. Likewise, Louis cannot make his father at once unique and allegorical. In both books, he finds himself caught in the bind of representation: To make his readers care about the factory workers of the North, he first has to make them care about his factory-worker father and his housewife mother. But if they care too much about either, they might come to believe that his parents are somehow different, more worthy, than their neighbors. (Who among us doesn't believe that Retty Priddle is no Tess?)

Louis is also aware that his class mobility has irrevocably altered his relationship to this world. He must now speak on behalf of a class to which he no longer belongs. The danger here is that his outrage about the injustices faced by the working class might start to feel manufactured instead of authentic. Is it possible for him, now securely a member of both the bourgeoisie and the literary establishment, to feel the same rage and resentment that he did as a child? Louis's anger does feel pure, but he cannot avoid the guilt of the defector. All of this makes *Who Killed My Father* and *A Woman's Battles and Transformations* chimerical works—part polemic, part confession, part apology.

**I**n *The End of Eddy*, Louis's father is a brute, someone who elicits fear, loathing, and disgust from his long-suffering wife and children. On the one hand, he never once lays a finger on any of his biological children or his stepchildren, even though he was beaten by his own father growing up—"violence had saved us from violence," as Louis notes. But in every other way, Louis's father is a petty domestic tyrant. Once, in an act of startling sadism, he pours a litter

of kittens into a bag and smashes them against concrete.

*Who Killed My Father* is a sobering, clear-eyed account of one man's slow and steady degradation: in addition to his physically abusive father and his own hard drinking, his decision to quit school at age 14; his brief, unsuccessful attempt to avoid the fate of the factory workers who came before him; his accident at work, which crushed his back and left him incapacitated; and finally, after the state rescinds his disability benefits, his forced return to work. "It is hard to describe your life in anything but negative terms," Louis writes. Using his father as a representative subject, Louis catalogs the indignities heaped on working-class bodies: diabetes, cholesterol, obesity, fatigue, pain." Paraphrasing Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Louis asserts, "You belong to the category of humans whom politics has doomed to an early death." In a single sentence, Louis addresses

the unique individual who is his father and then transmutes him into a type.

Part of the allure of Louis's writing is his undisguised, unapologetic fury. In *The End of Eddy*, this anger was raw and wild. He set it loose on whoever was closest: his schoolmates, his siblings, and often his parents. In *Who Killed My Father*, his fury has been trained and redirected. The new target is the ruling class.

The lucidity that comes with this anger is why there is no question mark in the title of his only work of nonfiction—Louis already knows the answer. In plain, direct prose, he enumerates the crimes of the smirking suits who have ruled French politics for the past few decades: Jacques Chirac (who took away state coverage of his father's medicine), Nicolas Sarkozy (who led a campaign against "*les assistés*" and forced his father back to work), and François Hollande (who passed a labor law making it easier to fire workers and increase working hours). But Louis reserves special ire for the smug claymation president currently in power:

August 2017. The government of Emmanuel Macron withdraws five euros per month from the most vulnerable people in France: it reduces—by five euros—the housing subsidies that allow France's poor-

est people to pay their monthly rent. The same day, or a day or two later, the government announces a tax cut for the wealthiest in France. It thinks the poor are too rich, and that the rich aren't rich enough. Macron's government explains that five euros per month is nothing. They have no idea. They pronounce these criminal sentences because they have no idea. Emmanuel Macron is taking the bread out of your mouth.

If you like subtlety, Louis is not for you. (You probably wouldn't be for him either.) A writer like Louis might sensibly worry about the utility of books as a tool of class struggle, but the work itself retains a sense of urgency. It is this radiant anger that saves Louis from the despair that consumes so many of his fellow millennials. He makes it easy to share his rage about the ruling class's contempt and neglect, even if his attempts to shame the shame-proof feel futile.

**W**ho Killed My Father not only condemns the powerful men of French politics; it also indicts the left for abandoning the working class. In the American press, Louis has been lazily compared to J.D. Vance of *Hillbilly Elegy* fame. Both seem concerned to explain why their communities shifted political allegiances—an account, desperately sought by the mainstream press in the wake of recent elections, of why these people are attracted to the likes of Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump. Yet only a fool could conflate Louis and Vance. They might both write about the hardships of left-behind communities, but they have come to incompatible conclusions about the solutions. On his campaign page, Vance laid out his anti-abortion, anti-immigrant, pro-Second Amendment agenda and defended the "conservative way of life that values grit, determination, and freedom." He has, in other words, embraced what Louis has called the "false explanations" of the right. The final words of Louis and Lagasnerie's "Manifesto for an Intellectual and Political Counteroffensive" (first published in *Le Monde*) sum up their mission: "to bring the left to life." Vance wants the keys to the castle; Louis wants to burn it to the ground.

By rerouting his rage—away from the



individual, toward the state—the Louis of *Who Killed My Father* has sharpened it. His expanded vision yields a clarity that produces a wholly different picture of the man. Louis constructs this revised draft by assembling a series of anecdotes. (He has never been much interested in plot or linearity.) Several of these anecdotes are not new. Louis restates facts, even whole incidents, from his first novel, but they are refracted through a different lens. Louis embraces repetition as a political gesture: The working class has been so absent from literature, he has said, that he is determined to tell the same story over and over again.

But his newfound sympathy for his father also allows other, happier recollections to rise to the surface. We see his father blushing after his son finds out he used to dance; tearing up while listening to the opera; crying when the Twin Towers were hit on 9/11; singing loudly with his son to a pirated copy of a Celine Dion album; laughing riotously after his son imitates an alien; and buying him a videocassette of *Titanic* and letting him watch it on repeat. Louis, who has always seen himself as a source of deep shame for his father, realizes that he is also a source of intense pride for him.

The man who emerges in this book is almost unrecognizable—capable of tenderness and exuberance, deserving of compassion. Louis realizes that, despite the callous shield his father has developed over the course of his unhappy life, he loves his son fiercely. This discovery exacts a confession from son to father: “It often seems to me that I love you.”

**T**o do justice to his mother in *A Woman's Battles and Transformations*, however, Louis recasts his father in the role of drunken bully. With the detachment of a social anthropologist, he reports on his mother's innumerable struggles during the “twenty years of her life deformed and almost destroyed by misery and masculine violence.” Her childhood, mostly a blank, is marked by the death of her factory-worker father. At 16, while she is at culinary school pursuing her modest ambition of becoming a cook, she is impregnated by a man who asks her to keep the baby. So she drops out of school and marries him. Before she is 20, she has had two children with

an alcoholic husband who beats her and cheats on her. It is only after he starts waking up “drunk even before he started drinking, the alcohol no longer draining from his body,” that she decides to leave him. Soon after, she marries Louis's father.

