

## JET PEGE

THIS MAGAZINE IS KOSHER, HALAL, VEGAN, AND GLUTEN-FREE. BUT PLEASE DON'T EAT IT, EXCEPT IN AN OUTRIGHT EMERGENCY.

an updated List of the right's enemies

Conservatives seem to hate and/or distrust an awful lot of groups, and it can be difficult to keep track of who the latest "Problems" are in America. Fortunately we have compiled an updated list of people the Right thinks are a problem. Don't worry, if you're not in one of the following categories, you're probably fine! Just don't have any woke thoughts.

- Migrants
- Y Postal workers
- ★ Union members
- **Teachers**
- Swifties
- Trans people
- People who are not trans but look like they might be
- ★ Vegetarians/Vegans
- Human rights workers
- Antifascists
- Climate scientists
- \* Palestinians
- Non-Zionist Jews
- \* Cat ladies
- Ladies who seem like cat ladies even though they don't own cats
- Men who own cats
- Men who do not own cats but seem like they would
- **X** Atheists
- Christian leftists
- Sex workers
- Environmentalists
- Trial lawyers
- Prisoners
- ★ Lesbians
- The media
- Librarians
- ★ The FBI
- Professors
- "The inner city"
- Trag queens
- ★ BLM activists
- Anyone with purple hairAnyone from New YorkCity except Donald Trump
- Anyone associated with California, except Ronald Reagan
- Public health officials
- The entire rest of the government

### **NOT WATCHING YOU WITH TINY CAMERAS**

More and more readers report a lingering suspicion that this magazine may be what is known as an "op." "How," they ask, "can such a beautiful magazine survive, when it has no advertising, no paywall, and no corporate backers? Could it possibly be that its readers are so loyal and generous with their funds that they enable it to survive without its creators having to resort to the usual shady practices or branching into word puzzles and cooking apps? Such things cannot be! They must be funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, or Iran. Perhaps they are on Putin's payroll. Yes, yes, it must be Putin." Well, reader, our pockets do not overflow with rubles, and our attempts to get the U.S. government to subsidize our production and distribution have come to naught. (The IRS won't even give us our tax refund.) We can assure readers that we are not watching you with tiny cameras embedded in our pages, despite the conviction of a number of readers that we are. We repeat: there are no tiny cameras embedded in the folds of this magazine. And that's a Current Affairs promise!

please skip these pages if you wish to read only things that are reliably true.

### All other media is propaganda!

Everyone else is lying to you for profit! Not Current Affairs. We tell you plain honest truths. Seriously!



### INTRODUCING THE ONTOLOGY DESK

Here at *Current Affairs*, we occasionally get requests to deal with topics deeper and more philosophical than our usual fare. We confess, we've never known quite how to deal with these. We're perfectly comfortable talking about tax policy or Maoism, but ask us something like "Does the quality of an absent presence expand our understanding or merely shift its limits?" and we can only tug our collars and go "er, well..."

That's why we've called in an expert. As you might know, the *New York Times* has an Ethicist to answer its readers' most pressing questions; we, on the other hand, now have an Ontologist, who arrived in New Orleans early this July.

Unfortunately, the Ontologist disappeared into a maintenance closet soon after showing up, and we haven't seen him since. All we get are occasional "hmm" sounds coming from the ducts, and scribbled notes saying that he refuses to come out until he's found the "thing in itself." So if you have questions for the Ontology Desk, please bear with us. It may be a while.

if everyone
if a cop,
so are **you!** 

They say that
"if everyone is a

is." If that's true, then it means that the quickest route to police abolition is to deputize the world. We therefore present you with your very own *Current Affairs* Official Officer Person badge, which we insist carries all of the legal privileges of being a Cop. Use it responsibly!

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### RECONCILE THE

### Consider two statements:

- 1. "What can be, unburdened by what has been"
- 2. "You think you just fell out of a coconut tree? You exist in the context of all in which vou live and what came before vou."

Explain: How can you be "unburdened by what has been" if you "exist in the context of all in which you live and what came before you"? Why is context not itself a burden?

### WNY STOP AT PANDA DIPLOMACY:

Panda diplomacy (熊猫外交) is "the practice of sending giant pandas from China to other countries as a tool of diplomacy and wildlife conservation." We believe that more diplomacy should be conducted through the medium of charismatic megafauna. What if, instead of menacing other countries with nuclear



missiles, the United States melted their hearts with cute manatees? What if we sent Putin a nutria? This is a vast country, filled with animals. Surely a foreign policy based around strategically waving around our most interesting-looking creatures is vastly preferable to militarism. As long as the animals are okay with it...

### **MAGAZINE** ORIGAMI

Did you know: anything that can be made out of folded paper can also be made out of Current

Affairs, because Current Affairs consists (at its core) of sheets of paper? It's true! That means the possibilities for "magazine origami" are as endless as those of origami itself. Send us pictures of the wondrous plants and flowers you

make using our pages!

WHY Not take our magazine to the beach?

Show this magazine to a stingray and get 20% off your next subscription.





### SECHAPIN DOMINO LIVES

Over the last few years, readers have inquired about the health status of our publisher, S. Chapin Domino. They have noted that his bimonthly column, "Domino Theories," no longer appears in these pages, and they have read scurrilous tabloid accounts suggesting that Mr. Domino is being held against his will in a remote location. We would like to take this opportunity to refute these rumors in the strongest terms and reprint a statement forwarded to us from S. Chapin Domino himself in his coastal villa: "I am fine. Really. Please stop asking. There is nothing to worry about. Move on. Really, nothing is wrong." We hope that provides adequate reassurance and can put a stop to the ongoing letters from the public and series of open police investigations.

### TO READERS IN JAILS OR PRISONS!

Current Affairs has a number of readers residing in federal and state "correctional facilities." We would like to extend a special greeting to those readers, for whom life can be especially tedious and a magazine can provide special relief. We are sorry we cannot do more for you than give you these humble pages, but we hope that we can deliver you a small amount of joy in trying circumstances Our very best to you, stay strong.

city of the MONTH: CINCINNATI

We're not sure why, we just get a good feeling about the place! If you're a reader in Cincinnati, know that this





### THE VOICEMAIL **IS DOWN**

Readers who have tried to call the Current Affairs voicemail will have noticed that their calls are not getting returned. We apologize for this. The editor-in-chief has lost the password to the voicemail inbox, as well as access to the email inbox that can reset the voicemail inbox password. It's a very convoluted predicament, one we are endeavoring to resolve quickly. In the meantime, calling us is futile. Please send an email to help@currentaffairs.org or dispatch a pigeon to New Orleans. (Two readers did once successfully communicate with us by sending a pigeon. True

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### SHOULD HOST A HOOTENANNY

BY ANNIE LEVIN

I was terrified of civilizational collapse and bewildered by the U.S. government's inept response to large-scale suffering. Also like many, I lost my job and fought with close friends. I fantasized about the end of the pandemic, foolishly imagining that there would be a hard stop inside of a few months when everything would go back to normal. I yearned to hug people again, to get drunk and go dancing, and to shout over loud music in crowded bars. I wanted my whole life back. But most of all I wanted to sing with my choir.

Unfortunately, indoor choral singing was probably the single most dangerous artistic activity during the pandemic's early lockdown phase. Since singers must stand close together while essentially spitting at each other, choral rehearsals were known to be some of the worst superspreader events. At a choir rehearsal in Mount Vernon, Washington, in March of 2020, 53 of the 61 people present became infected, three were hospitalized, and two died from COVID-19.

Choral singing is also completely untransferable to a virtual format. Online lag time makes it impossible for musicians to be in sync with each other in real time on Zoom. You can instead create a facsimile of the real thing with singers recording

themselves privately and a sound engineer painstakingly mixing the voices together so that they appear to be singing together. The effect is interesting, and the sound quality can be excellent, but for the singers themselves it's not the real thing. That's because the real thing isn't just about the music you make but the act itself, joining your voices together in joyous collective song.

My choir took all the right precautions in the pandemic. We canceled rehearsals and appearances, went online, and made virtual choir videos. I hated every minute of it. I hated the flattening of the human experience to my narrow MacBook screen. I hated the forced autocracy of Zoom rehearsals, where I dutifully followed the song leader and muted my microphone to sing lower harmony to my bedroom walls. I hated most of all how the virtual rehearsals felt like an empty husk in comparison with the real thing. Where once the idea of a choir rehearsal could get me out of bed in the morning, in the spring of 2020 their virtual equivalent became just another obligatory Zoom call.

This state of affairs was why I found myself, in August of 2020, cycling in 90-degree heat across Brooklyn to a rooftop garden where my choir was to have its first masked, socially

distanced rehearsal. The world was allowed to open up a crack, and outdoor gatherings, even choral gatherings, were permitted, so long as people stayed masked. We stood feet apart, singing while sucking in the cloth of our face masks, our sound muffled by the rush of traffic in downtown Brooklyn. Even under these conditions, I was happier than I'd been since the start of the pandemic.

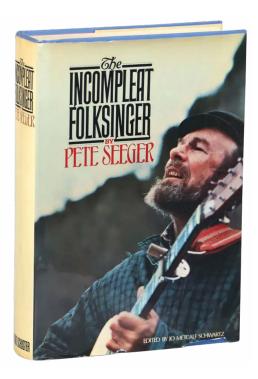
My choir is Sing in Solidarity, the choir of the New York City Chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America. The songs we sing are socialist, anarchist, communist, and anti-fascist, and we call each other comrade, mostly unironically. In the videos I took of our first rooftop rehearsal, choir members—actual grownups with jobs and bills to pay who were suffering under a criminally negligent government during a pandemic—were jumping up and down for joy.

Throughout the unseasonably warm fall of 2020, we returned repeatedly to the rooftop to sing. As the sun set, after rehearsals ended, we'd go on food and beer runs, and rehearsals turned into parties. A summertime party on a roof garden in New York City, with 20 or so singing socialists who had had little contact with other people in months, had a particular flavor to it. We were a little like sailors on shore leave, at least insofar as the singing went. The music certainly didn't stop when rehearsals ended, and we would croon for hours, deep into the night.

P on the rooftop in the fall of 2020, we sang Spanish Republican songs, Chilean Nueva Canción, Greek anti-fascist songs, and old American labor songs made popular by folk music legends like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie in the 1940s. We'd run through entire songbooks and break out our phones to look up lyrics and chords to contemporary songs we'd only ever heard in recorded versions. We'd sing in multiple languages, in multiple genres. Some songs were solos, some we'd sing collectively; most were a mix of both. People who couldn't read music and who struggled to be heard during a formal rehearsal would lead songs and improvise harmonies. Mild intoxication had something to do with all this newfound confidence, but more important than the drinking was the powerful feeling of safety that collective singing provided. Unlike in a karaoke room, where inexperienced voices are immediately detected and found hilariously wanting in comparison with the recorded original, when we sing together, we are stronger and more beautiful. At a sing-along, if you have a voice, you can join in without embarrassment.

The word *hootenanny* probably went into usage in the 1920s as a nonsense word, used when someone couldn't remember the name for something—the equivalent of "thingamajig" and "doohickey." It came into popular use in the 1940s as a term for an informal musical gathering, at least partially because it was what Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and other Communist Party-adjacent musicians called their renowned singing parties in Greenwich Village.

These Greenwich Village hootenannies placed an emphasis on participation. You came to make your contribution, to lend



Cover of Pete Seeger's 1972 book "The Incompleat Folk Singer"

your voice or your instrument to the proceedings, whatever your ability. In her book "My Song is My Weapon": People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50, American Studies professor Robbie Lieberman describes these folk sessions. "The live, spontaneous music at a hootenanny contrasted with the trend toward professional recorded music. People came together to enjoy a collective experience, as opposed to individually 'consuming' the music in the privacy of their own homes," she writes.

Seeger and the other folk music revivalists from the mid-20th century were rowing against the current of music production in their era: a detachment and professionalization that has only increased in the decades since. These days, song circles are generally left to small children, to mommy-and-me music enrichment classes where a song leader instructs toddlers in the finer points of clapping and counting. Today, sing-alongs have mostly bad connotations in popular culture. We know to start groaning at the part of a movie where an overconfident white guy takes out his guitar and breaks into a ditty dripping in unctuous sincerity. Join in on the chorus? Absolutely not.

Today, folk music sing-alongs are a dying practice. They have this in common with almost all forms of amateur secular music. Outside of a church or karaoke room, singing is mostly left to the professionals. There is the musician and the listener, and a widening gulf between them. We can certainly fault the invention of recorded music in the 19th century for this separation, although the distancing can be traced back before the invention of recording instruments. The communist composer

Hanns Eisler faults the industrial revolution itself and the transformation it made in the material conditions of work for the death of community music. In his speech to the Choir of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union in 1938, he asks:

What did the Industrial Revolution do to music culture? It destroyed most of the old folk music. The explanation is simple. Factory workers cannot sing at work in the same way and for the same reasons as the Volga boatmen sang. The tempo and rhythm of their work is dictated by their machines and not by the workers themselves. Spontaneous music culture dies under such conditions.

Far from the niche hobby it is today, singing was once a tool in our everyday lives. Collective singing once gave strength, speed, and wellness to laborers as they worked as one body to pick crops, mend fishing nets, or dye wool. The Volga boatmen Eisler refers to worked as a team along the shores of the Volga River in Russia, pulling cargo-hauling sailing ships in the opposite direction to the current. They had been doing this work since the 16th century. It was grueling manual labor, not to be romanticized; however, Eisler argues that the material conditions of this work allowed the workers to sing, and this singing helped them keep up the pace of their labor.

You might be familiar with this genre of song from the African American singing tradition, a genre that partly originated in the work songs and field calls of the enslaved or imprisoned. These songs helped maintain the pace of the work and offered occasions for protest or even resistance: telling stories of the enslaved defying authority, outwitting slavers, and even freeing themselves. Work songs, in this instance especially, allowed the singers to preserve a feeling of their own humanity while living under a system of violence and oppression.

hatever their application centuries ago, today work songs, like most fully organic folk songs, aren't likely to make a comeback. It's hard to imagine singing while we work our 21st century jobs under neoliberal capitalism, except possibly as an exercise in the absurd. The accountants in the 1983 film *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* transform into pirates, turning their office building into a sailing ship and taking off singing "The Accountancy Shanty." The writers here knew that the idea of an accountant or any kind of white-collar worker singing and dancing a jig in the office would come off as ridiculous.

Similarly, employees in an Amazon warehouse or a box store or chain restaurant do not have working conditions that allow them to sing while they work. A warehouse or distribution center is typically so noisy that workers must wear noise-canceling headphones to preserve their hearing. Collective singing would probably also get shut down in a service environment since it would disrupt the flow of work. In fact, we'd be hard pressed to find much collective on-the-job song-making in any quarter of the contemporary landscape for workers. Uber drivers and GrubHub delivery workers could

probably entertain themselves singing solo while waiting in traffic, but they could hardly sing collectively.

Capitalism killed folk music, in the same way it has destroyed—and continues to destroy—so much of what makes life beautiful. Why, then, did communists like Pete Seeger in the mid-20th century attempt to revive it? Why did the Soviet Union elevate folk music, transforming commonplace folk songs like the 'Song of the Volga Boatmen' into militant anthems? What possible use could this dying art form serve in organizing a revolutionary working class?

In "My Song is My Weapon," Lieberman quotes Seeger's book The Incompleat Folk Singer, in which he describes collective music-making as a societally transformative act. "Ultimately, rank-and-file participation in music goes hand-in-hand with creativity in other planes—arts, sciences, and yes, even politics," Seeger writes. He draws a parallel here between creative agency and mass collective action. In both music and politics, by adding one voice to many we can become stronger, more confident, and more effective. Being able to sing competently in public is a skill that almost everybody can develop. It has this in common with most skills involved in left-wing organizing. You don't need a lot of special training to sing a folk song or to help organize your workplace; you just need a little practice and the expectation that your contribution matters.

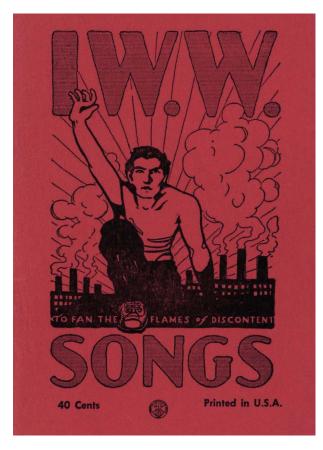
Lieberman describes hootenannies as challenging "the



Margaret Herric Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences

conception of culture as passive entertainment separate from the rest of life." One thing I love about them is how easily they weave music in with everyday reality. At the best hootenannies that I've been to, singing is integrated into conversation, eating and drinking, hijinks, and the sharing of memes and TikToks. While music might be front and center, it's not even always the star. Lieberman cites a manual that Seeger's left-wing music organization, People's Songs, put out, called How to Plan a Hootenanny. It recommends not only singing, but also dancing, poetry, storytelling, and skits.

One of the last outdoor Sing in Solidarity rehearsals of 2020 took place the day the general election was called for Joe Biden. After the results were announced, New York City turned into a giant, teeming block party. That day also happened



Industrial Workers of the World songbook, 1909

to be the anniversary of the Russian Revolution, and some choir members brought huge bouquets of red carnations to rehearsal to mark the occasion. We sat singing on the roof, red carnations twirled in our hair, while below us the streets of Brooklyn swarmed in crowds giddily celebrating the ousting of Donald Trump.