This second marriage sours quickly too. Louis's father is a volatile domestic authoritarian. Though he doesn't beat her like her first husband, he seeks to

demean her—“fat cow” is a typical jibe. Added to the injury of insult is the insult of monotony. She is imprisoned by the dull routine of housework, oppressed by “the precise duplication of hours and days that life with my father imposed upon her,” Louis writes. When, despite an IUD, she gets pregnant for the fourth time, she is dismayed to discover that there are two fetuses. She wants an abortion—she knows they cannot afford another two mouths to feed—but her husband refuses to allow it: “He decided, she ceded.” The cycle of poverty is complete. The tragedy of Louis's mother's life is that it replicates the lives of so many other working-class women.

The accident that seriously injures Louis's father transforms the family “from being poor to being destitute,” which forces his mother into an exhausting, humbling job as a home health aide. The physical agony that her husband's injury causes him and the indignity of no longer serving as the family's breadwinner increase his taste for bullying. Louis's mother returns, after long days of backbreaking labor, to a man who lashes out to remedy his own suffering: “She no longer had a story of her own; her story could only be, ultimately, his story.”

Compounding the everyday deprivation of his mother's life is her constant yearning for something better. She had always wanted to be different from the people around her. (She married her second husband because, unlike every other man she knew, he wore cologne.) At one point, she fights through the endless

hurdles of bureaucracy just to take her family on vacation. She maintains her dignity by holding on to pride. She insists on the superiority of her family over her husband's (her relatives work; his are unemployed or in prison). She makes sure her children know that her job is as a home health aide, not a cleaning lady, and, like Hardy's Tess, she claims to have an aristocratic heritage. At one point, Louis steps back from his narration to muse: “Why do I feel as though I'm writing a sad story when my aim was to tell the story of a liberation.”

Louis's mother is forbidden to wear makeup—one of his father's pettiest acts as household dictator. Recognizing this, Louis writes:

I started this book wanting to tell the story of a woman, but I've realized that yours is the story of a human being who fought for the right to exist as a woman, as opposed to the nonexistence imposed upon you by your life, and by life with my father.

What he means is that women like his mother have been deprived of their femininity by the patriarchy. Nevertheless, it is odd to downplay gender here when describing someone whose every aspiration in life has been foiled by a series of mostly unwanted pregnancies, who escapes one bad marriage only to enter another, and who has been forced by these circumstances to stay at home in order to cook, clean, and look after the children. It sounds like the story of a woman to me.

**L**ouis feels compelled to tell his mother's story after he accidentally stumbles across a photo of her before she became his mother. In it, she looks free, even happy. The image evokes shock, then anger, sadness, and finally remorse:

Seeing the photo reminded me that those twenty years of devastation were not anything natural but were the result of external forces—society, masculinity, my father—and that things could have been otherwise.

The vision of her happiness made me feel the injustice of her destruction.

**To do justice to his mother, Louis ends up telling a very different story about his father in *Woman's Battles and Transformations*.**

I cried when I saw this image because I was, despite myself—or perhaps, rather, along with her and sometimes against her—one of the agents of this destruction.

Guilt taints almost every memory in *A Woman's Battles and Transformations*. Louis relentlessly tallies the ways that he was hostile to his mother as a young child: pretending that he didn't know her when another child asked who she was; saying that he wishes his teacher was his mother instead; screaming that she had to stop on the rare occasions when she was enjoying herself. "I didn't understand why," he admits, "but I hated seeing her happy."

Yet all this pales in comparison to the way Louis treats his mother after he starts to attend high school and enters the universe of what she calls "*les bourgeois*." As with his father, so too with his mother: Once Louis moves away from home to attend a performing-arts high school in Amiens, the schism between them deepens.

When I came back to the village those first times, I wanted to show you my new membership—that is to say the growing divide between my life and yours. It was above all through language that I made this distinction. I was learning different words in high school, and these words became the symbols of new life—unimportant words like *bucolic*, *fastidious*, *laborious*, *underlying*. They were words I'd never heard before. I used them with you, and you got annoyed: Enough of your minister's vocabulary! You'd say, *That* guy—ever since he went to high school he thinks he's better than us.

As soon as he is able, Louis wields these new weapons at his disposal—books, an expanded vocabulary, proper grammar and etiquette—and attacks his mother with them. At every opportunity, he asserts his superiority, but his mother, no fool, recognizes the ploy instantly. And his motives, Louis confesses, were never pure: "I became a class defector out of revenge." As the social gap between them expands, it brings a new truce, but only at the cost of silence. Inhabitants of separate worlds, mother and son no longer have anything to say to each other; what once united

them no longer exists. "When I was a child," Louis writes, "we felt ashamed together—of our house, our poverty. Now I was ashamed of you, against you. Our shame had parted ways."

One day, struck by agonizing stomach pains, Louis comes home and begs his mother to call for help. Convinced that he is acting like a spoiled little rich boy, she refuses to lift a finger; actually, she barely stops watching television. When he finally drags himself to the hospital, he learns that his appendix is a few hours from bursting. Yet so firm is Louis's commitment to his novelistic social science that he presents his mother's act of astonishing negligence by outlining the conditions that produced it:

I saw what was happening: you thought I was exaggerating the pain because I was behaving like city folk, the people I had wanted to be like ever since I started at the high school in Amiens, privileged people. In our world, medicine and relationships with doctors had always been considered a way for *les bourgeois* to feel important by taking meticulous and extreme care of themselves. Essentially, I think you saw this scene as an extension of all the others since the beginning of our estrangement; as my way of showing class differences, of attacking you. (And how could I reproach you for it, since it's true, I was waging a war against you?)

**Y**et when he begins to visit the homes of his bourgeois friends in the city, Louis comes to realize that not all women are treated like the women in his village: They are not publicly humiliated or beaten until their faces are swollen. He comes to recognize too that his mother's incessant talking, which used to drive him crazy, was a way to ease her boredom. Later, when his mother asks if she can clean his house for money—if she can become his cleaning lady—Louis, who has otherwise reveled in his newfound class privilege, is forced to reckon with the reality of his new status: "Had I become one of those bodies I'd hated?"

Unlike *Who Killed My Father*, however, *A Woman's Battles and Transformations* is also the story of a parent's liberation. One day, out of the blue, Louis's mother

calls him to announce, "At last. I've done it." Louis knows, even before she tells him, that she has decided to divorce his father. The decision to end her marriage changes her life. She moves to Paris and starts to dress better, to wear makeup and jewelry, to color her hair, to speak differently. She is, miraculously, happy. The transformation is radical: "Nothing about her resembled the woman who had been my mother," Louis writes. It is tempting to call her a new woman, but it might be more accurate to say that the woman in the photograph has finally come back to life.

The separation of Louis's parents also brings mother and son closer together. Louis notes, with some satisfaction, the reversal of their fortunes:

It's strange: We both started our lives as History's losers—she the woman, I the dissident, monstrous child. But as in a mathematical equation, a perfectly symmetrical inversion, the losers of the world we shared became the winners, and the winners the losers.

Louis doesn't pretend that this is a fairy-tale ending—he knows his mother is still reliant on a man, still lonely, still relatively poor—but he cannot help seeing it as a victory. Their shared journey from hardship to freedom brings relief, for Louis and the reader alike. Yet there is something disappointing about this story of individual (rather than class) liberation. Louis's stated desire that this book might serve as "the home in which she might take refuge" feels like a surrender to the personal. In the final pages of *A Woman's Battles and Transformations*, the child conquers the sociologist.

**W**hat makes Louis's books required reading is his readiness to depict ugly behavior, but to do so in a way that always provides context for it. Recent fiction about the working class—Douglas Stuart's Booker Prize-winning *Shuggie Bain*, for example—is often reluctant to do this. The milieus of *The End of Eddy* and *Shuggie Bain* are nearly identical: a blighted postindustrial community ravaged by addiction and violence. Like rural northern France, inner-city Glasgow in the 1980s was not exactly a friendly place for a young boy desperately failing to hide his sexuality.





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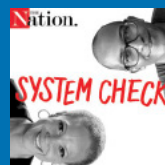
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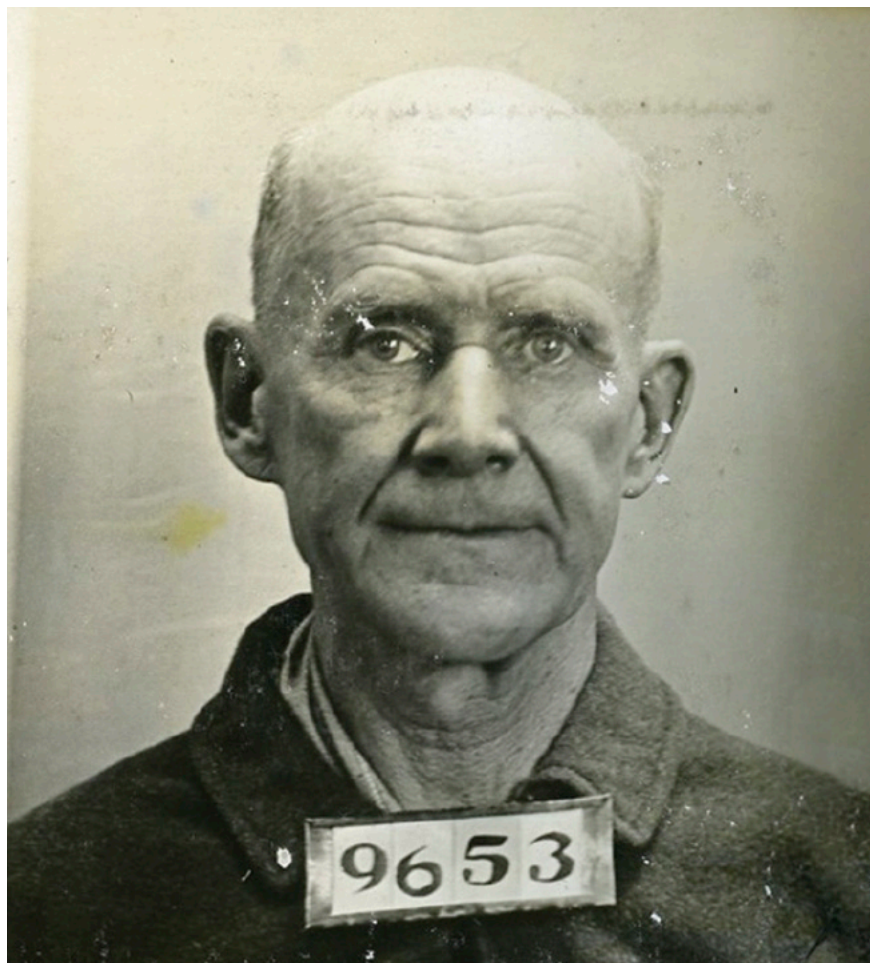
Poor, gay, and misunderstood by everyone around them, both Shuggie (Stuart's avatar) and Eddy live as creatures in anguish.

Yet for all the similarity, Stuart and Louis see the world differently, and this is how Louis sets himself off from his peers. Although *Shuggie Bain* is, if more implicitly, a political novel (Thatcher is Stuart's unnamed villain), anger is entirely absent from the book. Stuart's novel is set in a world without monsters: Even Shuggie's stepfather, the closest any character comes to malevolence, is accorded a moment of sympathy. Shuggie's alcoholic mother is neglectful—at times, criminally so—but she is never intentionally cruel. She is sweet and kind, caring when she's not drowning in her own vomit. It is an extraordinarily sympathetic account by a man who, because his mother spent all of their benefits money on drink for herself instead of food for her children, was often left hungry. Yet Shuggie, despite all the suffering, is an angelic child, and one devoted to his mother—her caretaker, guardian, and fiercest defender.

In Louis's world, there are no angels. Cruelty abounds. Though Stuart presents working-class people with more generosity, Louis's depiction of poverty is more radical in its honesty. Deprivation doesn't just cause pain and hunger; it also fosters hostility. Circumstances warp behavior. And it isn't always the schoolyard bullies or nasty neighbors who cause the most distress; often, it is those closest to you. Louis is scathing about the government's neglect of the working class, but he also makes no attempt to sugarcoat the psychological effects of poverty.

Today, liberals are increasingly uncomfortable with representations that show members of oppressed groups in a negative light. They think such representations demean them, rendering them less worthy of sympathy, and worry that showing the marginalized at their worst will make them easy targets for the right. Louis has no patience with this. He knows that hunger and pain can make you mean. It is poverty, not its representation, that is demeaning. To deny this is to sanitize the effects of poverty, perhaps to the point of allowing us to forget about them. Louis indicts the politicians who have failed his family, but he is also writing for the enervated left. There is no one solution

to reverse the course we are on, but Louis insists that we start by looking reality in the eye. **N**



## War Fever

*The crusade against civil liberties during World War I*

BY ERIC FONER



WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR, every military conflict in which the United States has taken part has generated an anti-war movement. During the American Revolution, numerous Loyalists preferred British rule to a war for independence. New Englanders opposed the War of 1812; most Whigs denounced the Mexican-American War launched by the Democratic president James K. Polk; and both the Union and the Confederacy were internally divided during the Civil War. More recently, the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan split the country. At the same time, wars often create an atmosphere of hyper-patriotism, leading to the equation of dissent with treason and to the severe treatment of critics. During the struggle for independence, many Loyalists were driven into exile. Both sides in the Civil

War arrested critics and suppressed anti-war newspapers. But by far the most extreme wartime violations of civil liberties (with the major exception of Japanese American internment during the Second World War) took place during World War I. This is the subject of Adam Hochschild's latest book, *American Midnight*.