After the usual six or seven hours of singing, I biked home, my facemask plastered to my cheek with sweat, stopping on occasion to watch the dancing revelers. I genuinely wanted to be happy for them. I wished I felt the same relief that they did. I wished I was as confident as they were that the bad times would be over soon and that we'd seen the last of Trump. Lacking that assurance, I was glad that I had a community of collective music-making to hang onto for the catastrophes vet to come. 4

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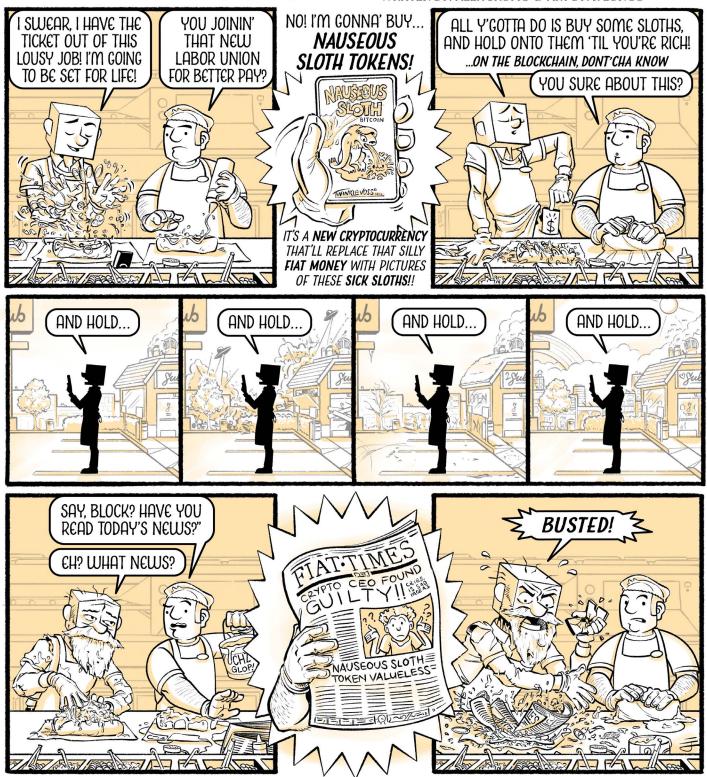
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In 1912, cartoonist **Ernest Riebe**—a trade unionist with the Industrial Workers of the World—created one of America's most memorable cartoon characters. **Mr. Block**, Riebe wrote, is "the representation of that host of slaves who think in terms of their masters," and sides with the rich and powerful in every argument. Mr. Block "owns nothing, yet speaks from the standpoint of the millionaire," he is "patriotic without patrimony," and he "licks the hand that smites him and kisses the boot that kicks him." In short, **Mr. Block is "the personification of all that a worker should not be."** Thanks to the wonders of the Public Domain, *Current Affairs* is proud to present to you the 21st-century adventures of:

### MR. BLOCK HE BUYS CRYPTO WRITTEN BY: ALEX SKOPIC & ART BY: J. LONGO



# TELLING ABOUT SOUTH AFRICA

## LIES

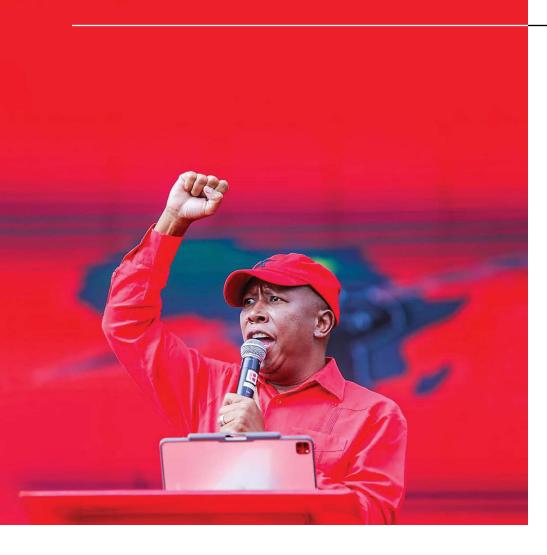
BY JOE WALSH

The first half of this year saw South Africa mark 30 years of democracy since apartheid officially ended with the country's first free vote in April 1994. The following month, the country's seventh post-apartheid parliament was elected on May 29. For the first time since 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) failed to secure a majority, garnering just 40 percent of the vote. This translated to 159 of the 400 seats in the National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament. Ultimately, the election resulted in a coalition or Government of National Unity (GNU), as it is called. Both the main opposition party, called the Democratic Alliance (DA), and several other smaller parties now have a seat at the table.

Since the election, a lot of the international coverage of South Africa has alternated between outright celebrations of the ending of sole ANC rule—which the *Spectator* blamed for "30 years of corruption and ruin"—to despair that the ANC had left the country "on the

brink of chaos," as *Bloomberg* put it. Particularly in the conservative-leaning press, the consensus seems to be that multiracial democracy and ANC governance in South Africa have resulted mainly in dysfunction. This is a deceptive, insidious narrative, and one that badly needs to be debunked.

One point that the far right has been trying, and succeeding, to push into the public discourse is the myth of "white genocide" in South Africa. The conspiracy theory is centered on the murder of white farmers, and involves deliberate misrepresentation of the statistics around this crime in a country with exceptional levels of violence overall. It gathered pace as a favorite narrative of the far right a few years ago, with 2017 to 2020 showing a drastic increase in the Google search trends for both "farm murders" and "white genocide." Behind South Africa, the U.S., U.K., Canada,



Australia, and New Zealand were the top countries searching these terms. They are also the top destinations for white South Africans emigrating from the country.

In 2018, the right-wing British pundit Katie Hopkins came to South Africa to report on farm murders, creating both a documentary and an accompanying ebook about what she called "the mass-slaughter of South Africa's whites." In the same year, Canadian far-right blogger Lauren Southern also came to the country to make a documentary called Farmlands on the same subject. Both of them essentially argued that farm murders are so common and out of control that they cannot be considered individual, unrelated violent crimes and in fact must have tacit support from the ANC government. They argue that the attacks on farms are directly linked to proposals to nationalize South Africa's land, which would break up and redistribute farms currently held by white farmers—a policy known as land expropriation without

compensation, which has yet to be passed by South Africa's parliament.

The "white genocide" argument mainly centers around an incorrect interpretation of farm murder figures, which suggests that the farming profession has a murder rate of 133 per 100,000, compared to the national murder rate of 34 per 100,000. This idea was first introduced in a debate in the South African Parliament by Pieter Groenewald, the leader of the right-wing Afrikaans party Freedom Front Plus (VF+), in 2017. Groenewald based his claim on a figure by Johan Burger, a research consultant at the nonprofit Institute for Security Studies who said it was never meant to be a scientifically accurate figure—just an "indication" to show the seriousness of the situation.

Even then, it still falls apart as a data reference. Essentially, Burger had started with the number of murders that happen on a farm or smallholding, a statistic that is recorded by the South African Police Service (SAPS). For the period he was

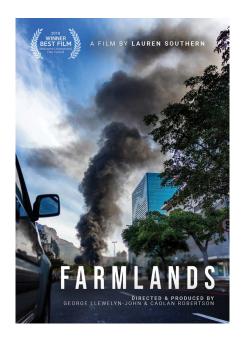
looking at, 2015-2016, the figure was 49 murders—which includes any type of worker, visitor, or resident killed on a farm as well as "farmers" in the strict sense of the word. Then he took data from South Africa's 2007 Census of Commercial Agriculture showing there were an estimated 32,375 full-time farmers in the country, applied the 2015-2016 farm murder figures to the 2007 census, and got 133 per 100,000. Sound the alarm bells, the whites are being murdered in South Africa!

Yet this is clearly a nonsensical figure. Not only does the SAPS murder-victim number include all people on a farm, not just full-time professional farmers, but it applies to all types of agricultural spaces—not just commercial farms, like the 2007 census data. If you include all kinds of agricultural workers on commercial and non-commercial farms, along with households who live in those agricultural areas, you have a population of an estimated 11 million people. The same murder number of 49, applied to that population, gives a much less threatening murder rate of 0.4 murders per 100,000.

Essentially, as Kate Wilkinson wrote for *Africa Check* in 2017, it is "near impossible" to give an accurate figure of the murder rate on South Africa's farms because the population is too difficult to define. However, it is certainly less than 133 per 100,000, the number the international far right continues to parrot without any consideration of where it came from.

Later in 2017, the figure was updated to 156 per 100,000 by the Afrikaans rights organization AfriForum. And it is this organization that most recently took its cause international and attracted the attention of people like Hopkins and Southern to South Africa, as its deputy CEO Ernst Roets toured the U.S. and went on Fox News to speak to Tucker Carlson in May 2018. The successful media tour really took the myth mainstream in the States, and then-President Donald Trump even tweeted about it, urging Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to "closely study the South Africa land and farm seizures and expropriations and the large scale killing." With those words, the supposed plight of South Africa's white farmers cemented itself as a cause of the moment for the far right.

The narrative soon went beyond the fringe inhabited by commentators like



Promotional poster for Lauren Southern's 2018 film "Farmlands"

Hopkins and Southern and was seized on by more mainstream news outlets in the U.S., U.K., and Australia, with horrific instances of farm murders being used to suggest that the country's entire white population was on the brink of being wiped out. (For example, one colorful headline read "'Bury them alive!': White South Africans fear for their future as horrific farm attacks escalate.") In Australia, the Minister for Home Affairs considered offering fast-tracked asylum to white South Africans, saying they needed the opportunity to flee to a "civilised country." Other publications, such as the *Telegraph*, haven't adopted the language of "genocide" but do assert that unchecked farm murders are a particular failing of South Africa, different from its failings on other violent crime, and are "fuelling a steady exodus of whites from the farming sector."

Even respectable newspapers like the New York Times occasionally indulge in the gory details of an attack on white farmers, a level of attention Black victims of crime in South Africa are almost never afforded in the international press. But in fact, poor Black citizens of South Africa are far more likely to be victims of violent crime and murder than white population. During the period Groenewald was looking at, when there were 49 murders on farms across the entire country, one of Cape Town's predominantly Black townships called Khayelitsha recorded 179 murders, at a rate of approximately 116 per 100,000 people. Yet none of these murders have their gruesome details described in the Western press. None of those 179 victims, apparently, are worthy of having their stories told to people in far-flung places like the U.S. and U.K.

Meanwhile, police stations in Cape Town's wealthier and whiter suburbs, Hout Bay and Sea Point, recorded just three and four murders respectively, with a murder rate of 12 per 100,000 people. Not the figures you'd expect in a country where the white population is facing a genocide—especially when, just down the road, the Black population is being killed at ten times the rate. Instead, the numbers suggest a much more mundane reality: that poverty and violence have created a vicious cycle in which, in certain impoverished areas, human life is too easily snuffed out.

A common theme, regardless of

whether they're explicitly claiming farm murders are "white genocide"—and it's generally left for the more lunatic fringe to make that assertion—is to link the murders to the rhetoric of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the furthest-left of South Africa's major political parties. In particular, the EFF's leader Julius Malema is a character the Western right-wing press loves to hate, with the Daily Mail lambasting him as a "race-baiting Marxist." Malema has certainly thrived off the controversy he creates, particularly when it comes to statements made about the country's white population. He seems to almost enjoy his pantomime villain role in the Western media—the face of the supposedly terrifying Black masses, cajoling the crowds.

Although the most recent bubble of Western interest was in 2018 and 2019, with reporting having died down since then, the killing of white farmers is never far away from being dredged up as a subject of fear and alarm and a possible indication of South Africa's impending failed-state status. Its latest foray back into the headlines was when the world's (sometimes) richest man, Elon Musk, late last year agreed that his former homeland may be committing genocide against white South Africans like himself.

Malema was again at the center of this furor as he, along with EFF party spokesperson Mbuyiseni Ndlozi, was taken to court in 2022 for hate speech. Both leaders had been singing an old anti-apartheid protest song called "Kill the Boer" (an Afrikaans word meaning farmer, which is generally used to describe white farmers of Dutch ancestry) at EFF rallies. The case was a civil hearing brought by AfriForum, whose lawyers compared the song to those sung in Rwanda ahead of, and during, the 1994 genocide there. The organization wanted Malema to be made to apologize and for both him and Ndlozi to be criminally charged with hate speech. The court dismissed the case and AfriForum appealed, but earlier this year the Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA) dismissed their case once again, with costs awarded to Malema and Ndlozi, concluding as follows:

The reasonably well-informed person would understand that Mr. Malema was using a historic struggle song, with

the performance gestures that go with it, as a provocative means of advancing his party's political agenda. Understood in its full context, it was a form of political speech.

Perhaps Musk and other right-wing figures, who are mostly based outside of South Africa, are just not "reasonably well-informed" enough to understand the historical context of these songs, at least according to the SCA. In addition, farm murders remain significantly lower since the emergence of the EFF in 2013 than they were in the early 2000s: the period 2001-2002 saw 140, compared with 54 over the 2023 calendar year. So it's hard to see how the party or its rhetoric can be responsible for driving them. "Even if Mr. Malema's performance of Dubula ibhunu [shoot the boer] may be regarded by some people to be shocking or even disturbing, the Constitution required a measure of

published a piece responding to the concerns of Musk, Trump, and other prominent figures and aiming to find out the "truth about South Africa's 'genocide' of white farmers." Consulting experts in the field, journalist Geoff Hill discovered that, essentially, there's no truth to the narrative at all:

Based in Washington, D.C., Genocide Watch is the world's early warning system. It was founded in 1999 by Dr. Gregory Stanton, a professor of human-rights law, who says that "for all the tragedy of farm murders in South Africa, there is no evidence of a planned extermination." There are instead, "opportunistic crimes," sometimes acts of revenge by workers who are owed wages or feel aggrieved with their employers. Or just attacks carried out by thugs out for money.

Donald J. Trump @ @realDonaldTrump

I have asked Secretary of State @SecPompeo to closely study the South Africa land and farm seizures and expropriations and the large scale killing of farmers. "South African Government is now seizing land from white farmers." @TuckerCarlson @FoxNews

9:28 PM · Aug 22, 2018

Message posted on Twitter from Donald Trump on August 22, 2018

tolerance," the court added, affirming that Malema was entitled to freedom of speech.

Notably, around this same time, AfriForum also went to the SCA to appeal a decision by the Equality Court that flying the apartheid-era flag constituted hate speech. This time the court agreed with them and overruled the lower court on the same basis that freedom of speech covered the display of the flag. It seems that for right-wing groups like AfriForum, freedom of speech should only apply to controversial things they approve of, while controversial things they feel attacked by need to be labeled as hate speech and incitements to violence. The double standard is obvious.

In December of 2023, the Spectator

"We have studied this for many years," Stanton said, "and I've done research on the ground in South Africa. The numbers show us that white people, urban or rural, are much safer than their black counterparts, and less likely to end up on a slab at the coroner's office." Farmers[,] he said, "are often vulnerable, isolated and easy targets, but that doesn't make it genocide."

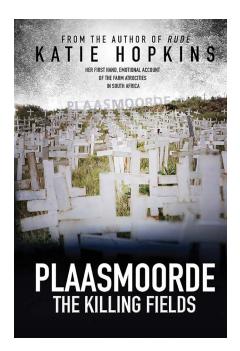
By all rights, that *should* put the discussion to bed forever. Hill even notes that from the 2022 crime figures, farm murders were just over 50—a minor increase from the 49 Groenewald was looking at a few years previously, but still way down

from the peak in the late '90s, when the period 1997-1998 saw 153 farm murders.

The story is nothing new, though. Racial violence has been a long-discussed fear among whites in South Africa ever since Jan van Riebeeck first made landfall in the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. Van Riebeeck, an employee of the Dutch East India Company at the time, was actually on his way back to the Netherlands to be fired for corruption when he decided to set up a waypoint between Europe and India in the southwest corner of Africa, primarily in a bid to save his career. Right from the start the settlers feared the native people of the land, as early settlers got into a war with local tribes within just five of years of arriving, after which they fortified their position and even grew almond hedges to protect themselves from locals. Over the centuries this antagonism developed into the concept of swart gevaar (Black peril), a fear tactic played into by the various white governments of South Africa to suggest that white civilization was in danger from the Black masses. In his famous speech at the Rivonia trial, where he and several other anti-apartheid activists were sentenced to life in prison, Nelson Mandela spoke about white fear of African rule as one of the biggest factors preventing the country from moving towards democracy.

That fear, that lingering idea of swart gevaar, is a threat that persists in many white South Africans' imaginings of the country. It even formed the bedrock of Oscar Pistorius's defense case for killing his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp in 2013. Pistorius used the fear of a Black man breaking into his home to justify why he panicked and shot four times at close range into his bathroom, killing Steenkamp. An irrational fear of an unknown, unnamed Black person was considered a reasonable defense for murder, and Pistorious was found guilty only of the lesser charge of "culpable homicide." Perhaps it is unsurprising that both Pistorius and Musk attended the same private school for boys in Pretoria.

We are now over 450 years from when Van Riebeeck first came to South Africa and still, according to those on the far right, a racial civil war in which the Black population of the country wipes out the



The cover of "Plaasmoorde: The Killing Fields" by Katie Hopkins

descendants of white settlers in an orgy of violence and bloodlust is "imminent." But just as the fear of "white genocide" in South Africa has been, and will continue to be, used as a warning sign by the far right of what's coming to the U.S. and Europe if too many non-white people move there, the country is also held up as a harbinger of doom for what governance will be like when these non-white people take power.