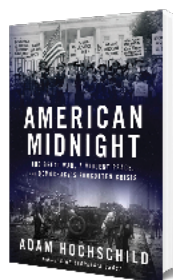


**A**dam Hochschild is one of the few historians whose works regularly appear on best-seller lists, a tribute to his lucid writing style, careful research, and unusual choice of subject matter. Most historians who reach an audience outside the academy focus on inspirational figures like the founding fathers or formidable achievements such as the building of the transcontinental railroad. Hochschild, on the other hand, writes about villains and rebels. His best-known book, *King Leopold's Ghost*, is an account of the Belgian monarch's violent exploitation of the Congo, one of the worst crimes against humanity in a continent that has suffered far too many of them. When Hochschild writes about more admirable figures, his heroes are activists and reformers: British antislavery campaigners in *Bury the Chains*, the birth control advocate and socialist Rose Pastor Stokes in *Rebel Cinderella*, the Americans who fought in the Spanish Civil War in *Spain in Our Hearts*.

*American Midnight* does not lack for heroic figures. But as Hochschild notes at the outset, the book presents a tale of "mass imprisonments, torture, vigilante violence, censorship, killings of Black Americans." It will certainly not enhance the reputation of President Woodrow Wilson or that of early 20th-century liberalism more broadly, nor will it reinforce the widely held idea that Americans possess an exceptional devotion to liberty.

Hochschild relates how, when the United States joined the conflict against Germany and its allies in 1917, "war fever swept the land." Some examples of the widespread paranoia seem absurd: Hamburgers became "liberty sandwiches," frankfurters "hot dogs." (The latter name stuck, unlike the rechristening of french fries as "freedom fries" in 2003, after France refused to support the Iraq War.) The German Hospital and Dispensary in New York City changed its name to Lenox Hill Hospital (even though no hill is to be found nearby). In New Haven, Conn., volunteers manned an anti-aircraft gun around the clock, oblivious to the fact that Germany had no aircraft capable of reaching the United States. Neighbors accused Karl Muck, the German-born conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, of radioing military information to submarines from his vacation home on the coast of Maine. Anecdotes like these have long enlivened history classrooms. But Hochschild also details the brutal treatment of conscientious objectors subjected to various forms of torture in military prison camps, including the infamous "water cure" the Army had employed in the Philippines, nowadays known as waterboarding.

In 1917 and 1918, Wilson and Congress codified this patriotic fervor in the Espionage and Sedition Acts. These laws had nothing to do with espionage as the term is commonly understood (and



### **American Midnight**

*The Great War,  
a Violent Peace,  
and Democracy's  
Forgotten Crisis*

By Adam Hochschild  
Mariner.

421 pp. \$29.99

Hochschild points out that hardly any German spies were actually apprehended). The former criminalized almost any utterance that might interfere with the war effort; the latter outlawed saying or printing anything that cast "disrepute" on the country's "form of government." States supplemented these measures with their own laws and decrees, including banning speaking on the telephone in German or advocating "a change in industrial ownership." It is difficult to say how many people were arrested under these statutes, but the number certainly reached into the thousands.

Meanwhile, private organizations such as the Knights of Liberty and the American Protection League took the law into their own hands. The APL investigated the "disloyal" by, among other methods, purloining documents, and it swept up thousands of Americans in "slacker raids," in which men were accosted on the streets, in hotels, and in railway stations and were required to produce draft cards. If a person did not have one, he would be dragged off to prison. Throughout the country, individuals who refused to buy war bonds were tarred and feathered and paraded through their communities. German Americans everywhere came under suspicion for disloyalty, as did members of other immigrant groups. In the years

before the war, Southern and Eastern Europeans had immigrated to the United States in unprecedented numbers, sometimes bringing political radicalism with them, and they too found themselves in the crosshairs of nativism.

The atmosphere of intolerance opened the door to settling scores that predated the war. Long anxious to rid the nation of the Industrial Workers of the World, business leaders and local and national officials seized on the organization's outspoken opposition to the war to crush it. All sorts of atrocities were committed against IWW members, from Frank Little, an organizer who was lynched in Montana, to the more than 1,000 striking copper miners in Bisbee, Ariz., who were rounded up by police and a small private army hired by the Phelps Dodge company, then driven into the desert and left to fend for themselves. Local police routinely raided the IWW's offices without a warrant. In 1918, over 100 "Wobblies" were indicted for conspiracy to violate the Espionage and Sedition Acts, resulting in the largest civilian criminal trial in American history. Every defendant was found guilty and received a jail sentence.

Hochschild brings this history to life by introducing the reader to a diverse cast of characters, some well-known, many unfamiliar even to scholars. His protagonists include Ralph Van Deman, who oversaw the surveillance of Americans deemed unpatriotic. Having honed his skills in the Philippines by keeping track of opponents of American annexation, Van Deman became head of the newly created Army Intelligence branch—the first time, according to Hochschild, that the US Army spied on American civilians. One of Van Deman's men was among the first to tap Americans' telephones. The surveillance reports in government archives also allowed Hochschild to follow the exploits of Louis Walsh, a militant labor activist in Pittsburgh who was actually Leo Wendell, a paid government agent who sent a "blizzard" of paperwork to the Bureau of Investigation, the FBI's forerunner. Wendell boasted of joining "prominent Reds" in stirring up violence, providing a justification for further repression.

The Espionage Act empowered the Post Office to exclude from the mail publications that undermined the war effort. Postmaster

*Eric Foner is an American historian and a member of The Nation's editorial board.*

General Albert S. Burleson interpreted this as an authorization to go after any published expression of dissent. In the first year of American participation in the war, Burleson banned 44 periodicals. He also suppressed individual issues of other publications, including the one you are reading now. Issues of *The Gaelic American*, a supporter of Irish independence, were barred for fear of offending our British ally. Burleson particularly targeted the Socialist Party press, which consisted of numerous small local newspapers—a powerful blow against the party’s efforts to communicate with its membership. His first target, though, was a small Texas newspaper, *The Rebel*, whose offense had less to do with the war than with having published an exposé of how Burleson had replaced Mexican and white tenant farmers with convict laborers on a cotton plantation his wife had inherited. And his crusade against unorthodox opinion continued after the armistice: Even as the Paris Peace Conference deliberated in 1919, the New York *World* commented, Burleson acted as if “the war is either just beginning or is still going on.”