The right-wing narrative holds that the ANC, in its 30 years of governance, has simply mismanaged South Africa's infrastructure and public services to a catastrophic extent. Rather than bring up the lives of the majority of South Africans to the standard enjoyed by the white minority, the idea goes, the ANC instead brought everybody down to the same level. A version of this story can be found in the Australian edition of the Spectator, where Benjamin Crocker writes that "rolling blackouts, public disorder, and impending societal collapse" were the result of a government that "attempted to redress historic racial injustices by increasing the diversity profile in both government and private sector job markets" at the expense of meritocracy and competency. In UnHerd, columnist Wessie du Toit paints a dismal picture of South Africa as a country with collapsing water infrastructure, increasing crime and homelessness, and corrupt politicians looking out for themselves rather than the country—then warns bluntly that "Britain is turning into South Africa" from its own social ills, using the country as a synonym for inevitable collapse.

Yet the facts don't bear this out. Many seem unaware of or are simply unable to grasp how bad life was for the vast majority of South Africans before democracy arrived. In fact, a look across some of the basic metrics of quality of life for the majority of people shows vast improvements in South Africa since 1994.

Despite its significant troubles and reputation for corruption now, the state-run electricity service Eskom was a shining light and an award-winning utility in the early 2000s. Its main achievement was bringing electricity to the masses after apartheid, as the number of people using it to light their houses shot up from 58.1 percent in 1996 to 94.7 percent as of 2022. Villages and informal settlements across

the country were connected to the grid in a way unimaginable under apartheid.

None of this is to say that South Africa's infrastructure, particularly power and water, is not in a dire position today. It clearly is, and Johannesburg itself is a prime example. Added to the now-regular power cuts have been recent water cuts, as the pipes and sewage system have decayed for more than three decades. Traffic lights often don't work, even if there is power, and in the last year alone the city center experienced both a gas explosion and a major fire that killed 76 people, along with several smaller fires in illegally occupied buildings. All of these things have led publications like the *Telegraph* and others to quote people in South Africa saying that "things used to at least work," or that "our country was better in the apartheid era... things worked," as the Daily Mail did in 2021. (Of course, for the papers to avoid allegations of racism, these quotes need to come from non-white South Africans.) This is a reframe that you can hear often, both within the country and

Corruption has played a vastly significant role in these problems. It would certainly be a mistake to naively suggest South Africa is a utopia free from problems within its ruling party. State capture and corruption costs the country billions, arguably trillions, in money that is desperately lacking in the delivery of basic services; by one estimate, corruption at Eskom alone costs \$55 million per month, or \$660 million a year. (There's a chance the country has turned a corner on that front, as this year Eskom surpassed 100 days without initiating power cuts. However, as the utility's managers felt the need to celebrate this fact with a press release, it suggests they think it was a little remarkable as well.)

But the suggestion that "things worked" previously is a gross misrepresentation, one that right-wing Western media love to find and repeat to appease their own readers about how apartheid wasn't actually that bad. As apartheid was the purest, most distilled version of settler colonialism the world has ever seen, its crimes need to be minimized—just like the crimes of colonialism elsewhere in the world—in order to maintain a right-wing worldview and buttress the West's claim that it's not at fault for the problems

facing people in countries it previously colonized. It's the fault of the people there that they are poor, and historical injustices that shaped the world have no impact today; this is the argument that must be adhered to. In much the same way, any conversation about the U.K.'s role in the Atlantic slave trade is often met with a combination of everyone did slavery, Britain was the first country to end it and what about the Arab slave trade? Just as the impacts of those two crimes on the world need to be diminished, so too must the impact of apartheid on South Africa, as it shows how very relevant colonialism and oppression are to how the world has been shaped. And what better way to wash away the crimes of apartheid than to show that, now that it's gone, the country is a corrupt, falling-apart, failed state? The subtext, barely concealed, is that Africans simply can't govern themselves—a racist notion if ever there was one.

Yes, some white people in South Africa are having to endure power and water outages and other infrastructure problems that are new to them, and even for some non-white South Africans these problems could be new. But for the vast majority of people in the country, power, clean water, and a proper dwelling are far more available and accessible today than in 1993.

Certain incidents, like the 2014 case of a child dying in a pit latrine at school, are horrific and a stain on the country's reputation. And yet, that kind of death is now such a rare occurrence that it makes international news. According to the most recent census data, from 2022, the number of South Africans using a flush toilet connected to the sewage system has increased from 51.9 percent in 2001 to 70.8 percent, as unventilated pit toilets declined from 22.8 percent to 12.5 percent over the same period. Given the state of media censorship under apartheid, it would be impossible to say how many children were dying in pit latrines pre-democracy, but given the significantly higher prevalence of unsafe and unsanitary toilet facilities under apartheid, it is likely a significantly higher figure.

The narrative of systemic corruption and collapse even allows journalists and other commentators to dismiss anything South Africa does on the international stage that the United States and its allies don't like. It's treated as an outrage that a country like South Africa dares to have an independent foreign policy while still having problems within the country itself. Obviously this is selectively applied: it's only an outrage if a country goes against U.S. foreign policy, while poor countries that support the U.S. position are obviously more than entitled to have a foreign policy no matter their domestic issues.

Most notably at the moment, it is South Africa's case against Israel for genocide at the international Court of Justice (ICJ) that is causing it to be attacked for corruption and infrastructure collapse. In a recent article for the libertarian Mises Institute, Lipton Matthews wrote that "instead of battling with Israel, probably [President] Cyril Ramaphosa should focus on improving the standards of his country." Publications like the Jewish Chronicle have suggested that the only reason South Africa brought the case is because the corrupt ANC was paid by Iran to do so. Of course a country whose liberation movements have long supported Palestine and the Palestine Liberation Organization and know first-hand how their apartheid oppressors were supported by Israel couldn't possibly act like that by itself!

This is all somewhat ironic, given that a key reason South Africa did not, after 1994, become a perfect "rainbow nation" where all were equally wealthy and content is because this exact international right wing ensured that it wouldn't. By the time democracy emerged in South Africa, the Soviet Union, a longstanding ally to Nelson Mandela and the ANC during the struggle against apartheid (unlike Western governments), was no longer in existence. The country was therefore forced into global capitalist markets. A neoliberal shift in the ANC had to take place, with party policy changing to allow increasing private access and control of South Africa's assets (primarily mineral) for the fledgling democracy to be allowed to survive. Global capital and the right wing in the West were the driving force of this change, as the rights of private companies to exploit South Africa's minerals and other resources were placed ahead of the party's

principles of building an egalitarian society. Economic advisors and the doctrine of the "Washington Consensus" pushed the newborn nation into prioritizing the protection of capital as the foundation of its economic outlook. In the journal Philosophy and Social Criticism, scholar Danelle Fourie argues that "these policies seem to have deepened the existing economic inequality in contemporary South African society." Rather than ensuring an era of sustained prosperity for all, the pro-market shift in the 1990s entrenched a wealthy South African elite-which was slightly more multiracial now, but still distant and protected from the poor masses.

Not even the most naive believer in South Africa could argue that the country has no problems, or that it has a faultless government where all racial and inequality issues from its past have been resolved and healed. However, the global far right's obsession with "farm murders" and "white genocide" in South Africa reveals more about them than the country. Given their fixation on the tiny percentage of murders the actual data accounts for, clearly they value white lives over others. Those who push the narratives barely even try to make sense, as that is not the point. The purpose is to try to prove how dangerous it is to have Black people in control and to convey the sheer horror that that portends for white people when they lose power.

The same is true for arguments about South Africa's imminent infrastructure collapse. The truth about the increase in people with access to services like electricity, clean water, and proper toilets is ignored, for the people who benefit the most aren't white, and the white population has generally seen an increase in energy insecurity compared to their privileged position under apartheid. That is all that matters to the international right-wing press.

If they're not outright killing you in the fields, then they're looting from the state so completely that its basic functions are collapsing. This is what happens when white people cede power to Black people. That is the essence of the right's view of South Africa and what they use as a harrowing example of what awaits elsewhere. It is nonsense that needs to be countered at every opportunity. •

## The Pacific

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Written by Devin Schiff
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The Pacific

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WOULD

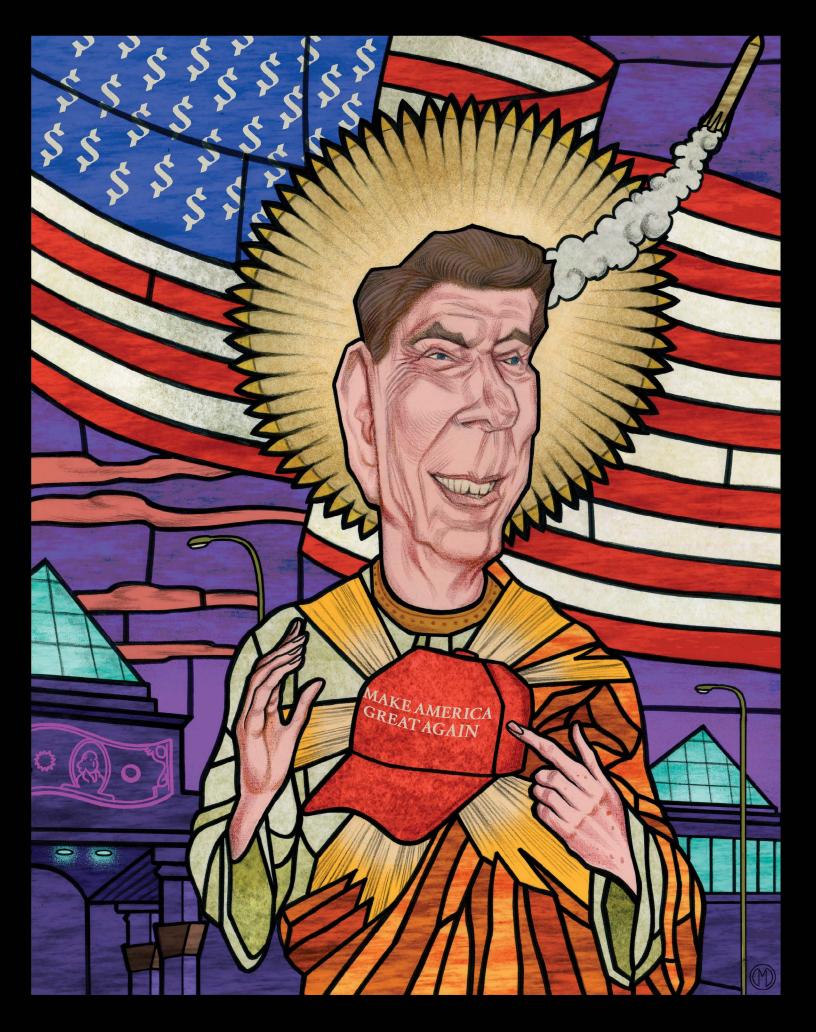
WANT TO BE

MY FRIEND

By Jake Tapper

The P2





## RONALD REAGAN AND THE FIRST MAGA MOMENT

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

"Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." — KARL MARX, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

### *"Let's Make America Great Again"* — RONALD REAGAN campaign slogan, 1980

N 2011, A GALLUP POLL FOUND THAT WHEN AMERICANS WERE ASKED WHO THE GREATEST president in U.S. history was, they were most likely to say Ronald Reagan. Abraham Lincoln and Bill Clinton were next on the list. George Washington came in fifth, after JFK. Reagan is less fondly remembered among certain groups, like Black Americans and LGBTQ people, who recall what his presidency meant for them. But on the whole, Americans had, and still have, a positive impression of Reagan the man.

His policies are a different story. They were unpopular then. They're unpopular now. Americans didn't want to see an upward redistribution of wealth, the bloating of the military budget, tax cuts for the rich, and the arming of Central American death squads. Reagan's secret funding of the Nicaraguan Contras, in direct violation of U.S. law, proved staggeringly unpopular, with nearly 80 percent of the public disapproving. Yet even after the exposure of the Iran-Contra scandal, three-fourths of Americans still approved of Reagan "as a person."



The anti-Contra movement and transnational solidarity protest

It's not hard to see why. Reagan's public persona was avuncular and self-deprecating. He was a Hollywood actor, and he performed the role of president perfectly. He peppered his speech with humorous, folksy anecdotes and spoke in a warm, reassuring voice. He conveyed an impression of complete innocence, so that when repeated ethical scandals hit his administration, he was able to convince much of the public that he couldn't possibly be responsible for anything nefarious—hence the moniker "Teflon president." Watch clips of Reagan joshing with the press, or making light-hearted references to his assassination attempt, and we can see easily how the Reagan mystique was developed.

Yet the actual record of the Reagan administration is horrendous. As Peter Dreier wrote in the *Nation* in 2011,

During his two terms in the White House (1981–89), Reagan presided over a widening gap between the rich and everyone else, declining wages and living standards for working families, an assault on labor unions as a vehicle to lift Americans into the middle class, a dramatic increase in poverty and homelessness, and the consolidation and deregulation of the financial industry that led to the current mortgage meltdown, foreclosure epidemic and lingering recession. These trends were not caused by inevitable social and economic forces. They resulted from Reagan's policy and political choices based on an underlying "you're on your own" ideology.

ENEATH REAGAN'S "GEE WHIZ" AND "AW SHUCKS" persona there was a cruelty, a belief that people were responsible for their own suffering and it wasn't the job of government to help alleviate social misery. Reagan famously said that "the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help." This would be news to anyone who has ever been rescued by a firefighter or a park ranger or given a Social Security check. But Reagan didn't try to make a factual, logical case that the government was incapable of doing anything but harm. Instead, he told stories that projected a vision of an idyllic small-town America where people bootstrapped their way to success. Beneath the sto-

ries, his actions were cruel and deadly. Reagan helped create many of the most devastating problems facing American society in 2024.

Reagan always denied being in any way racist and claimed to have had a "hatred for bigotry and prejudice" from an early age. Nevertheless, in a private phone call with Richard Nixon, he called African United Nations delegates "monkeys," and rightwing economist Thomas Sowell departed Reagan's 1980 campaign after he insisted on giving a "states' rights" speech in Mississippi near the site of the infamous 1964 murders of three civil rights workers, a move that was widely interpreted (including by Sowell) as a dog-whistle to white supremacists. Reagan's support for apartheid South Africa (and softness on white supremacist Rhodesia), his reluctance to approve a federal holiday honoring Martin Luther King Jr., and his initiation of the "war on drugs" all help to explain why Black Americans did not look back fondly at Reagan's presidency once it was over.

Reagan never cared much if what he was saying was true. He would pass movie scenes off as historical fact and even told the prime minister of Israel that he had personally helped liberate Nazi death camps, when in fact he had edited footage of them in Culver City, California, while working on films for the War Department. As Jimmy Carter said, with characteristic understatement, "President Reagan doesn't always check the facts before he makes statements, and the press accepts this as kind of amusing." In On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency, journalist Mark Hertsgaard reports that eventually, the press just gave up on fact-checking Reagan, since so much of what he said was nonsense. The national news editor of Newsweek said that "I think everybody in the press corps is just a little bit astonished at how many times the President can make horrible mistakes in public[...] [F] or a long time we were writing practically every week a little box on what he said that wasn't true. We ultimately just couldn't stand doing it week after week after week because it seemed sort of unfair [...] [I]t seemed like persecuting him or something."

Much of what Reagan said was ludicrous. In the words of his daughter Patti Davis, "he [had] the ability to make statements that are so far outside the parameters of logic that they leave you speechless." Remarks Reagan made with utmost confidence include:

- "Fascism was really the basis for the New Deal."
- "Unemployment insurance is a pre-paid vacation for freeloaders."
- "[Evolution] has in recent years been challenged in the world of science and is not yet believed in the scientific community to be as infallible as it once was believed."
- "Approximately 80 percent of our air pollution stems from hydrocarbons released by vegetation."

Simon Hoggart noted in *The Observer* in 1986 the peculiar way in which Reagan's "errors glide past unchallenged. At one point [...] he alleged that almost half the population gets a free meal from the government each day. No one told him he was crazy. The general message of the American press is that, yes, while it is perfectly true that the emperor has no clothes, nudity is actually very acceptable this year." Mark Green notes that Reagan's rigid anti-government ideology, his belief that the state could

do no right, led him to wilfully misinterpret reality: "This loathing for government, this eagerness to prove that any program to aid the disadvantaged is nothing but a boondoggle and a money gobbler, leads him to contrive statistics and stories with unmatched vigor."

HOSE WHO INTERACTED WITH REAGAN UP CLOSE were often shocked by his ignorance. "You sometimes wonder why it occurred to anyone that he should be president, or even governor," commented Henry Kissinger. Richard Nixon called him a "man of limited mental capacity [who] simply doesn't know what the Christ is going

(Famously, he confessed: "I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not.") But he deserves to be given credit for his record.