To ensure that Americans received the right kind of news, not the “false statements” criminalized by the Espionage Act, the federal government launched a massive wartime propaganda campaign, spearheaded by the newly created Committee on Public Information. Headed by the journalist George Creel, the CPI flooded the country with publications, films, and posters. It mobilized journalists, academics, and artists to produce pro-war works, as well as some 75,000 “Four Minute Men” trained to deliver brief speeches at venues including churches, movie theaters, and county fairs. In previous wars, such propaganda had been disseminated by nongovernmental organizations. But Wilson decided that patriotism was too important to be left to the private sector. Much of Creel’s output whipped up hatred of the Germans as barbaric “Huns.” But he also put forth a vision of the country’s future strongly influenced by the era’s Progressive movement, a postwar world in which democracy would be extended into the workplace and the vast gap between rich and poor ameliorated. This wartime rhetoric was one contributor to an upsurge of radicalism after the conflict ended, when it became apparent that no such changes were in the offing. Creel’s success at shaping wartime public opinion, Hochschild remarks, launched the symbiotic relationship between advertising and politics so visible today. It alarmed observers like the political commentator Walter Lippmann, who in a series of writings in the 1920s lamented that while democracy required an independent-minded citizenry, the war experience demonstrated that

public opinion could be shaped and manipulated by the authorities.

Then there was Wilson’s attorney general, A. Mitchell Palmer. Obsessed with deporting radical immigrants, the “fighting Quaker,” as the press called him, launched what came to be known as the Palmer Raids, which lasted from November 1919 into the following year. By this point, the First World War was over, but not the Wilson administration’s war on the American left. Thousands of people—critics of the war and suspected socialists and anarchists—were arrested, mostly without a warrant. Many who had recently immigrated and not become citizens were deported. The Palmer Raids dealt a serious blow to the left, and they were followed by one of the most conservative decades in US history.

**A**merican *Midnight* does introduce the reader to more praiseworthy figures. Hochschild devotes considerable attention to the great anarchist and feminist orator Emma Goldman, who spent much of the war in prison for conspiracy to interfere with the draft and was deported a year after the arrival of peace as an undesirable alien. In contrast to Burleson, Palmer, and the enigmatic Wilson, whom Hochschild describes as simultaneously an “inspirational idealist” and a “nativist autocrat,” a few government officials remained committed to constitutional principles. If the book has a hero, it is Louis F. Post, the assistant secretary of labor, who ran the Labor Department in the spring of 1920 when his boss was away because of family illness. Post’s career embodied much of the 19th-century radical tradition: His forebears were abolitionists, and he himself participated in Reconstruction

in the South. Post was an ardent follower of Henry George, the popular late 19th-century economist who proposed a “single tax” on land to combat economic inequality. For a time, Post edited a magazine that opposed America’s war in the Philippines, denounced the power of big business, and called for unrestricted immigration. He directed the Labor Department for only six months, but in that time he invalidated thousands of deportation orders that lacked the proper paperwork and released numerous immigrants being held, ironically, at Ellis Island awaiting expulsion from the United States. He also refused to be intimidated when a congressional committee held hearings about his actions.

One individual who doesn’t quite get the attention he deserves is Eugene V. Debs, the most prominent leader of the Socialist Party, which on the eve of the war was a major presence in parts of the United States, with 150,000 dues-paying members and a thriving local press. The party controlled the local government in many working-class communities, sent elected members to Congress, and won almost 1 million votes for Debs in the presidential election of 1912. Compared with the colorful IWW, with its *Little Red Songbook* and its rallying cry of “One Big Union,” the Socialists seem boringly respectable, which perhaps accounts for their relative neglect here. But they arguably had a greater impact on American life. The Socialist Party was the largest organization to oppose America’s entry into the war.

Debs was arrested in 1918 after delivering a speech in Canton, Ohio, critical of the draft. He received a sentence of 10 years in prison for violating the Espionage Act. Before his sentencing, he delivered a brief speech to the jury that remains a classic vindication of freedom of

expression. “I look upon the Espionage Law as a despotic enactment in flagrant conflict with democratic principles and with the spirit of free institutions,” Debs declared. He traced the right to criticize the government from Thomas Paine to the abolitionists and women’s suffrage leaders. While Wilson and his administration proclaimed themselves the creators of a new, liberal world order, Debs asked, “Isn’t it strange that we Socialists

**Wilson’s rhetorical  
commitment to  
democracy stopped at  
the color line.**



stand almost alone today in upholding and defending the Constitution of the United States?" After the war ended, Wilson rebuffed appeals for Debs's release. "I will never consent to the pardon of this man," he declared. It was left to his successor, Warren G. Harding, a conservative Republican, to free Debs from prison in 1921.

**H**ochschild presents a vivid account of this turbulent time. But he does not really explain one of its many disturbing features: why so many Progressive-era intellectuals failed to raise their voices against the suppression of free speech. Many, in fact, enlisted in the CPI's propaganda campaign. Although the Progressive movement, which envisioned government as an embodiment of democratic purpose, is sometimes viewed as a precursor of the New Deal and the Great Society, it differed from them in a crucial respect: Civil liberties were not among the Progressives' major concerns. Many saw the lone person standing up to authority as an example of excessive individualism, which they identified as a cause of many of the nation's problems. They believed that the expansion of federal power required by the war would enable their movement to fulfill many of its goals for social reconstruction, from the public regulation of business to the creation of social welfare programs, and they also hoped that the mobilization of America for war would help integrate recent immigrants into a more harmonious and more equal society.

Hochschild says nothing about one of the most memorable exchanges of these years, the debate over American participation in the war between the prominent intellectual John Dewey and the brilliant young writer Randolph Bourne. Hailing the "social possibilities" created by the conflict, Dewey urged Progressives to support American involvement. In response, Bourne ridiculed the idea that forward-looking thinkers could guide the conflict according to their own "liberal purposes." It was far more likely, he wrote, that the war would empower the "least democratic forces in American life." War, Bourne famously declared, "is the health of the state," and as such posed a threat to individual liberty.