The record was disgraceful. It's chilling to go back and look at how Reagan's press secretary responded to questions about AIDS, for instance. As a terrifying epidemic began to decimate the gay community, Reagan's spokesman cracked homophobic jokes in the press room. The reporter who asked about AIDS was "met with dismissive wisecracks questioning the reporter's own sexual orientation." Reagan himself showed no interest in the issue and even proposed to cut funding for AIDS research, until



Members of PATCO, the air traffic controllers, were fired on the order of President Ronald Reagan, August 5, 1981

on in the foreign area." House Speaker Tip O'Neill said that Reagan "knows less about the budget than any president in my lifetime. He can't even carry on a conversation about the budget. It's an absolute and utter disgrace." Reagan was a hands-off and inattentive manager, nodding off in meetings or remaining silent and often leaving staff in the dark about what his administration's actual policies were supposed to be. Many people have described Reagan as a mere figurehead or speculated that his Alzheimer's symptoms began before his term in office was over.

But to treat Reagan as a vapid actor, a pleasant frontman for a rapacious oligarchy, is to underappreciate his talent and let him off the hook for his worst actions. Watch Reagan interacting with the press in 1987, and it's clear that he's fully lucid and engaged. After the Iran-Contra scandal, Congressional leaders declined to impeach Reagan that same year, perhaps because he successfully conveyed the impression that he was a bewildered innocent.

the death of his friend Rock Hudson spurred him to action. Despite being the only former labor leader ever to ascend to the presidency (he had been president of the Screen Actors Guild), Reagan did everything in his power to crush the American labor movement. In 1981, 10,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) went on strike for better pay and working conditions. Reagan simply fired them all. As Richard Sharpe writes,

The strikers were often working-class men and women who had achieved suburban middle class lives as air traffic controllers without having gone to college. Many were veterans of the US armed forces where they had learned their skills; their union had backed Reagan in his election campaign. Nevertheless, Reagan refused to back down. Several strikers were jailed; the union was fined and eventually made bankrupt. Only

about 800 got their jobs back when Clinton lifted the ban on rehiring those who went on strike. Many of the strikers were forced into poverty as a result of being blacklisted for [U.S. government] employment.

Reagan's crushing of the union "was interpreted by many as a green light from the federal government for union-busting, and ushered in the vicious employer attacks of the 1980s." The head



Protests against U.S. intervention in Nicaragua at Westover Air Force base, April 26, 1985

of Reagan's Office of Personnel Management said this explicitly, writing that with the strike, "American business leaders were given a lesson in managerial leadership that they could not and did not ignore. Many private sector executives have told me that they were able to cut the fat from their organizations and adopt more competitive work practices because of what the government did in those days." Journalist Jon Schwarz dates the beginning of the 40-year-long "murder of the middle class" to Reagan's firing of the air traffic controllers.

EAGAN BEGAN WHAT JOURNALIST MARK AMES CALLS "ONE of the most shocking wealth transfers in the history of the world, all under the propaganda diversion of 'making America competitive' and 'unleashing the creative energies of the American worker." With the aid of Congressional Democrats, he substantially cut taxes on the wealthy and attempted to undo both the New Deal and the Great Society. This included making more than \$22 billion in cuts to social welfare programs, while still massively increasing the federal deficit, in part by bloating the military budget. Poverty, homelessness, and precarity all increased.

It's harder to measure the indirect cultural consequences of Reagan's tenure, but he certainly did nothing to counteract the "greed is good" spirit of the times. As Mario Cuomo put it, Reagan "made the denial of compassion for the people who needed it most sound like a virtue." Similarly, Cornel West says that "Reagan made it fashionable to be indifferent to the poor and

gave permission to be greedy with little or no conscience."

In *The Man Who Sold the World: Ronald Reagan and the Betrayal of Main Street America*, William Kleinknecht summarizes the dire consequences of "Reaganomics":

He enacted policies that helped wipe out the high-paying jobs for the working class that were the real backbone of the country. This supposed guardian of traditional values was the architect of wrenching social change that swept across the country in the 1980s, the emergence of an eerie, overcommercialized, postmodern America that has left so much of the populace psychically adrift. Reagan propelled the transition to hypercapitalism, an epoch in which the forces of self-interest and profit seek to make a final rout of traditional human values. His legacy—mergers, deregulation, tax cuts for the wealthy, privatization, globalization—helped weaken the family and eradicate small-town life and the sense of community.

Investigative journalist Greg Palast puts things even more bluntly:

The New York Times, in its canned obit, wrote that Reagan projected, "faith in small town America" and "old-time values." "Values" my ass. It was union-busting and a declaration of war on the poor and anyone who couldn't buy designer dresses. It was the New Meanness, bringing starvation back to America so that every millionaire could get another million. "Small town" values? From the movie star of the Pacific Palisades, the Malibu mogul? I want to throw up.

All of that's just on the domestic front. Reagan's foreign policy was a horror show. His administration supported Saddam Hussein as Iraq waged a brutal war of aggression against Iran, even covering up evidence of Hussein's use of chemical weapons. Reagan violated both domestic and international law in his support for the Nicaraguan Contras. The Contras, according to Human Rights Watch, "were major and systematic violators of the most basic standards of the laws of armed conflict, including by launching indiscriminate attacks on civilians, selectively murdering non-combatants, and mistreating prisoners." (Reagan repeatedly compared the Contras to the American Founding Fathers, labeling them "freedom fighters" and "our brothers.") The Reagan administration funneled money to them through arms sales in explicit violation of U.S. law, while Reagan's terrorism against Nicaragua (mining the country's harbors and destroying civilian boats) was found to be illegal by the World Court, a ruling the administration simply ignored.

IKE OTHER PRESIDENTS, REAGAN SUPPORTED friendly despots around the world when it served "U.S. interests," including not only Hussein, but Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, the deposed Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, Suharto in Indonesia, and the genocidal Guatemalan military leader Ríos Montt, whom he called "a man of great personal integrity and commitment." Reagan freely violated international law, such as by invading Grenada without any authorization from the United Nations Security Council. Yet some Reagan policies look moderate and restrained by comparison with recent presidential actions. Reagan was willing to re-



President Ronald Reagan at an anti-communism rally in 1984

strain Israel when its conduct became embarrassing and appears to have been sincerely committed to the issue of reducing nuclear weapons, going so far as to propose eliminating nuclear weapons altogether in one meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev.

Unfortunately, Reagan was rigidly committed to his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, derisively known as "Star Wars"), an attempt to intercept inbound nuclear attacks on the United States. Reagan thought nothing could be objectionable about defending against a nuclear attack, but it disrupted the logic of deterrence (if the U.S. could defend itself from a nuclear attack but the Soviet Union could not, there was less reason for the U.S. to avoid attacking the Soviet Union), and the Soviets saw it as a serious threat, which led to one of the worst nuclear scares of the Cold War.

The Reagan presidency was a giant fraud. He promised safety but brought us closer to Armageddon. He promised prosperity but crushed American workers. His kindly demeanor belied a nasty streak. (For instance, Jon Schwarz writes in the *Intercept* that "when Patty Hearst's kidnappers demanded that her family start handing out free food to the poor, Reagan privately said, 'It's too bad we can't have an epidemic of botulism.") *TIME* magazine called him "a Prospero of American memories, a magician who carries a bright, ideal America like a holograph in his mind and projects the image in the air." Reagan, "master illusionist, is himself a kind of American dream." Well, as George Carlin said, "they call it the American dream because you have to be asleep to believe it." Reagan smiled at the country in a big cowboy hat while robbing people blind.

### FROM **RONALD** TO **DONALD**

An ignorant, deceitful entertainer bamboozling Americans into thinking that plutocracy is good for them. Does this sound familiar? We've had another one of those recently, one even more cartoonishly dishonest in his promises to "Make America Great Again" (a slogan Trump simply lifted and repurposed from Reagan). As Schwarz writes, Trump and Reagan share the "same political DNA": "Reagan was Trump's progenitor, and Trump is

Reagan's degenerate 21st-century descendant. Trump is to Reagan much like crack is to cocaine: cheaper, faster-acting, and less glamorous. Still, in their essence, they are the same thing."

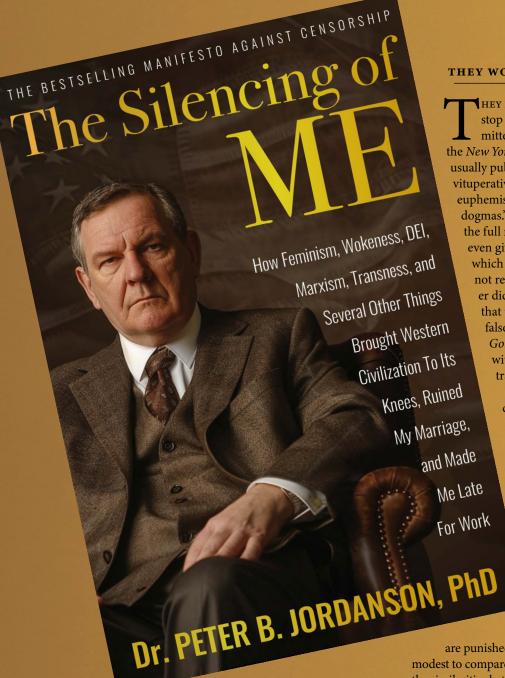
There are some important differences. Reagan exuded positivity, even utopianism, promising that "America's best days are yet to come. Our proudest moments are yet to be. Our most glorious achievements are just ahead." He was capable of seeming reassuring and reasonable, as in his well-received address after the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster. Trump's tone is dark, hateful, vindictive, while Reagan's was sunny. But both carried out variations on a similar fraud.

EAGAN PROMISED TO TAME THE WORST EXCESSES OF government. But in office, he let corruption and abuse run rampant. His Department of Housing and Urban Development was "enveloped by influence peddling, favoritism, abuse, greed, fraud, embezzlement, and theft" according to the House Government Operations Committee. His presidency ultimately resulted "in the investigation, indictment or conviction of over 138 administration officials, the largest number for any president of the United States." Reagan should plainly have been impeached and removed from office over the Iran-Contra scandal. The irony is that we only need to have a Reaganesque fear of government when people like Ronald Reagan are running the government.

Let's Make America Great Again, Reagan said. Did he? Of course not. It was a fantasy, an image. Trump is the same, offering an appealing lie that desperate people would very much like to believe in. But if it's trivial to point out that these men are selling snake oil, the question is: how do you convince people not to buy it? That's much more difficult. Reagan won two landslide victories. Trump could well be on his way to a second term.

Perhaps one lesson of Reagan is that because appealing visions and stories can be so powerful, we need one of our own. People voted for Reagan even though they disliked his policies, because he seemed personable and he projected an image of forward-looking confidence. Trump does not seem kind or personable, but he has a powerful story to tell, one of a country being ruined and awaiting its redeemer. Counteracting salesmen like these requires a powerful alternative story, with a promise of a different, better future. Democrats since Barack Obama (who himself was an admirer of Reagan) have failed to offer such a message—consider Hillary Clinton's "America is Already Great" or Joe Biden's promise to his donors that "nothing will fundamentally change."

Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump are two of the greatest con men of the age, successfully convincing many people to do immense harm to themselves and their country. Their political talents, however, should not be underrated. Reagan has, incredibly, been successfully sold as one of the greatest presidents ever, with Republicans viewing him as something close to a saint, an achievement that Noam Chomsky says would have impressed Kim Il-Sung. We need not just to puncture the myths, which is done well in both Kleinknecht's *The Man Who Sold The World* and Will Bunch's *Tear Down This Myth*, but to offer a more inspiring alternative that will keep people from falling for the pitches of vicious grifters.



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### THEY WON'T LET YOU READ THIS BOOK.

HEY HAVE DONE EVERYTHING IN THEIR POWER to stop these words from reaching you. When I submitted a partial draft of the text (12,000 words) to the New York Times, the editor told me that they "don't usually publish anything this long, or, frankly, this vituperative"—"long" and "vituperative" being obvious euphemisms for "out of step with prevailing leftist dogmas." I approached forty-three publishers with the full manuscript, and forty-two of them didn't even give me the courtesy of a rejection notice, which I can only conclude was because they could not refute my arguments. The forty-third publisher did offer an "explanation" of a kind, namely that they "only publish cookbooks," a transparent falsehood since several of their titles, such as Golfing for Cats, have nothing whatsoever to do with cooking or cookery. Powerful elites use transparent lies to conceal their true motives.

The rejection of my book had nothing to do with its quality, as anyone who reads it will see. The reasons must therefore have been political. All mainstream publishers are part of the Wokist Nexus, or Axis of Woke (a term I coined), and anyone who questions or subverts the nexus is ruthlessly "canceled," meaning criticized. Look at what happened to esteemed film director Woody Allen. Despite multiple Academy Awards, Allen's memoir was unceremoniously dropped by Simon & Schuster over what I assume was some trivial accusation. (I have not looked into the case closely.)

I have survived, but barely. Truth tellers are punished for their beliefs. It is ever thus. I am too modest to compare myself with Socrates or Jesus Christ, but the similarities between their cases and my own are striking. Socrates pointed out that the elite of Athens only pretended to possess knowledge, and that their philosophies were stupidity itself. For this, they hemlocked him to death. I have pointed out that today's woke elite believe in their own kind of nonsense, such as the multiplicity of genders and the existence of racial injustice. For this, I have been hounded out of "respectable" life. (I cannot set foot in the Harvard Club without having awkward looks cast my way.) I have become a stranger in my own country. (I now summer in the Principality of Liechtenstein.)

Yes, I have suffered for my ideals. Just last year, a stranger (who hid behind an obscene username) referred to me as "the termite" in an online post that went "viral." I was also called "mantis-like," which

offended me somewhat less, because it must be admitted that my physique is uncommonly spindly. A youth once threw a Pringles® can filled with fecal deposits at my garage door, an act I am certain was revenge for a column I had recently penned criticizing the concept of transgender poetry evenings. (How can poetry "be" transgender?) I take consolation in contemplating the fate of Galileo, persecuted by the Inquisition for daring to defend scientific reality—though my fate is not the same as his. In fact, in many ways mine is worse, for Galileo never experienced the braying of a Twitter mob. And yet *eppur si muove* ("still, yes, it moves").

My fight for truth has taken its toll on my personal life. I am no longer on speaking terms with my several adult children, my marriage has ended, and many of the women I try to date make it clear within minutes that they are unwilling to allow me to correct basic misconceptions they hold about the world. This is not a rational response, I explain to them. One should welcome corrections, for they help us to see more clearly. To reject my gentle constructive suggestions is to reject reason itself. Yet they seem unbothered by their manifest unreasonableness, and I remain alone.

But I do not complain. We are turning into a nation of whiners, and so I suffer in silence, confining my observations to newspaper columns, television appearances, public lectures, and several dozen books. True, in daily life I am apt to complain to management about poor service, and have gotten more than one barista terminated from their post for writing a rude variation of my name on the side of a disposable coffee cup. And, yes, if I see a septum piercing on a checkout girl, I will place a sternly worded note in the suggestion box on my way out. But that is a matter of enforcing basic standards of decency, without which the foundations of Western Civilization would rot.

Ah, the West! Wellspring of all that is worthwhile. America, Britain, Europe (except the decadent French), Australia, and possibly Latin America, I'm not sure. The West has wobbled lately, and we *must* keep it from wobbling, perhaps by wedging a piece of ideological cardboard under one of its legs. We are becoming a nation of feather boa-wearing, show tune-whistling, avocado toast-munching, flamingo-worshiping, multi-gender *boulevardiers*.

What happened, for instance, to the classical masculine physique? To even mention it these days is to risk being carted off to Gender Jail. But I remember a time when men looked precisely like men. I could gaze at their glistening pectorals and feel a swelling pride in the physical form of my fellow heterosexuals. These days, I can't even tell whether I am looking at a man or not. Several times I have found myself attracted to someone I thought was a woman, only to find out that by my definition she was not. When the feeling of physical attraction

does not dissipate upon the revelation, I am left confused, and therefore angry.

### HOW THINGS USED TO BE

HE AMERICA OF MY YOUTH WAS AN EDEN. ONE KNEW one's place. The pies were crisp and golden, the elevators never broke down, and women were svelte and/or buxom. It was rightly considered shameful to be unattractive. There was only one kind of cheese: American. The hats had wide brims, the lawns were verdant, and professors knew that their job was to teach Tacitus and Themistocles, not to make fun of the President of the United States. We would never *think* of "pasteurizing" our milk, which was considered French and unseemly.

Men did not go bald, sperm counts were high, water hadn't gone woke, and there was no such thing as ants, making picnics a joy. The CIA knew to keep its darkest misdeeds closely under wraps, so that we could preserve an unspoiled image of an innocent and generous nation. The economy was operating the way God intended it, meaning that you couldn't just sit around in leather chaps watching online pornography all day while collecting a government stipend. You had to get a job, and the jobs were real. A man could expect to be a zinc miner, boot washer, paste hauler, or nail hammerer. You didn't work at a desk performing vague "services" or "coordinating" so-called "operations." You worked with your hands and occasionally chopped off your fingers. It was difficult, dangerous labor, but we understood that the risk of a serious injury at work builds character.

In the America of my youth, you could milk a cow without having to fill out a form. The nanny state didn't check if you were "feeding" and "clothing" your children. It didn't inspect your meat to determine whether it was "safe." Which deadly bacteria I put in my body is none of the government's damned business. Klaus Schwab hadn't shown up to invent the mRNA vaccine, and Marilyn Monroe's ample bosom was the great symbol of American womanhood. We had exactly the right number of genders (2) and people's races were invisible and undiscussed...