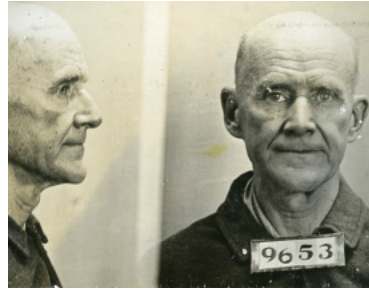
Despite the clear words of the First Amendment, the Supreme Court offered no assistance to those seeking to defend civil liberties. Early in 1919, the justices unanimously sustained the conviction of the Socialist Party's Charles T. Schenck for violating the Espionage Act by distributing leaflets opposing the draft. A week later, it upheld Debs's conviction. The same result followed in 1919 in the case of Jacob Abrams and four others jailed for distributing publications opposing US intervention in the Russian Civil War. This time, however, Justices Oliver Wendell Holmes and Louis Brandeis dissented. The next year, 1920, saw the formation of the American Civil Liberties Union, founded by an impressive group of believers in free speech, including Jane Addams, Roger N. Baldwin, Helen Keller, and Oswald Garrison Villard, the editor of *The Nation*. The ACLU would wage a long battle to invigorate the First Amendment. Its efforts were initially stymied, its own pamphlets defending civil liberties barred from the mail. But the excesses of wartime repression were finally beginning to generate opposition.

**H**ow can we explain the "explosion of martial ferocity" in a country where respect for the free individual is supposedly the culture's bedrock? Hochschild doesn't offer a single explanation, but he directs the reader's attention to a number of factors—historical, material, political, and psychological—that "fed the violence." They include nativism, which made it easy to identify radical ideas with immigrants; the "brutal habits" (which is to say, a penchant for torture) picked up by the military in the Philippine-American War; and the long-standing hostility of business leaders to trade unions and socialists. He notes that Palmer sought the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 1920, hoping to ride the hysteria he had helped create all the way to the White House. Hochschild also suggests that American

men felt uneasy at a time when "the balance of power between the sexes" was changing, with women rapidly moving into the workplace and the campaign for women's suffrage reaching its culmination. War offered a way to reinvigorate an endangered masculinity. As Lippmann observed, World War I created a situation in which all sorts of preexisting prejudices and fears could be acted out, a perfect storm in which "hatreds and violence...turned against all kinds of imaginary enemies."

One additional element should be noted: As Black Americans streamed out of the South to take up jobs suddenly available in Northern industry because the war cut off European immigration, "race riots" broke out in East St. Louis, Chicago, Tulsa, and other cities. Protests by Blacks who came to realize that Wilson's rhetoric about democracy did not apply to the American South were met with an upsurge in lynchings. Some of the victims were soldiers still in uniform. W.E.B. Du Bois had urged Black people to enlist in the armed forces to stake a claim to equal citizenship. Instead, as he put it, "the forces of hell" had been unleashed "in our own land."

Wilson's deep-seated racism has been the subject of much discussion in the past few years. Princeton University recently removed his name from its School of International and Public Affairs. (This step was taken almost entirely because of his racial views; there was little discussion of the wartime suppression of civil liberties.) The first Southern-born president elected since the Civil War, Wilson grew up in Columbia, S.C., during Reconstruction, a time of major gains for African Americans but also a campaign of violence by the Ku Klux Klan and kindred organizations. Wilson shared the prevailing disdain among white Southerners for the enfranchisement of Black voters during Reconstruction and embraced the system known as Jim Crow that followed, which locked Blacks into second-class citizenship. One of his initiatives as president was to segregate



**It is striking how many Southerners held high positions in the Wilson administration.**

the civil service in Washington, D.C.

It is striking how many Southerners held high positions in the Wilson administration. Wilson's closest adviser, Col. Edward House, was from Texas; his physician, Dr. Cary Grayson, and Wilson's wife, Edith, who together effectively ran the government after Wilson suffered a severe stroke in 1919, were from Virginia. Creel's grandfather was a Missouri slave owner. The father and grandfather of Postmaster General Burleson served in the Confederate Army, and Burleson believed that "offensive Negro papers" were among the country's most dangerous publications. At home and abroad, Wilson's rhetorical commitment to democracy stopped at the color line. The promise of a postwar liberal world order outlined in his Fourteen Points did not apply to the colonized peoples of Asia and Africa or to the American South. One would hardly anticipate respect for the rule of law, or for basic constitutional rights, from an administration with so many members who had roots in the Confederacy and the Jim Crow South. Once some parts of the Constitution have been abrogated, it is easy to ignore the rest.

Hochschild ends this powerful and disturbing history on a surprisingly optimistic note. The very excesses of the World War I era, he writes, "gave Americans a greater appreciation of the Bill of Rights." It is true that in subsequent years the government did not censor newspapers, arrest thousands of critics, or engage in the sadistic torture of prisoners (at least those incarcerated in the United States). But the echoes of the World War I era survive. The Espionage Act remains on the books. The wartime hunt for radicals created the modern FBI and launched the systematic surveillance of political activity that continues to this day. The demonization of immigrants, the disdain for democracy, and the penchant for labeling political opponents as unpatriotic are all features of our current moment.

One conclusion we might glean from Hochschild's history lesson is the fragility of our freedoms. As Abraham Lincoln declared in his Lyceum speech of 1838—another time of lynch mobs and the denial of basic liberties (for abolitionists, Native Americans, and Mormons, among others)—the danger to freedom lies within: "If destruction be our lot, we ourselves will be the authors." **N**



## Last of Its Kind

*The return of James Cameron's Avatar*

BY ERIN SCHWARTZ



**I**N 2019, I SCREENED A SERIES OF FILMS IN MY APARTMENT organized around the theme of "Obama Baroque," a term coined by the art collective DIS, which defined it as "renewed comfort in consumptive excess" following the 2008 financial crisis. Even then, the cultural products of the Obama years felt like artifacts from another era, ready to be historicized—bizarrely optimistic about the power of individuals in the face of obvious, planet-wide decline. Some of the criteria I developed for choosing the films were empirical—made between 2008 and 2014, with a budget in excess of \$50 million—and some were thematic ("vague gestures toward anti-capitalist critique"). There was never any question that the first film in the series would be James Cameron's space epic *Avatar*.

When *Avatar* premiered, in December 2009, I remember that it was a film everyone had to see, recommended less for its plot or characters than for the experience: being immersed in the realer-than-real CGI jungles of Pandora, riding along with a nine-foot-tall, blue-skinned, humanoid Na'vi on a prehistoric bird as it zigzags between floating mountains. I

ILLUSTRATION BY LILY QIAN



saw it in a suburban New Jersey multiplex and was dazzled. So were many others: About a month after its release, it overtook *Titanic*, another James Cameron production, to become the highest-grossing film worldwide, justifying its enormous budget and ending up with \$2.92 billion in ticket sales, a figure approaching the annual GDP of the nation of Bhutan. (*Avengers: Endgame* briefly took the top-grossing spot before *Avatar* regained it in 2021 with its rerelease in China; it was also rereleased in US theaters the following year.) According to one consumer-research study, about one in five American adults has seen the film in a theater.

Two sequels were announced in 2010, and then *Avatar* entered a curious lull. The flurry of official and unofficial activities that extend a blockbuster's cultural life—spin-offs, toys, games, theme parks, memes, fan theories, and the like—failed to accumulate. In 2019, the YouTuber Jack Douglas posted a video in which he offered money to people on the Santa Monica Pier if they could name a single character from *Avatar*. Most couldn't. "What I remember about that movie was there was a large yellow machine and there was an old man driving it, and some blue people," one respondent said. In an episode of *How to With John Wilson*, Wilson remarked that one of the few things people remember about the movie is that the Na'vi "make love by attaching their ponytails together."

Now, after eight years of delays (the first *Avatar* sequel was originally scheduled for 2014), Pandora is back, just beyond the lenses of our plastic-framed 3D glasses. *Avatar: The Way of Water* is merely the first of four planned sequels; the next film and part of the following one have already been shot. According to Cameron, making *The Way of Water* was "very fucking" expensive. He also told the studio that it represented "the worst business case in movie history," since it would have to become the third- or fourth-highest-grossing film of all time just to break even. (*The Hollywood Reporter* puts its budget at \$350–\$400 million; for comparison, the *Fast & Furious* movie where cars were driven out of an airplane two miles aboveground so that skydiving camera crews could capture them in free-fall had an estimated budget of \$250 million.) But so far, it's paying off, with *The Way of Water* already earning over \$2 billion in worldwide sales, on track with its predecessor.

It's strange to do this much business analysis at the start of a review. Cameron's advice for new filmmakers is "Don't make movies about movies," and a corollary might be "Don't write movie reviews about the movie business." But it's the brush you need to wade through to get to *Avatar*, a story of indigenous struggle on an alien planet, plucked from a drawer of unproduced scripts, this one written in part because Cameron wanted to showcase the work of his new special effects company. *Avatar*

and *The Way of Water* are not the "movies about movies" that Cameron dislikes, but they are exceptionally well calibrated toward what makes movies sell: that undefined appetite for wonder that brought 19th-century Parisians into small rooms to see grainy footage of workers leaving factories.

The *Avatar* franchise also marks what a studio can't stop Cameron from making. Since 2009, the film industry has been reshaped by acquisitions, notably the ill-fated merger of Time Warner and AT&T in 2016 and Disney's purchase of Marvel Studios in 2009, Lucasfilm in 2012, and 20th Century Fox in 2017 (and with it, the *Avatar* intellectual property). A few large companies—Disney, Comcast, and Warner Bros. Discovery—now dominate the global spending on content and sit on massive reserves of previously developed IP, which tend to represent less risk for big-budget productions than introducing viewers to something new.

It is easier to get a movie made if it repurposes a story with a sizable, sympathetic fan base that the studio already owns; the first *Avatar* film, which was drawn from Cameron's own imagination, represents an increasingly rare breed. But although the budgets for *Avatar* and its sequels indicate a hope that the Na'vi will join Disney's roster of well-established, durably marketable characters, the franchise has not quite fixed itself in the zeitgeist yet, except as the butt of jokes about people barely remembering it. There's something quixotic about it all: One of the few directors who can will a new franchise into existence on the strength of his box office record chooses to spin a yarn about bioluminescent jellyfish and ponytail sex, starring a Marine and his nine-foot-tall blue girlfriend.

**I**n *The Way of Water*, the protagonists—the human Marine turned Na'vi general Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), his wife, Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), and their four children—are driven from their home in the jungle by Jake's old Earth enemies. They take refuge with an oceanside community called the Metkayina, introducing viewers to a new ecosystem of extraterrestrial wonders: giant flying fish with flapping fins and long jaws like crocodiles; an underwater tree with leaves that float in the current like fleshy feathers. The importance of Pandoran fauna to the Na'vi sets up the film's final confrontation: To draw Jake out of hiding, his nemesis, Col. Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang)—who was killed in *Avatar* but, in a plot exigency, has now been cloned and reanimated in a Na'vi body—directs an attack on a pod of tulkun, whale-like creatures with a familial connection to the Metkayina. Two hunters (played by Jemaine Clement and Brendan Cowell) explain how to take down tulkun, a process with overt parallels to whaling: First, disrupt their ability to echolocate with sound cannons; next, target a mother with a calf and kill them with harpoons; finally, harvest a tiny amount of a valuable substance (ambergris on Earth; on Pandora, a golden liquid called amrita that halts aging) and discard the rest of the body.

The plots of both *Avatar* movies are generic; what sets them apart from similar films are the aesthetic details that make up the world of the Na'vi. If you had to define the look of Cameron's pre-*Avatar* films, the references would include fire and chrome, heavy machinery and wisecracking soldiers, not blue catgirls and glowing mushrooms. But *Avatar* is the expression of another set of interests: an affinity for the mind-bending environmental sci-fi of the 1970s—Cameron cites writers like Ray Bradbury and Stanisław Lem, as well as James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, the idea that a planet functions similarly to a self-regulating organism—and an appreciation for and "outrage" at the destruction of Earth's natural ecosystem.

Cameron often discusses these influences in the same breath as analogies between the Na'vi and Indigenous people: the First Nations of the Americas in the first film and the indigenous Oceanian peo-

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ples in *The Way of Water*, particularly the Māori. (At one point, the Metkayina leader performs a version of the haka, a Māori dance.) Cameron dates his “fascination” with Indigenous cultures to an anthropology class in college, and he has described *Avatar* as a “science-fiction retelling” of “the European destruction of native peoples, using military force, in order to acquire their land and resources,” according to a document he filed in 2012 to combat a plagiarism lawsuit. “Europe equals Earth. The native Americans are the Na’vi. It’s not meant to be subtle.”

*Avatar*’s relationship with Indigenous viewers has been contentious. Some comments that Cameron made in 2010 while protesting Brazil’s Belo Monte dam project—in which he opined that the Lakota Sioux “would have fought a lot harder” if they could have seen the present—recently resurfaced, prompting calls to boycott the film. In general, Cameron’s characterizations of Indigenous cultures show a lack of specificity that would be perplexing in any artist making

work about colonial dispossession, much less a director with a limitless budget and a reputation for exactness. “I see the Indigenous people that still remain in our world today as the people who are more connected to nature than we are in our industrialized urbanized civilization,” Cameron told the British men’s media outlet *Unilad*. Asked whether the *Avatar* films engage in cultural appropriation, he replied, “We try to draw from everything so we kind of average it out and we’re not extracting from any individual culture without their permission.”