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# THE BLACK CHURCH IS NO SHIELD FOR EMPIRE

BY RANN MILLER





Left: Martin Luther King Jr. speaking in Eutaw, Ala., 1965; Above: Joe Biden speaking at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., 2024

HE BLACK CHURCH IS A STALWART INSTITUTION IN THE African American community, serving as a major hub of spiritual enlightenment, social activism, and economic empowerment for Black people. It's hard to overstate the impact the Black Church has had on the United States, particularly its artistic culture and politics. It's the institution that gave us the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well as a rich musical tradition that was foundational to popular culture, impacting everything from "blues, jazz, rock and roll, soul and R&B, folk, [and] rock. [...] [E]ven hip-hop bear[s] the imprint of Black sacred music," as Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes in The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song. It's also an institution that remains deeply embedded in contemporary politics. This is why politicians—white and Black, Democratic and Republican are in the habit of visiting the Black Church to secure Black votes in exchange for a sense of solidarity and public policy promises. Addressing Black voters recently in Newsweek, former Ohio State Senator Nina Turner wrote, "It is not just the presidential candidates who run to us; congressional candidates, gubernatorial candidates, mayoral candidates, city council candidates—everybody and their momma comes to us for our votes."

While officials visit Black neighborhoods, colleges, and radio stations, the most important of these spaces in terms of political strategy is the Black Church. While there are around a hundred

Historically Black Colleges and Universities, they represent only one segment of Black voters: the youth vote. Black churches, on the other hand, provide access to thousands of voters across various demographics. A visit to two Black churches in a major U.S. city could reach 5,000 to 10,000 people, an enormous payoff compared to other avenues of outreach. Black radio shows, for instance, have sizable audiences, but their political content may be missed by listeners. And political canvassing, which tends to happen in major cities such as Philadelphia, Detroit, or Houston or in Black neighborhoods in gerrymandered Alabama or across Affrilachia, may not reach as many people. For politicians, visiting a high-profile Black church makes sense.

African Americans have traditionally voted Democrat since the New Deal era, so it's no surprise that President Joe Biden, a deeply unpopular president, has at times needed to solidify his base of support among Black people. In an April Gallup poll, the president had a 38.7 percent approval rating, the lowest of any president at that point in their administration since Dwight Eisenhower. And that was *prior* to a disastrous June debate performance against Donald Trump in which the president gave rambling and incoherent responses, sparking concern about his cognitive capacity and his fitness to run for another term. Since then, President Biden has dropped out of the race. Vice President Kamala Harris secured the nomination less than two weeks later.

Just prior to dropping out of the race, President Biden's approval rating had dropped to 36 percent.

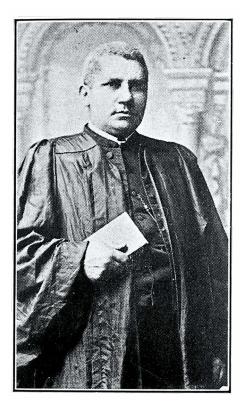
UST DAYS AFTER THE DEBATE, in the midst of Democratic "panic" about his performance, Biden attended Sunday service at Mount Airy Church of God in Christ in Philadelphia and addressed the congregation, saying that he, like the audience members, was an "imperfect being" who would keep the faith. The church's bishop came to Biden's defense, and the crowd applauded the president. The scene was strikingly different from earlier in the year, in January, when Biden attended services and gave a speech at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C. There, in 2015, nine Black congregants, including pastor Clementa Pinckney, were massacred by a white supremacist gunman. During his address, Biden was met with protest from audience members who questioned his dedication to honoring life while being complicit in Israel's ongoing genocide against Palestinians

in Gaza. "Ceasefire now!" they cried out before being removed from the church.

After the visit, criticism continued. One podcaster said that Biden deserved the protest he was met with. CUNY Graduate Center professor Marc Lamont Hill unleashed passionate criticism on the president—referring to him as "Genocide Joe"—for using the pulpit as a "shield" for his complicity in Israel's genocide of the Palestinians. Bree Newsome Bass, the antiracist activist who famously scaled a flag pole to take down the Confederate flag from the South Carolina state capitol grounds in 2015, had similarly critical words for the president:

To use the pulpit at Emanuel AME in this manner, to make it a prop, essentially, for Joe Biden's reelection bid, to me, is the greatest assault on truth. [...] And this effort to use the church, not just the Black Church, but the site of racial violence, of a mass murder, to deflect from the fact that Joe Biden himself is bombing churches, bombing mosques, bombing places of worship, and murdering many civilians, people who have sought shelter in those places, it just exposes the complete hypocrisy of this entire situation and the vacuum of moral leadership at the top.

The Black Church, Bass and others understood, is no shield for empire. In fact, the Black Church is a weapon against it because it was forged in struggle against some of the greatest injustices in this country. Those include the injustices of mass incarceration, Jim Crow segregation, and enslavement, the period when the Black Church was born.



Bishop Turner, New York Public Library Digital Collections, 1916

### **'BIRTHED OUT OF STRUGGLE'**

"No PILLAR OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN community has been more central to its history, identity, and social justice vision than the 'Black Church," writes Gates Jr. As he explains, there is no singular "Black Church," as there is no singular Black religion. The Black Church is a collective term to represent Black Christian congregations in the United States that engage in the work of transforming Black lives spiritually, politically, economically, and socially.

The Black Church is a Black institutional space, meaning that all aspects of the Black Church—how it is operated, including its policies, politics, and priorities—are led by Blackness or the Black lived experience. Contrary to white institutional spaces, Black institutional spaces like the Black Church weren't forged to exclude whites. Rather, they came to be because Black people were excluded from participation in white spaces. Black Churches are led by Black people, predominantly attended by Black people, discuss matters important to

Black people in both spiritual and secular ways, and engage in spiritual and secular activism on behalf of Black people. The Black Church is primarily Protestant, although there are Black Catholic congregations as well.

HE BLACK CHURCH IS NOT SIMPLY A RELIGIOUS OR spiritual community. It operates as a political, social, and economic entity to bring forth God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. The Black Church mobilizes Black people to vote while producing political and moral leaders, hosts financial literacy and first-time homebuyer courses, and hosts social gatherings across various age groups for congregants to attend the movies, sporting events, concerts, and dances such as sweethearts ball or church prom.

To understand the history of the Black Church, which emerged during the enslavement of African people, we have to go back to the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the society of New World Protestant enslavers. While the enslavement of indigenous people in the New World took forms such as convict leasing or debt peonage, African enslavement was unique in that Africans were designated as chattel, or property. In other words, Africans were legally defined as the property of their captors and not human beings, thus they were treated as their captors wished without legal (or moral) repercussions. While the Spanish, French, and Portuguese tended to convert those that they enslaved, Protestant planters in English, Dutch, and Danish colonies did so less often.

In Barbados in the 1600s, for instance, "Christian" became

"shorthand for 'nonslave," writes Katharine Gerbner in *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World*. Protestant enslavers on the island were resistant to converting the enslaved because Christianity was essential to maintaining the slavocracy. To convert an African to Christianity would risk making him human, just like his colonizers, which was antithetical to the policy of the African as chattel. Therefore, the faith was withheld.

The example of one early 18th-century French missionary, Francis Le Jau of South Carolina, illustrates another problem inherent in conversion: the fact that literacy—in particular, reading the Bible—could cause enslaved people to question their station. Gerbner writes that Le Jau "did not want his enslaved congregants to develop their own interpretations of the Bible" and concluded, "those men have not judgment enough to make a good use of their learning."

As much as Protestants may have resisted conversion of the enslaved, over time, Christianity was introduced to enslaved Africans as a tactic to elicit compliance and quell the spirit of resistance. This came in the form of the "slave bible," which was created a few years after the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and used as a tool to make enslaved Africans more docile while simultaneously preventing rebellion. This "slave bible" omitted 90 percent of the Old Testament and 50 percent of the New Testament—a curated Gospel.

Nevertheless, African people, when introduced to Christianity, used the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a foundation for resistance to enslavement, white supremacy, racial capitalism, and white settler colonialism. While enslavers determined that the faith would reinforce the slavocracy, African people determined that the faith would dismantle it. Rev. Richard Allen, who was born enslaved and would later become the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, is one example. He was introduced to the faith, taught himself to read and write while enslaved, and purchased his freedom. When confronted with racism while worshiping with whites, he and

other Black members defected and created the first Black church in the United States in Philadelphia. There's Denmark Vesey, a pastor who planned a revolt and escape of enslaved persons in Charleston, S.C. Nat Turner was a preacher who led a revolt against whites with 75 others after receiving a prophecy from God. Lastly, Harriet Tubman, known as Moses for freeing Black people from bondage, spoke of receiving direction from God to help her on her trips to bring Black people to freedom. After the Civil War, Rev. Henry McNeal Turner was inspired by the Gospel to enter politics and promote a message of self-determination that would prefigure Black Nationalism.

HE BLACK CHURCH, OF COURSE, ALSO STOOD AT THE epicenter of the 20th-century Civil Rights Movement. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and a host of other Black clergy served as some of the leaders fighting for the rights of Black people to be treated as fully human in the United States. Their shared leadership, along with that of other spiritual and secular leaders, secured landmark legislation: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. King's analysis of the plight of African Americans in the U.S. went even further, though, than advocacy for political and civil rights: King argued for a "radical redistribution" of wealth so that Black people might actually be able to afford a meal at newly-integrated lunch counters. He was also fiercely anti-imperialist, speaking out against the Vietnam War (which made him a target of both the Democratic Party's and the liberal media's ire) as well as the violence of neglecting anti-poverty efforts domestically in order to finance the war.

Another example is the Deacons for Defense, who during the Civil Rights Movement took up arms to defend Black clergy and congregants alike to ensure the work of protests got done. Today, Rev. William J. Barber II uses activism to shed light on racism, capitalism, and militarism with his Poor People's Campaign (a social justice movement centering poor and low-income people) and Repairers of the Breach (a group that trains and organizes

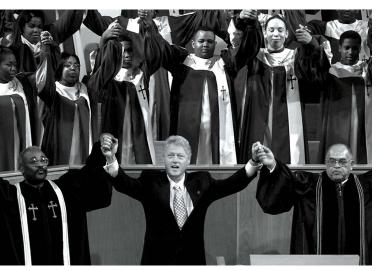




religious leaders).

The Black Church today continues in the activist tradition by serving as an institution for Black history instruction, particularly in places where Black history is under attack. Black Church clergy and congregations have pledged their support and solidarity with Black Lives Matter despite "creative tension," as Dr. King called it, between the groups. Additionally, the Church encourages African American voter turnout through its tradition of "souls to the polls."

Concerning the genocide in Gaza, over 1,000 Black church pastors demanded a ceasefire in Gaza in January, and some leaders even took out whole-page advertisements in newspapers expressing their demand in November of 2023. One of the most prominent Black Churches, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in February called on the U.S. to "end its financial aid to Israel." And in May, 13 leaders of the predominantly Black Churches of Christ signed a letter calling for a permanent ceasefire.



Bill Clinton at Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va., 2000

But there is a tension that exists in the Church due to diverging paths within. For example, while many within the Church speak out against the evils of racism and economic exploitation, which are both key features of capitalism, others promote a gospel of prosperity that says that individual financial prosperity is also the will of God for his people. To manifest such "blessings," one must name and claim: speak positively about receiving material blessings and donate (sow a seed) into a prosperity ministry, a church where the prosperity gospel is the foundation of its religious work. The contradiction here is substantial: critics of capitalism often wish to dismantle structural racism and establish an entirely different economic system, while prosperity adherents strive for individual success within the current system. Another example is the reticence, if not the failure, to speak on behalf of the LGBTQ community. The "progressive" tenor of Black Church politics hasn't always included advocating for the civil rights of the LGBTQ community. These examples may contribute to the decline in Black

Church attendance among Black youth.

This tension notwithstanding, the Black Church is a beacon of hope at a time when the world faces major problems such as war and genocide, inequality, the climate crisis, police violence, and homelessness (to name a few) and the possibility of change through politics sometimes leaves us feeling hopeless. The Black Church pulpit offers a space where truth and justice are proclaimed in order to encourage and inspire the masses to work for change. However, when politicians make the rounds at church to promote their agenda, they're generally standing in contrast to what the Black Church has always stood for.

of Black voters, have consistently made rounds in the Black Church. Take the Clintons. In the 2016 Democratic primary, Hillary Clinton visited several Black Churches in Philadelphia and Detroit, using parables found in the gospel accounts to solicit votes. She also addressed the National Baptist Convention—the largest predominantly Black Church institution in the United States. There, she reminded Black people of her Christian connections to make her campaign pitch against Donald Trump, saying:

I am sure some of you are sick and tired of politicians who just show up at election time... you and your congregations deserve more. [...] Across this great country, you've welcomed me into your congregations with open arms and open hearts. [...] If [Trump] doesn't respect all Americans, how can he serve all Americans? You know better than anyone that people who look at the African American community and see only poverty, crime, and despair are missing so much.

Hillary's comments on "poverty, crime, and despair" were notable given that her husband, former President Bill Clinton, had enacted policies that, in the words of legal scholar Michelle Alexander, had "decimated Black America." Bill Clinton's signature "welfare reform" bill of 1996, which enacted strict work requirements for welfare recipients, simply reduced welfare rolls and put single women to work without addressing the underlying causes of their poverty. Clinton's 1994 crime bill increased police funding and helped shuttle African Americans into the country's vast prison system. Hillary supported this, using her role as first lady to speak out about the need to "bring to heel" youth "super-predators," a reference to young people who were obviously coded as Black.

Despite these facts, political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry noted during Hillary's 2008 presidential campaign that there was a tendency to think (falsely) that the Bill Clinton years had been "good times for Black America," particularly on reversing Black-white economic disparities. She wrote that "deep racial affection toward Bill Clinton contributed to many African-Americans' misunderstanding the continuing economic inequality faced by the race."

Such "deep racial affection" came about in no small part because Bill Clinton was very skilled in the art of building cultural relationships with the Black community. For example, Clinton leveraged his awareness of Black cultural norms and

popular trends to appear on the "Arsenio Hall Show" in 1992, where he played the saxophone while wearing a pair of shades. His visits to the Black Church were no less calculated. As Nathan J. Robinson notes in *Superpredator: Bill Clinton's Use and Abuse of Black America*, in 1993, Clinton addressed the Church of God in Christ in Memphis, using the opportunity to chastise Black people, saying that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would be disappointed in them. The reason? Lack of personal responsibility, lack of adherence to family values, and Black-on-Black crime. Michelle Alexander summed up the two faces of Clinton:

Clinton mastered the art of sending mixed cultural messages, appealing to African Americans by belting out "Lift Every Voice and Sing" in black churches, while at the same time signaling to poor and working-class whites that he was willing to be tougher on black communities than Republicans had been.

On issues of foreign policy and empire, Clinton was responsible for the disastrous U.N.-backed "humanitarian" bombing of Kosovo, which led to 500 civilian deaths; the bombing of a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan under false pretenses, an incident that is rightly considered a terrorist attack; and the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, which put in place the infrastructure for Donald Trump's later border policies. Both Clintons were involved, during Hillary's role as secretary of state under Barack Obama, in a series of failed and shoddy "recovery" projects in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake there. The Clintons' legacy clearly runs counter to church teaching.

NE MIGHT ASSUME THAT PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA was a natural fit in the Black Church because of his identity as an African American. But Obama was raised outside the U.S. mainland mostly by his white mother and grandparents, who were not religious. He discovered the Black church in his mid-20s, around the time that he worked as a community organizer in Chicago. He started attending the Trinity United Church of Christ, where he found a "spiritual guide" in the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who delivered sermons bubbling with "righteous anger about oppression and deliberate hyperbole in laying blame, which are common in sermons delivered in black churches every Sunday," as James Carney and Amy Sullivan wrote in 2008 in *Time* magazine. This was the Reverend Wright whose controversial 2003 "God damn America" sermon Obama would seek to distance himself from on the eve of his election.

As president, Obama frequently engaged the Black Church by attending services with his family or addressing congregations. At the end of his first year in office, Obama visited and addressed congregants at Vermont Avenue Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., where Dr. King had preached during the Civil Rights Movement, to urge patience while offering honesty about his frustrations with "progress" being slow. During one particularly moving address, Obama calmed the righteous anger of Black people after the massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church, leading those in attendance to his rendition of "Amazing Grace."

As talented an orator as Obama was, there were some cringeinducing moments, such as when, at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church (where both King Sr. and Jr. had been pastors), he chided Black people by saying that if Black people were honest with themselves, they'd admit their role in not upholding Dr. King's dream by virtue of allowing anti-LGBTQ sentiment, antisemitism, and xenophobia to persist in the Black community. While King would certainly agree with the idea of working to eliminate bigotry and intolerance, it's quite a stretch to suggest that the Black community itself is the reason that "King's dream" of, say, economic redistribution and racial equality had not been realized.

Perhaps it's not surprising that while Obama sometimes sought to link himself with King, he also separated himself from the King-like prophetic preaching of Rev. Jeremiah Wright. In one of his most famous speeches, sometimes referred to as the "race speech," given in Philadelphia in 2008, Obama "condemned" Wright's language in the "God damn America" sermon and called the preacher's words "divisive." Wright himself



Bishop Suffragan Chester Talton, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, and the Rev. Canon George Regas at All Saints Church in Pasadena, Calif., 1992

explained the gist of his words as, "You cannot do terrorism on other people and expect it never to come back on you." Wright's point—that violent U.S. foreign policy was indeed a form of terrorism—is an entirely valid critique of the American empire. But it was still too much of a political liability for Obama. (Years later, Obama would half-heartedly defend Wright—but it was too little, too late.)

As much as Obama was ushered in with promises of "hope" and "change," and some people even thought his ascension to power signaled a post-racial America, Obama's record itself—on everything from economics to race to foreign policy—ran counter to the anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist views of the Black Church. Domestically, he bailed out Wall Street during the Great Recession, which hit Black people particularly hard. He failed to call out the racism of the Tea Party because he didn't want to upset white voters. During the nation's response to police

brutality, namely the murder of George Floyd, Obama said that political candidates should avoid "snappy slogans like 'defund the police'" because it would lose them support. As president, Obama awarded more funding for police. In a June 2020 blog post, where he advised protestors of the Floyd murder not to engage in "violence," Obama wrote, "if we want our criminal justice system, and American society at large, to operate on a higher ethical code, then we have to model that code ourselves."

On foreign policy, Obama presided over a drone strike program that killed hundreds of civilians, saying in his memoir, *A Promised Land*, that he did not want to look soft on terrorism. For his immigration policy, he earned the moniker "Deporter in Chief" as his administration successfully removed 2.7 million immigrants from the country.

Obama solidified his place in the Black Church space as a congregant. There is where he experienced impactful moments of his life, including his wedding. Like others before him, Obama utilized the Black Church for his political purposes; the difference is that he was an insider. But his overall standing with the Black Church is tainted—and not simply because of his use of the Church for political cover. He sold out his own pastor in exchange for securing the presidency while calming white sensibilities and continuing to "proselytize" to Black Church congregants the "gospel" of neoliberal policy. Although the cuts from the Rev. Wright controversy and Obama's patronizing and chastising comments have healed somewhat, the scars remain.

EPUBLICAN POLITICIANS HAVE MADE THE ROUNDS TO the Black Church as well, including Donald Trump. In June of this year, Trump visited the 180 Church on the West Side of Detroit. The church was, as Marc Lamont Hill explained, "for real in the hood, it's not a fake Black Church." Even so, Trump's visit saw the church "packed with white crowds" and suspiciously few Black people. The church's pastor praised Trump's supposed agenda for the Black community and would go on to speak at the Republican National Convention the following month. True to Trump fashion, the event seems like it was a setup designed to make people think that Trump has more support among African American voters than he does.

Other Republicans who have visited the church include George Bush, who had the support of a handful of Black Church leaders when he was up for reelection in 2004, and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. In 2019, just ahead of his announcement that he would be seeking the Democratic nomination for president, Bloomberg visited the Christian Cultural Center in Brooklyn. In a cynical move, he apologized for stop and frisk, using the visit to renounce a policy he had consistently defended until he decided to run for president, the *New York Times* noted. Bloomberg also visited Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama, to gain some support—at a commemoration for Bloody Sunday, the day that police brutally attacked peaceful voting rights protestors crossing the Edmund Pettus bridge in 1965. There, he was met with Black congregants

who turned their backs in protest.

Former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley visited the Black Church the year after the massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church in order to deflect from the racism at the root of the massacre. She, along with other conservative politicians, including Republican U.S. Senator Tim Scott, chose to organize a day of prayer to focus on South Carolinians coming together rather than talking about the sin of white supremacy. When running for president, Tim Scott visited New Beginnings Church in Chicago to gain support from Black voters. Some saw through his attempt, one person saying that, "the bottom line is any person that comes through these doors, any other door where they meet the public, they're trying to win votes. Period."

OE BIDEN VISITED BLACK CHURCHES DURING HIS RUN for the White House in 2020, as did many of his opponents. I am unsure whether Joe Biden is familiar with the Church as a site of struggle for justice. President Biden said in 2019 that he was "raised in a Black Qurch."

However, that cannot be substantiated. Even the president's record of activism during the Civil Rights Movement has come under question (so has his claim that he was arrested in South Africa during apartheid). President Biden's policy legacy speaks for itself: his stance against bussing, his role in creating the crack-powder cocaine disparity, his failure to act in good faith concerning the charges of sexual harassment made by Anita Hill, and his authorship of 1994 crime bill.

In May of this year, President Biden served as the commencement speaker at Morehouse College, one of the nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). While not part of the Black Church, HBCUs are in many cases Black Church-adjacent. His speech was a campaign pitch to Black America while a defense of his politics, namely the genocide of the Palestinian people. Like Clinton and Obama before him, Biden invoked the name and legacy of King to portray himself as a champion of Black causes while positioning himself as having the interest of the Palestinian people in mind in the oval office.

The irony of Biden linking himself with King runs deep. Morehouse is the alma mater of King, who, of course, led disruptive protests toward the federal government in the name of civil rights. Biden is essentially the "white moderate" that Dr. King once warned about in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," someone who is "more devoted to order than to justice." Biden, after all, called for law and order on college campuses during the pro-Palestinian encampments, which goes directly against the spirit of protest called for by King. During Biden's Morehouse speech, "a handful of students, some wearing keffiyehs, turned their chairs around to face away from the president."

Meanwhile, on the election front, Vice President Kamala Harris is now the Democratic nominee. This came about due to pressure from Democratic funders and allies who no doubt

<sup>1</sup> Biden promised he would cancel student loan debt for people who attended HBCUs, something he has yet to do. He also should address the funding disparities faced by HBCUs due to racism.

feared the president's worsening approval ratings in the aftermath of his poor debate performance. While most will point to his debate performance and age, the president's funding of Israel's genocide of the Palestinians and his response to anti-genocide protests on college campuses around the country had initially placed his political future in doubt.

According to a poll conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in April of this year, the majority of African Americans want a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, believe that military assistance to Israel should be conditional, and believe that the U.S. should impose sanctions on Israel if it is convicted of genocide by the International Court of Justice. (The ICJ ruled in January of 2024 that it is "plausible" that Israel has committed acts that violate the Genocide Convention.)

The Black Church pulpit is a place where people committed to faith, justice, and truth can challenge power, not the place where they make excuses for it. Take, for example, a sermon given by Rev. Barber in April of this year:

This is why today's religious nationalism is so dangerous. It always embraces violence and war—whatever faith tradition it exploits. In this country when we see it, they say more guns, more military spending, hating gay people and immigrants, and tax cuts for corporations is God's agenda. It's heretical, but it's there—paid for by big money. We see it in Putin, we see it in Trump, we see it in Netanyahu. They all insist that God is on the side of violence and vengeance. And it is contrary to the Gospel. [...] We must question how fast our government can move to fund defense. [...] The moral question is, if the will and the money are there when lives and democracy are on the line, why can't the same political forces act when 800 people right here in our own country are dying every day from poverty?

In January, President Biden thanked the Black Church, saying that the world would be "a different place" if the Church hadn't shown people the "'power of faith' during dark times." The world, including the United States, would indeed be different without the Black Church's resistance to injustice. But Biden is clearly committed to war and empire—the very things Black Church leaders have spoken about for decades.

The truth is that Biden and other politicians have reduced the Black Church pulpit to a space to win or *win back* Black votes for elections. In President Biden's case, the Black vote would have been no guarantee—not because Trump is an appealing alternative, but because Biden has failed to protect Black voters at the polls.

The Biden Administration—including Vice President Harris—didn't make voting rights a priority during the administration's first hundred days. This was unfortunate in light of the ongoing assault on the Voting Rights Act. Court cases such as Shelby v. Holder (2013) and NAACP v. Arkansas Board of Apportionment (2023) have struck back portions of that law meant to protect minority voters from policies that could harm their ability to vote, particularly African American voters. As a result, many African Americans willing to vote for Kamala

# THE BLACK CHURCH PULPIT IS A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE COMMITTED TO FAITH, JUSTICE, AND TRUTH CAN CHALLENGE POWER

Harris could face serious challenges in doing so, especially in the former Confederate states, where conservatives have enacted voter ID laws and absentee ballot limits.

We've yet to see Kamala Harris's approach to engaging with the Black Church as a presidential nominee. Like President Obama, Vice President Harris attends a Black Church and identifies as a Black Baptist. In January, while stumping for President Biden when he was still in the race, the Vice President encouraged a Black Church women's organization in South Carolina to vote for President Biden while touting the accomplishments of the administration for the Black poor. My hope is that if she visits a Black Church in the remaining months before the election, she stumps for justice rather than empire. Sadly, the history of policy and political campaigns gives me little confidence she'll actually do that.

It also appears that the genocide-related political pressure on Democrats from the Black Church may have lessened, as some leaders are rallying in support of Harris. Reverend Barber recently praised her campaign in a co-written op-ed for MSNBC. Curiously absent was any mention of the genocide. However, any apparent lessening is due to the necessity of the Black Church leveraging its political power to tackle more than a single issue.

HE BLACK CHURCH PULPIT OR LECTERN HAS HISTORICALLY been—and continues to be—a vehicle to advocate for truth, justice, and antiracism by way of the gospel of Jesus Christ, not a shield for empire. No matter how many appearances or speeches politicians make in Black churches, they cannot simply wish away their records in order to win Black votes. When politicians convert the transformative space of the pulpit into a self-aggrandizing space to sustain power and find affirmation for their often destructive and unjust policies, the pulpit is cheapened. In this political moment, as the Democrats continue to aid Israel's genocide in Palestine, the words of Dr. King remain as true as ever: "a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." To stop the nation's march toward "spiritual death," ordinary people should take inspiration from the moral clarity of one of its most important institutions: the Black Church. 4

# current affairs marketplace by Aidan Y-M

Got too much useless shit lying around? Not enough useless shit lying around? Boy, do we have good news for you! Introducing *Current Affairs* Marketplace, the perfect spot for broke 20-somethings and obsessive hoarders alike to buy, sell, and trade with the scammers in their community. Why throw your garbage away when you can find some sucker down the street willing to pay their hard-earned money for it? Why spend full price on a new version of the thing that actually works when you can be that sucker? No matter what you're looking for, *Current Affairs* Marketplace is the place to find it! As long as "it" is a meeting with a shady stranger who now has your contact information. Happy hunting!



### Marketplace





Sell



Local

More ~

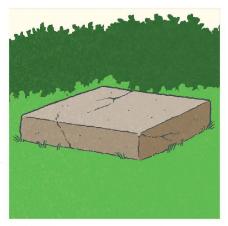
### Today's picks



\$25 • Bones for arts and crafts, occult rituals

Found these while on a walk in my local cemetery. Possibly raccoon or deer \*wink wink.\* Perfect for necromancy, demonic rites, or just a sip-n-summon night with the gals!

### • We like to have fun here, USA



FREE! • 40,000-pound concrete slab!

You pick up. Need gone by this weekend!



\$85 • 3 awesome games! + mostly working third-party controller!

These great games were poor sellers, which only makes them more valuable as collector's items! Great controller thrown in for free!



\$200 • Lip-shaped couch

Nothing says class and sensual luxury like a lip-shaped couch! Selling this bad boy as I'm moving apartments and it unfortunately won't fit in my new "play" room. Nobody has had sex on this couch, guaranteed! I swear!



\$20 • 63 back issues of Current Affairs magazine

OBO. Please help me get this trash out of my house!



\$175 • Nice bike

Bought this bike with money but don't want it anymore. Missing front wheel. Some hacksaw/bolt-cutter scratches, but barely visible under fresh new rustoleum paint job. Shifters work good!



\$2,500 • Pikachu engagement ring

Selling my engagement ring as, unfortunately, the relationship didn't work out. I'm sure you can see why. Perfect ring for someone else? Maybe?



\$45 • Something blurry

This picture must have been taken with a phone camera from 2003. What is it? A baby's toy? An abstract sculpture? Some sort of sex thing? Guess you'll just have to buy it to find out!



\$18,000 • Modded '04 Civic

Runs great! 190k miles on this baby with no end in sight! Fitted with body kit, stanced wheels, aerodynamic spoiler, roof rack, quad exhaust, jack-in-the-box antenna topper, Calvin peeing on Hobbes bumper sticker. No haggling, I know what she's worth.



\$500 • Glock 19

Selling unregistered Glock 19. Asking \$500. DO NOT ASK ME IF THIS IS LEGAL! I AM NOT A LAWYER!



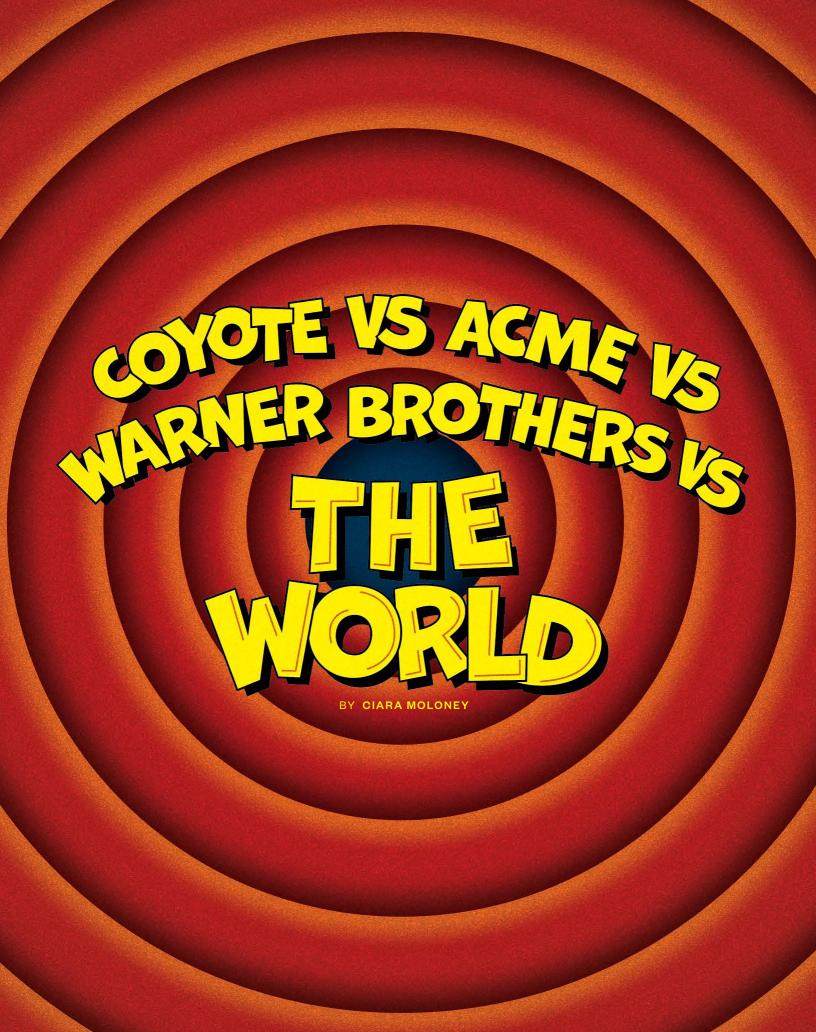
\$10 • Toilet plunger

Selling my old toilet plunger. Lightly used, some staining from use. Works great!



\$3,000 • An amazing lamp that would actually look perfect in your apartment

300 miles away. Must pick up.



## ILE E. COYOTE IS A FAMOUSLY

loyal customer of Acme Corporation, producers of nitroglycerine, bird seed, giant rubber bands, explosive tennis balls, do-it-yourself tornado kits, and jet-propelled pogo sticks. His brand loyalty is absurd considering his actual experience of using Acme products to try to catch Road Runner: anything Acme-branded inevitably backfires. He's the one who gets blown up by the explosive tennis balls. When he uses the tornado kit, he's the one who gets sucked up into a twister. The jet-propelled pogo stick launches him backwards off a cliff.

In *Coyote vs. Acme*, Wile E. Coyote decides to sue Acme with the help of a down-and-out human lawyer played by Will Forte. A live-action/animation hybrid in the tradition of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, the film involved artists sketching line drawings of the animated characters over a rough edit which was then used as a reference for the animators and visual effects artists. It was a combination of 2D and 3D animation which captured the look and feel of the original *Looney Tunes* designs in a live-action world.

Coyote vs. Acme "is about a giant corporation choosing stock over empathy, doing nothing 'illegal' but morally shady stuff for profit. It's a David vs Goliath story," the film's editor, Carsten Kurpanek, wrote on X. "It's about the cynical and casual cruelness of capitalism and corporate greed."

In November 2023, Warner Bros. announced that they wouldn't be releasing it. The crew were not informed in advance; instead they were blindsided after the decision had already been made. The film had been completed. Test audiences reportedly scored it very highly. But Warner Bros. decided that they would rather take a tax write-off of \$30 million.

Thirty million dollars. To shred a completed work of art. Once again, things blow up in Wile E. Coyote's face.

A year earlier, Warner had scrapped another film that was either completed or very near completion: Batgirl. The cancellation of Batgirl was shocking—basically unprecedented for a major Hollywood production—but it occurred in the context of Warner and Discovery merging to form Warner Bros. Discovery, under the leadership of new CEO David Zaslav. This made it relatively easy to rationalize Batgirl as a casualty of strategy shake-ups post-merger. "Several sources note that Batgirl was made under a different regime at Warner Bros., headed by Jason Kilar and Ann Sarnoff, that was singularly focused on building its streaming service, HBO Max," Variety reports. Zaslav, in contrast, wants to concentrate on theatrical releases, and according to Variety, "Spending the money to expand the scope of *Batgirl* for theaters ... was a non-starter at a company newly focused on belt-tightening and the bottom line." Paul Tassi in Forbes also notes that "there were rumblings that the movie also just isn't very good at baseline, and that WB wants to move in new directions with DC ... for better or worse."