*Avatar* and *The Way of Water*’s mishmash of Indigenous cultures reflects the problems with the franchise: Abstracting and systematizing things people care about can make for a successful blockbuster, but if you go too far, the connection to reality breaks. You’re left with something hackneyed, offensive, uncanny, or all of the above. At the *Avatar* theme park in Disneyland, which the YouTuber Jenny Nicholson describes as having “a ghoulish wrongness” about it, you can buy clip-on beaded hair extensions and a plastic walking stick and watch humans perform a traditional Na’vi drum circle, something the performers clarify that the Na’vi love. The films’ collage of woven and braided fiber crafts, percussion instruments, ear gauges, domed dwellings, and non-mechanized weaponry creates a sense of unplaceable indigeneity, without history or origin, though it serves as a great backdrop for special effects.

**A***avatar* is like some rare mineral, produced by one man’s ill-conceived aesthetic taste placed under the immense heat and pressure of the blockbuster industry. The product is scintillating, beautiful, and feels fairly useless. Some requisite elements of Hollywood’s hit-movie formula are barely transformed: Remove the lines about the Na’vi deity Eywa, and Jake’s descriptions of his “date nights” with Neytiri and his preference for having his sons call him “sir” could belong in a drama about the coach of a struggling Texas football team. The Na’vi, a species with the ability to connect with

other living beings with a degree of intimacy beyond human imagination, seem to favor heterosexual monogamy as the organizing unit of society, and they are also comfortable observing military hierarchy. They prefer male leaders, and Jake’s parenting style causes little friction. Everyone is thin, ripped, and able-bodied.

This generalized view of culture extends to Earth: Even though humans still inhabit Earth in *Avatar*, we know little about the state of our own world, other than our continued ability to muster a military, the fact we’ve destroyed the environment, and the existence of a busy market for alien goods.

Markets are, among other things, proxies for desires, and the desire we can glean from what people on Earth are buying is that they want to live forever—by buying amrita, the substance harvested from the whale-like tulkun, and by staving off extinction by relocating to Pandora. More mysterious or profane desires are absent.

For all the detail—a technically correct explosion, a faithful facsimile of what it looks like when a whale breaches to breathe—there’s a thinness to life on Pandora. Allegories often feel this way. When characters are part of a lesson, it’s troublesome to let them diverge from the flaws and strengths of the types they embody; to do so complicates the message. It also happens to be what makes stories feel real enough to remember as something other than an artifact of a particular time.

*The Way of Water* does show a shift from the franchise’s Obama-era origins: Its focus is more tightly on the nuclear family, its posture more defensive. “A father protects. It’s what gives him meaning,” Jake says in voiceover not once but twice, first at the beginning of the film and again at the end. Relatable and capacious enough to fit almost any ideology, *The Way of Water* has found an audience, which indicates that the franchise’s unstable footing in the zeitgeist hasn’t hurt its marketability. But there are still three sequels to go. By the time the final installment premieres, the world may be unrecognizable; we will probably be doing things that James Cameron could never even imagine.

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# Q&A

## Daniel Denvir

In 2012, Daniel Denvir, an out-of-work former newspaper reporter, decided to launch a podcast that would explore politics, history, and economics from a left perspective. From those humble beginnings emerged *The Dig*, a podcast from *Jacobin* that has since garnered a wide following among left-leaning audiences. Its popularity is in no small measure due to Denvir's ability to bring together leftist intellectuals and organizers in conversations devoted to working through contemporary political impasses. *The Nation* spoke with Denvir about what inspired him to start *The Dig*, the challenges the left faces today, and what he's learned from his guests about how to meet them. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

—Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins

### DSJ: What made you start *The Dig*?

**DD:** My most immediate motive was that I got laid off from *Salon* after a short stint struggling to keep up with their high-volume, clickbait production schedule. I had spent years as a reporter at the *Philadelphia City Paper*. It was everything I wanted out of being a reporter: I investigated local police, prison, and prosecutorial abuse; covered the huge conflict that erupted over the defunding and privatization of Philly public schools; and analyzed local and state politics. I had beats and sources, and I got paid—very little—to cover a city that I really loved. I left *City Paper* in 2015 to move to Rhode Island, and, sadly, the paper soon closed down. I then spent two years writing for national publications—first *The Atlantic's CityLab* and then *Salon*. But writing about everything, everywhere, didn't suit me. And so, after getting laid off, I dusted off an idea for a podcast that would build a bridge between two corners of the left—the intellectual side and the organizing side—that I'd been discussing with Alex Lewis, *The Dig's* producer.

### DSJ: You started *The Dig* just before Donald Trump began his bid for the White House. What effect did his presidency have on the podcast?

**DD:** Trump's election shaped pretty much everything. It was a moment that demanded a thorough accounting of a Democratic Party politics that had sold out workers and, to smooth things over, joined Republicans in celebrating the spectacular punishment of immigrants, poor people, and Black people—and that, in doing so, had helped produce a

cartoonish monster. The bipartisan origins of Trump, in other words, became one of the show's recurrent objects of analysis—as did a critique of liberalism's more general complicity in right-wing extremism. That was also the subject of the book I started writing at the same time, *All-American Nativism*.

### DSJ: The relationship between race and class is a major topic on *The Dig*. Who has impressed you most in how they tackled this issue on the show?

**DD:** Barbara and Karen Fields certainly made a huge impression on me. Their insight that racism produces the illusion of racial difference in the service of capitalist interests is a basic one, yet it flies in the face of a dominant racial liberalism that substitutes representation and recognition for anti-racist class struggle—something I have also discussed with Asad Haider and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. My interviews with Mike Davis, particularly the one I did with him on *Prisoners of the American Dream*, clarified how a constellation of forces makes and remakes relationships of domination and the politics to legitimate them—something that goes beyond the sort of laundry lists of oppressions fashionable among liberals.

### DSJ: You had Davis on a few times. What does his life and work mean to you?

**DD:** One of the many things that made Davis remarkable was his generosity and openness. He possessed a rare talent for learning from changing conditions and for relating to the American left as it existed or was emerging at any given moment. He listened to young people. Davis was also an intellectual who attempted to articulate an analysis of the totality of this country and the world. The siloed nature of academia militates against that, unfortunately. His inevitably quixotic but utterly necessary attempt to connect all the dots is a model for what I'm trying to accomplish with *The Dig*. He ruthlessly critiqued everything while insisting on hopefulness.

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**"The bipartisan origins of Trump became a recurrent object of analysis."**





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