But none of that applies to *Coyote vs. Acme*. The merger has done its shaking up already. The film is, by the accounts of those lucky enough to see it, excellent. It does not have the potential to harm the future direction of the *Looney Tunes* series—at least,

not any more than *Space Jam: A New Legacy* did. The story around *Batgirl* framed it as essentially unreleasable, undercutting any prospective mourning for its loss. But when it came to *Coyote vs. Acme*, that never stuck. "When I first heard that our movie was getting 'deleted,' I hadn't seen it yet. So I was thinking what everyone else must have been thinking: this thing must be a hunk of junk," Will Forte wrote in a letter to the cast and crew in February. "But then I saw it. And it's incredible."

But like *Batgirl*, and like *Scoob! Holiday Haunt*, *Coyote vs. Acme* wasn't released in theaters or on streaming or sold to another distributor. Like with *Batgirl* and *Scoob! Holiday Haunt*, the studio determined that the promise of a tax write-off made the film worth more dead than alive.

Something has gone very wrong in the movie business. There are blips, like the Barbenheimer phenomenon, that make me think everything will right itself again, but I know in my heart that the problems are too big, too systemic, for any one



Wile E. Coyote and Will Forte in "Coyote vs. Acme"

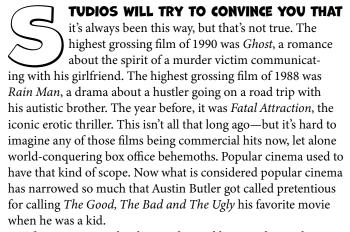
movie—or any one double bill—to fix. (Even if I'll demand that Glen Powell shoulder that responsibility anyway.) I know the entire history of cinema is full of doomsaying about the death of movies—damn you, synchronized sound!—but it seems more and more like we took a wrong turn 30 years ago, and I don't know how we'll find our way back. Outside of award season, the release slates of the major Hollywood studios are dominated by narrower and narrower types of films: where are the romcoms, the weepies, the westerns? Where are films in that most basic of genres, *drama*? Maybe on limited release in a major city.

"I think the movie business made a critical mistake ... to think of it as, 'this film did not make a ton of money, thus, we don't make that film. This film will make a ton of money, thus we make that one.' A very strict balance sheet equation," director James Gray said in an interview. "[W]hen you make movies that only make a ton of money and they're only one kind of movie, you begin to get a large segment of the population out of the habit of going to the movies. And then you begin to eliminate the importance of movies culturally."

The studios are, generally, less interested in being producers and distributors of original films—of maintaining the cultural importance of movies—than hoarding and exploiting existing intellectual property, pumping out sequels, spin-offs, and reboots for a couple of hundred million dollars a pop. Writing about Marvel movies and other franchise films, Martin Scorsese put it like this:

The pictures are made to satisfy a specific set of demands, and they are designed as variations on a finite number of themes. They are sequels in name but they are remakes in spirit, and everything in them is officially sanctioned because it can't really be any other way. That's the nature of modern film franchises: market-researched, audience-tested, vetted, modified, revetted and remodified until they're ready for consumption.

[...] In many places around this country and around the world, franchise films are now your primary choice if you want to see something on the big screen.



That narrowness has been cultivated by an industry that would rather make a billion dollars on a mega-blockbuster that acts as an extended trailer for its own sequel than spread that budget across a couple of smaller movies that might be riskier bets. "If people are given only one kind of thing and endlessly sold only one kind of thing," Scorsese goes on, "of course they're going to want more of that one kind of thing."

What's strange, then, is that *Coyote vs. Acme* and *Batgirl* and *Scoob! Holiday Haunt* were killed when they were exactly the types of movies that you would expect the studios to release: animation and actioners, based on some of the best-known



Leslie Grace as Batgirl

intellectual properties on earth. But if you zoom out, what happened is a natural reflection of the values that got us into this situation in the first place: a hostility to art, to entertainment, borne of an effort to engineer a movie business in which there is no risk. First by eliminating the risk of the filmmaker as artist, and ultimately, by eliminating the risk of releasing a product at all.

The decision to shelve Coyote vs. Acme is one that makes sense on a balance sheet. And since the 1980s, film studios function more and more as just another line on a global conglomerate's balance sheet. In 1989, Sony bought Columbia Pictures. In 1985, News Corp bought 20th Century Fox, which was then swallowed by Disney in 2019. Time Inc. and Warner Bros. merged in 1990, forming TimeWarner, which was acquired by AT&T in 2018 before being spun off from AT&T and merging with Discovery in 2022. Universal Pictures is owned

by NBCUniversal, which is owned by Comcast. Paramount Pictures is owned by Paramount Global, created through the 2019 Viacom/CBS merger, and soon to be acquired by Skydance Media.

And so the major studios are no longer companies that exist to make movies. They're a comparatively small part of a global corporation. This means that executives who make key decisions about the movie business may have little interest in movies but instead can be transferred to and from radically different industries that the conglomerate has its fingers in. "You've got people who don't know movies and don't watch movies for pleasure deciding what movie you're going to be allowed to make," director Steven Soderbergh said in 2013. According to *The Wrap* a decade later, David Zaslav never watched *Coyote vs. Acme* before deciding not to release it.

In the age of financialization, share price is king, even above profit: some of the biggest tech companies in the world have never turned a profit, but it doesn't matter if the line keeps going up on the NASDAQ. Conglomerates and private equity groups buy up outlets like *Pitchfork* or *Vice* or *The AV Club* not because they value them or their work, but because they are easily stripped for parts. (*The AV Club* has seemingly been rescued in 2024 from its sad fate posting AI-written articles thanks to Paste Media. No such luck for *Pitchfork* or *Vice*.) The product doesn't matter.

And so tax write-offs for finished products make a perverse kind of sense. What should be a last resort when you're stuck with an unusable, unreleasable product has become a kind of free money glitch. Jenny Nicholson, in her video essay about

Disneyland's Star Wars hotel, surmises that Disney shut the hotel so abruptly—announcing a closure date when later dates were already available for booking—because "the fiscal year ended on September 30th, and Disney's plan was to write the entire hotel off as a loss. The loss of the hotel would bring in a \$300 million tax break." Risk: eliminated.

Four years ago, I wrote in this magazine about how capitalism disincentivizes art preservation. But now, it's incentivizing destruction.

D

## **ECAUSE OF BACKLASH TO THEIR DECISION**

to shelve *Coyote vs. Acme*, Warner Bros. did an about-face and allowed the filmmakers to shop the film around to other distributors. According

to *The Wrap, Coyote vs. Acme* was screened for Netflix, Amazon, and Paramount, who each "submitted handsome offers," with Paramount proposing "a theatrical release component to their acquisition of *Coyote vs. Acme*." But since Warner Bros. "stood to make \$35 - \$40 million on the tax write-down," they wanted around \$80 million for a sale—and, inside sources told *The Wrap*, "they wouldn't allow the interested studios to counter Warner Bros.' offer. It was a 'take it or leave it' situation, one that the other studios didn't even know they were entering into."

These problems are, like I said, too big for even Barbenheimer to solve. But that doesn't make them unsolvable. We need to maintain solidarity with film workers' unions. We need to support public funding of the arts. We need to resist the industry's attempts to narrow our scope of vision, to refine our taste, and we need to support different kinds of films. But more than anything, we need antitrust.

In the 1948 case *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the major Hollywood studios would have to divest from theater chains, no longer practice block booking—where the theater would have to buy a studio's entire slate for exhibition blind, or not be allowed to buy any of the films individually—and no longer discriminate against smaller,

independent theaters. This decision changed the course of film history. The number of independent movie theaters in America increased throughout the 1950s to the 1970s. So did the number of independent film studios, which, thanks to the major studios' divestment, were actually able to get their films distributed on the big screen. Their rise was one of the ways the decision helped to dismantle the Hays Code, the censorship code abided to by the major studios. The end of long-term contracts for stars and directors meant that actors and filmmakers gained more artistic freedom.

In 1985, Ronald Reagan's

Department of Justice declared it would no longer enforce the Paramount Decrees. We are still seeing the sprawling consequences of that (practical if not official) deregulation. And yet, in 2019, Donald Trump's DOJ sought to terminate the decrees, a motion that the court granted in 2020.

What we need is a modern version of the Paramount Decision: we need a Department of Justice that will go after the monopolistic practices of the media conglomerates, from intellectual property hoarding to, as in *Coyote vs. Acme*'s case, preventing cancelled projects from being sold to other distributors. There isn't—or shouldn't be—anything radical in that. For most of the 20th century, that would have been a goal so bipartisan as to border on the banal. But since Reagan, the standard for trust-busting moved away from whether there was sufficient competition in a given market and towards requiring proof that any given merger would harm consumers, which is a much higher burden of proof. But consolidation in the media space *has* harmed consumers. It's just been done in a way that is hard to see without a control alongside it—something that's hard to have when the industry is simultaneously making older films harder to access.

If the media conglomerates were broken up, it would make spending \$250 million on a blockbuster untenable, essentially forcing them to make a higher number of smaller, varied films—some of which might hit, some of which might flop—instead of putting all their money on an alleged safe bet. Broken up, the companies' lobbying power would be diluted, and so maybe Congress would pass commonsense copyright reform. If the studios were limited in what existing intellectual properties they could own or acquire, it would force them to make more movies based on original ideas. There would still be superheroes movies—maybe even ones that aren't based on the same existing characters over and over—but there'd be comedies and thrillers and teen movies that don't have a superhero in them, too.

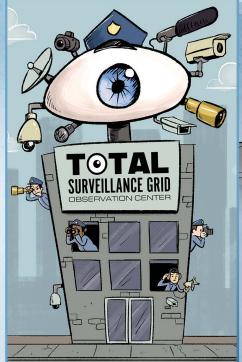
So many of the films that are nostalgia-bait hits today are riding on the creative risks taken decades ago. Disney is more interested

> in saturating the world with Star Wars content than it ever could be in producing an original space fantasy by this generation's George Lucas, wherever she may be hiding. We are constantly told that capitalism encourages innovation, but when I look at Hollywood, the opposite seems true: doing anything innovative, taking any chances, would spook the markets. The major studios are so scared of risk that they're not willing to release Coyote vs. Acme. And they get paid handsomely for cowering in fear. 💠



David Zaslav, photo credit: Thomas Hawk

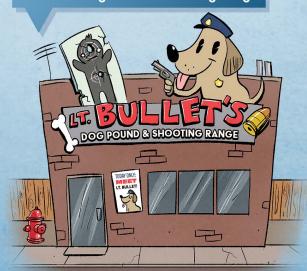
# Your guide to THE BLUE GITT

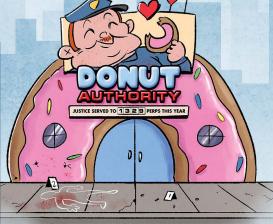


## The Total Surveillance Grid Observation Center

Even in your most private moments, the police panopticon ensures that law & order are maintained in Thin Blue City through constant paranoid vigilance.

Lt. Bullet's Dog Pound & Shooting Range





**Donut Authority** Just like arrest, our donuts are irresistible! Or else.

Over 1,000 people are killed per year by police officers - and most disturbingly, the majority of these deaths aren't even recorded in Donut Authority's Rewards Program.



White Collar Crime HQ This is "rich people crime." It's good for the economy!

TIMS OF NOT 100% SUPPORT

Memorial To The Victims Of Not 100% Supporting Everything All Police Do Always Regardless of Evidence

This touching memorial is etched with the names of everyone found guilty of undermining the cause of law and order, and their arcane and retrograde punishments.



**Civil Forfeiture Mart** Every year, billions of dollars' worth of property are seized by the police from citizens without trial or recourse.

Come on down to Civil Forfeiture Mart for deep discounts on lightly-used repossessed merchandise. Their loss is your gain!



Thin Blue City is completely surrounded by hostile jails, and has every right to defend itself.



This year's police budget has been increased to infinity dollars +1. According to the chief of police, last year's inadequate budget of a mere infinity dollars had created a criminality crisis that put our people in danger.

Yesterday, an officer pulled his hamstring while getting into his cruiser. In honor of this fallen warrior, all flags are being flown at half-mast for 12 months.

> A local retired police dog has bitten a child, who is in stable condition. Investigators are determining what crime the child must have committed.

The democratically-elected leader of Prison Island was struck by a bullet this morning while resisting arrest.

GUIDE TO TBPD POLICE VEHICLES - CHAPTER 3: MILITARIZED TO BRUTALIZE

**POLICE RADIO?** 



HIGH-VELOCITY HANDCUFF CANNON

Shoots handcuffs so fast it can knock a perp's head clean off.

## CIVILIAN CONTAINMENT CAGE

Humiliates arrestees while they're paraded around the town.

## VULCAN RAIL GUN -

What's playing on

Thin Blue City's education budget was fully diverted into financing the development of these state-of-the-art rotary cannons, leading to the closure of all our schools.

## COW-CATCHER

This patented wedge-shaped attachment quickly & efficiently clears your path of all obstacles, from striking laborers to "peaceful" protesters.

## MORE FEATURES:

- · Blade Boomerangs
- · Boiling-Acid Nozzle
- · Heart Attack Gun
- · Poison Dart Shooter
- · Circular Saws
- · RetinaBlast<sup>TM</sup> brand halogen headlights





# OUR WOORKING HOURS

BY LILY SÁNCHEZ

"I often wonder, to be absolutely honest, if I'd ever really have time for a job. How do people cram them in?" —WILL FREEMAN in *About a Boy* 

"How in the hell could a man enjoy being awakened at 8:30 a.m. by an alarm clock, leap out of bed, dress, force-feed, shit, piss, brush teeth and hair, and fight traffic to get to a place where essentially you made lots of money for somebody else and were asked to be grateful for the opportunity to do so?" —CHARLES BUKOWSKI, Factotum

ALWAYS KNEW THERE WAS SOMETHING wrong with going to work—with having to get out of bed, immediately eat breakfast and get dressed, get into a car and drive to some place, and be there from 9-5, Monday through Friday, unless you got special permission to stay away by saying you were sick or had to go to the doctor or sometimes got vacation ("time off").

I knew there was something wrong with work in the way my mother once spoke of her own job: we all have to do something for forty hours every week, she said when I was growing up, her voice heavy. That's the way things are, she seemed to be saying. But her voice betrayed no hint that she thought, This Should Change or, We Have To Change *This.* (My father, too, in what I felt was a rare moment of candor, would admit, decades later, that the grind of 30 years of full-time work had really taken a toll on him physically.) My mother raised my sister and me as a single parent in the 1980s and '90s. While we got ready for school, she got ready for work. The smell of burnt toaster crumbs (or was it Pop-Tarts?) reminds me of those mornings when she did her makeup at the dining room table with Bryant Gumbel's "Today" show on the

TV and the window air-conditioning unit blowing its miserable cold air onto us. (To this day, I hate window air-conditioning units in part because they remind me of those sleepy, too-cold mornings.) School was the thing I knew we were attending in order to prepare ourselves to one day do what our mother and every other adult did every day. School wasn't for fun, for exploration, or anything like that. It was job preparation, and I damn well knew it.

I now understand the years of my upbringing as the "neoliberal" era, when the welfare state was scaled back with "welfare reform" and austerity, privatization was in vogue, and the hyper-individualism of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher took hold. Individual grit and resilience? My mother certainly got the message that those were the qualities required to raise two kids alone, and she passed them down to us. We understood, although we never spoke of it, that there was no society out there for us to fall back on as a family of modest means: just our extended family and our neighbors and maybe our teachers at public school. But even teachers we didn't really think of as community members (or laborers). They weren't our neighbors, and we didn't even know where they lived or what they did once they left the school building each day. I confess, I never thought of my teachers or the lives they led outside the classroom. Maybe that was because I was a bookish kid, my mind focused on my schoolwork and not much else.

Actually, I never thought about people as laborers, either, even though I understood that every adult had to do "work." My parents were both college-educated, and their jobs mostly involved sitting behind desks or working in quiet rooms while dressed in a suit or business casual. My father was an attorney for the city, and my mother, after their divorce, went from homemaker to substitute teacher to welfare caseworker to college math tutor and, eventually, math instructor. Other adults in my family had office-based jobs or were in college.

As a child, then, I was blissfully unaware of manual labor and the laborers behind it. I never had to think about the work of lawn-mowing or restaurant dishwashing or grocery bagging (back when we had grocery baggers who would take things out to your car!) or produce picking or clothes-folding in the mall or the workers who did those jobs, even though I saw many of these people all the time. (I don't remember anyone in my family having a negative attitude toward working-class people; it's more that we lacked a conscious recognition of them.) Perhaps oddly, my realization that I was oblivious to the more physical kinds of working-class labor occurred in college, when I started reading the New York Times regularly for a journalism class (it was a requirement). I remember reading about labor disputes and about corporate wrongdoing and thinking, it sounds like workers have shit stacked against them. And that was just from reading the liberal-sanitized stories coming from the Times, before I got into progressive media a few years later. But I never thought about labor problems as applying to me. I, unlike the workers in news stories, had plans to go to medical school. I was going to get a job where I didn't have to sit behind a desk or listen to some boss tell me what to do. I didn't think of doctoring as a kind of labor all its own—certainly not as a profession whose workers are exploited, just as they are in practically every

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other line of work. What an ignorant fantasy world I lived in!

I also knew there was something wrong with work when I got my first job out of college, which required a bachelor's degree yet paid only \$21,000 a year (about \$35,000 in today's dollars). At that time, I began to realize that there was *also* something very wrong with the system of higher education that I had graduated from. I had obtained my college degree—from an "elite" institution, no less—with \$40,000 of debt (and that was *with* scholarships and grants). College was supposed to be one's ticket to financial success, one's way of paying off all that (very reasonably sought out) debt. Yet how was I supposed to pay off this debt when the best job I could get in my hometown in South Texas paid \$21,000 a year? I rationalized these contradictions by assuming that I just needed more education to increase my earning potential.

## When we step into the workplace, we give up all kinds of rights we otherwise have in normal life.

Admittedly, it felt pretty deflating to go from being a high school valedictorian to a student at a famous New England college—supposedly, as your teachers and counselors tell you, headed for some kind of greatness—to... living at home in my childhood bedroom and driving a used, dumpy \$7,500 car to a job I didn't like. I showed up every day to the workplace to sit behind a desk and help researchers recruit teenagers and young adults for their studies on binge drinking and cocaine use. In exchange for a small payment, the teenagers were subjected to questionnaires, psychiatric assessments, and spinal taps to study their nervous systems. It was extremely boring work, and I was frustrated by having to be there all day, every day, in the same drab office building, in an office with no window. Two of my three similar-age coworkers were also pre-meds, and I wonder if that's why it was so unpleasant there: people who think they're climbing the socioeconomic ladder tend to be competitive or just don't care about anyone else around them. I'm certain I was self-absorbed at that age. I also didn't care much for the other pre-meds' behavior: one of them was fired a few months after I got there for allegedly stealing petty cash from the institution.

Anyway, we pre-meds were headed for better things. That job

was just a stop along the way. But our fourth coworker, who was married with a young child, hadn't taken the job as a placeholder. For her, the job was no stepping stone. It was just her job. *How could she support her family on such a salary?* I wondered. This alarmed me at the time. But not too much. Again, I was on the way up. Thank God that isn't me, I thought.

ow I understand that all of us who work for a wage (whether a single job or multiple jobs) in order to earn a living are essentially in the same position. There is no escaping economic precarity in a society like ours—unless one is born into wealth, that is, or exploits others for profit. And no amount of education or culturedness or any professional-class job will shield you from the rampant exploitation that is core to a society that subordinates everything to profit. Worker exploitation runs the gamut from the unfair (wage theft, union busting, gender wage gaps, the precarity of the "gig economy") to the horrific (child labor, dangerous working conditions).

I can speak to the exploitation of the medical profession. First, clinical training is simply a form of hazing, with higher-ups and other staff members inflicting everything from emotional abuse to sexual harassment to discrimination onto trainees while they work unnecessarily grueling schedules. Some trainees have started to fight back by unionizing, and the training system itself has allowed reforms that have scaled back brutal 30-plus-hour shifts (every three to four days) to a slightly more humane 24-hour shift. But under the current system, trainees are still allowed to work up to 80 hours per week on average.

The entire system, from training to clinical practice, is built upon not only the myth of the physician as some benevolent, all-knowing dictator and dispenser of medical care—someone who, accordingly, should be brutalized into competence just the way the old guard was—but is also subordinated to the bottom line. Training itself amounts to a huge transfer of wealth from the public to the for-profit private sector. Medicare funds at least part of physician training—physicians are, I believe, supposed to be stewards of the public's health—and then physicians go on to provide the labor that allows health insurance and pharmacy benefit management companies to profit off of people's sickness and deny them care. And everything about clinical practice—how many appointments your doctor has been allotted for the day, how much time they spend with you, how much they get paid—is dictated by the bottom line, which is heavily influenced by insurance companies and their administrative burdens and reimbursement rules. Doctors only really get paid for time spent with patients, not for any of the administrative work generated by those patient visits. (The boss, after all, is telling you what to do, you just don't see them because they are an insurance company located somewhere

Recently, I went to see an ophthalmologist for my yearly eye exam. I was shocked when the medical assistant told me that the

<sup>1</sup> The open secret at my clinical job was that most doctors either saw patients part-time (myself, the boss) or wanted to go part-time but couldn't, citing factors like maintaining one's lifestyle or paying for children's college tuition as barriers to taking a pay cut and going part-time. Nationally, in one survey by the American Medical Association from 2021, some 40 percent of physicians expressed interest in leaving their job in the next two years.

doctor sees 80 patients a day. Eighty! Divided over eight hours (not including lunch!), that's a patient every *six* minutes. How could it be possible to give good care in six minutes? It's not! (In physician parlance, this kind of high-volume clinic is called a "patient mill.")

A major reason I left clinical practice (pre-pandemic) after six years as a general pediatrician was that the economics of the workday were unsustainable in terms of patient workload—and this was even in my particular case as a part-time (32 hours per week) clinician. In clinical practice, the conditions of work lead to 360 degrees of unhappiness among staff. Patients start to resent the doctors (doctors spend so little time with you!); doctors start to resent the patients (patients are demanding too much of our time!); doctors start to resent the medical assistants and scheduling staff (staff members aren't being time-efficient, they're overbooking patients, they're piling too much work onto us!); and staff start to resent the doctors because they pick up on this resentment; and so on and so on. It's a miserable situation <sup>2</sup> and creates the perfect conditions for what pediatrician Mark Vonnegut has called "zombie care"—care that is bad, indifferent, or uncaring. Unsurprisingly, it also delivers bad healthcare outcomes. The only people satisfied with it are the health insurance executives who are making tens of millions of dollars a year. It's not going to get much better until the profit motive is removed from healthcare entirely and we move to a system of socialized medicine. (Medicare for All is socialized payment of healthcare, but we need the entire system socializedfrom the production of pharmaceuticals to education and training of healthcare workers to the delivery of healthcare itself.)

Beyond medicine, many lines of professional work—from the nonprofit sector to lawyering to academia—have their own problems with exploitation. Workers in these jobs *may* make more money than the average U.S. worker—indeed, I was making more when I had a six-figure salary working in medicine before leaving that job—but at some point, unpleasant working conditions are going to take their toll. People might just quit and take their talents elsewhere. Some successful leftist podcasters and YouTubers, for instance, left their jobs as corporate lawyers and public defenders.

Another problem in the U.S. is that everyone has to worry about healthcare, which is tied to employment. Over the years, even good job-sponsored health plans have gone up in cost. No one can escape the fact that healthcare itself is increasingly unaffordable for everyone but the independently wealthy (and even for people who have insurance). The existential risk inherent in a society in which our lifestyles predispose us to disease, healthcare is tied to our job, healthcare costs are absurdly high, and COVID remains a threat (the CDC has washed its hands, pun intended, of any real public health campaigns to mitigate the spread of the virus) ought to frighten everyone. It certainly frightens me.

HEN WE STEP INTO THE WORKPLACE, WE GIVE UP all kinds of rights we otherwise have in normal life: democracy, decision-making, privacy, and so on. Working conditions obviously vary significantly from job to job, ranging from the abusive control of an Amazon worker who barely has time for a bathroom break, to the surveillance of an office worker in a cubicle, to the dangerous conditions for lone workers who manage dollar stores or agricultural workers who must endure extreme outdoor temperatures.<sup>3</sup> At my previous job, my colleagues and I may have been free to work at our own pace (to a point) or take a bathroom or coffee break whenever we wanted. But even professional workplaces employ (sometimes petty or frustrating) methods of control. At the clinic where I worked, doctors were required to work one 12-hour shift a week, and on that 12-hour day, even if no patients were on the schedule, we had to sit in the clinic until 8 p.m. and could not leave a minute sooner lest staff tattle that we were trying to leave early. Lunch breaks (which we often worked through anyway) were routinely disturbed by pointless meetings about finances.

No matter what kind of work we do, then, it is worth considering how much of a say each of us has in our workplace. This is, of course, where worker cooperatives and unions come in, and it is certainly right to support worker organizing efforts whenever they happen. But challenging management power in the workplace is just the beginning: we need to rethink entirely the assumption that work should be the primary focus of our energy as living beings.

If the 24-hour day is divided into thirds, work is where we spend a third of our lives, assuming around eight hours of sleep. And this is not counting the people whose shifts are longer than eight hours and those whose whose working conditions vary from stressful to outright hazardous, such that they need significant time after the shift to recover. Nor does that factor in the number of people afflicted by what David Graeber called the "spiritual violence" of "bullshit jobs"—jobs that often pay well but that are pointless or pernicious in the opinion of those who do them (think corporate law, finance, real estate, some administrative work). When we go to work, we spend our lives away from the people we are closest to—loved ones, family, friends. We move around the country for educational programs, training programs, and jobs, and this increases our atomization. Many of us are lonely in part because we live in cities that are designed to keep us apart, as they often lack public transit or public spaces that don't require a purchase to be there.

Lately, I find myself thinking a lot about what the U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher meant when she said, "There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women, and there are families." On a superficial or aspirational level, it makes

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<sup>2</sup> And that was before the pandemic. When the pandemic hit, I was in between jobs and was horrified to see hospitals and clinics failing to provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) to healthcare workers. There were social media posts from nurses who were using trash bags instead of gowns. Some people were even fired for demanding PPE at work or for speaking out about the lack of supplies. More than 3,600 healthcare workers died during the first year of the pandemic, and we can only wonder how many of those deaths could have been prevented with PPE and appropriate institutional policies.

<sup>3</sup> And that's just workers in the "free" world: consider the slavelike conditions of prison labor, where prison firefighters make as little as \$1 on the hour and cotton and other crop pickers pennies (2 cents) on the hour.

no sense—or at least, as a socialist, I find it morally and politically nonsensical, sickening even. Of course there is a "society," and we are all in it together. (Is there no such thing as a person because our bodies are made up of atoms?) We all depend on each other's labor to get our basic needs met. But in terms of how I feel about society—about how many of us spend our days (apart from our loved ones) and our nights (in atomized, antisocial housing) and how many injustices we tolerate—I think Thatcher was right. We do not, in fact, have a society in the true, realized sense of a collective, a society that values everyone. How could we with such unconscionable levels of homelessness, hunger, poverty, untreated illness, and police violence? With the brutal system of mass incarceration, in which we lock up more people than any other country on earth? With our country funding and supporting the genocide of the Palestinian people? With our morally bankrupt political system? And with climate change, when an extreme weather event comes—a cold snap or hurricane or torrential flood—every household is on its own. Just like when I was a kid. I felt it then. I feel it now.

I have a job I enjoy and find meaningful and coworkers I am happy to work with. I feel that my work—writing and editing, which involve long periods of time working alone—is conducive to my personality as an introvert. (This wasn't the case with my previous job, where I had to perform socially in a way that was mentally draining.) But my entire working adult life, I have felt out of balance. After the workday, I have little energy to do much else even though there are plenty of things I'd like to do: visit my family more, spend time with my niece as she grows up, do socialist organizing, become a pastry chef, learn a non-Romance language, or learn to play the cello or to sing. There's something wrong with work as we know it, with the idea of fitting our lives into the time that's leftover from the job. The character in *About a Boy* was right about jobs: how do we cram them in?

Does it make sense that one is supposed to squeeze into the remaining eight hours of the day—after work and sleep—every other aspect of human existence? Taking care of others, exercising and self-care, cooking, socializing, traveling, the arts, religion, leisure, and more? Of course, it's not really eight hours once you subtract the time needed to get ready for work, commute to and from the office, or wait in company metal detector lines, as some Amazon workers have been made to do after their shifts.

In October of last year, one GenZ TikToker went viral from a post about the problem of working 9 to 5. It was her first job out of college, she explained, and she was commuting to work because she couldn't afford to live in the city. "I don't have time to do anything," she cried. "How do you have friends?" This elicited an alarming backlash from some people online, including the hateful social media influencer Chaya Raichik (better known as Libs of TikTok), who mocked the poster. But many people responded with empathy and understanding as well.

And what about retirement? Older people now work more than they did in the 1980s, and some people say they simply can't afford to retire. Social Security, while a vital support for many seniors, is simply not enough for most people to live on, and Republicans are constantly threatening to cut benefits. Over

the years, pensions have been replaced by 401(k)s, which essentially leaves us to the mercy of the stock market. In some cases, pensions have even been handed off to private equity (PE), an "alternative asset" industry that buys up companies in "aggressive, high-risk buyout deals that leave a trail of layoffs, benefit cuts, and bankruptcies in their wake." Investors gut companies, sell them off for profit, and move on to the next one. When this process blows up and the profits dry up, pensioners whose funds have been invested in PE lose out (as do the workers in the affected companies). It's a cruel and unjust thing to do to workers, and as Aaron Wistar wrote in *Current Affairs* last year, we must stop private equity from doing any more damage than it already has.

've written before in support of Bernie Sanders's 32-hour workweek proposal, as well as the general idea that we need to be working less. There is plenty of justification for having a shorter workweek with the same pay. As Sanders pointed out in an op-ed in CNN earlier this year, American worker productivity has gone up significantly over the last half-century, yet working hours have not decreased and wages have not kept up. The United States' workers put in more hours than workers in other rich nations. (We also get fewer public holidays than workers in other nations, and we lack mandatory paid sick and parental leave.) Most importantly, Sanders writes, most of the economic gains from worker productivity have been "going straight to the top."

No wonder U.S. workers are burned out. Research has also shown that exploitation in the workplace leads to mental health problems. And we can't hack our way out of the problem by doing more self-care or "grindsetting" harder. In my personal experience, 32 hours of work per week allows much needed time to slow down, personally reflect, take care of oneself, and also pursue activities for fun. Thirty-two-hour workweeks have been tried in many other countries including Ireland, Spain, and the U.K. and have shown successful results. In one trial in the U.K., results showed "improved productivity, morale, and team culture" as well as improved life satisfaction.

Despite the fact that people seem to like working less and work better when they do, there is a pervasive cultural bias against it. One example of the way that part-time work is disparaged has come from Michelle Obama. In discussing the challenge of work-life balance that she faced as a young mother, she trashes part-time work instead of the economic conditions that often force women to choose between childcare and paid labor. In a 2016 interview with Oprah, she said:

"I had had Malia, Barack was in the U.S. Senate, so I was basically mothering part time on my own, having, I had a full-time job," said Obama, recounting the story of negotiating a job as vice president of community outreach for the University of Chicago Hospital. Like many women, Mrs. Obama thought that negotiating a part-time position would give her more flexibility at home to be a mother.

"I tried part time because I thought, I have to figure this out, I have to be able to pick the kids up, I've got to be able to do all

this. So I tried part time. [...] The only thing I found out from part time was that you just get paid part time." "So I had vowed that if I continued to work, that I would never settle for part time," she said. "I knew what my time and energy was worth."

"Settle" for part-time? There's nothing sacred about 40 hours being "full time"—or eight hours of work per day, for that matter. As Sanders points out, both became the standard because of legislation that unions fought for. The labor movement helped us claw our way out of 100-hour workweeks, which, for example, were documented in the late 19th century among manufacturing workers.

For reduced-workweek proposals to gain traction, more people (particularly those in what I broadly call the educated class) need to dissociate their identity from their jobs. They need to realize that there is no escape from economic exploitation or precarity in a society in which human flourishing is an afterthought—or at least when flourishing is something that only happens when people get the right amount of education and the right job with a high enough salary to pay for the conditions that would allow for it.

Consider the 2008 recession, when 9 million people lost their jobs and nearly 4 million lost their homes to foreclosure. In a 2018 piece for *Current Affairs*, Maximillian Alvarez, the editor-in-chief of the Real News Network who also holds a PhD in comparative literature and history, wrote about those years, when he was a graduate student and moved back home to help his family financially. (Unfortunately, his family ended up losing their home.) He writes about finding himself at a temp agency in this haunting scene:

Four months and hundreds of job applications later, I'm sitting in the deathly waiting room of the temp agency. [...] The jobs just aren't out there. And my fancy college degree doesn't mean shit. It doesn't make me better than anyone else. We're all here for the same reason. We've all got to eat. Truth be told, the only special thing about me is that I'm probably the only sad sack here who's also sitting on tens of thousands of dollars of student debt. [...] When we're all present and accounted for, the floor manager leads me and the other temps through the metallic, steaming bowels of the factory. I pass under some giant, whirring boiler, hard left, up a rickety aluminum staircase. Flashes of other goggled faces quickly appear and dissolve in the haze. I have no idea what the smell is, but at every turn I expect to see piles of dead somethings.

The smell is not just blood, turns out. It's all manner of human effluence. Mountains of it. In every kind of state: fresh, crusted, bubbling, black. Standing in front of a screeching conveyor belt, in full hazmat gear, our job is to sift through and sort endless piles of soiled laundry from hospitals in the county. About half the guys I start my shift with run off the line to throw up at one point or another. None of them come back. The bosses don't care. They just call in more temps and keep us sifting and sorting at a breakneck pace. They know they can treat us like dogs. They know how many of us are waiting back at the agency. They know we wouldn't be here if we had better options.

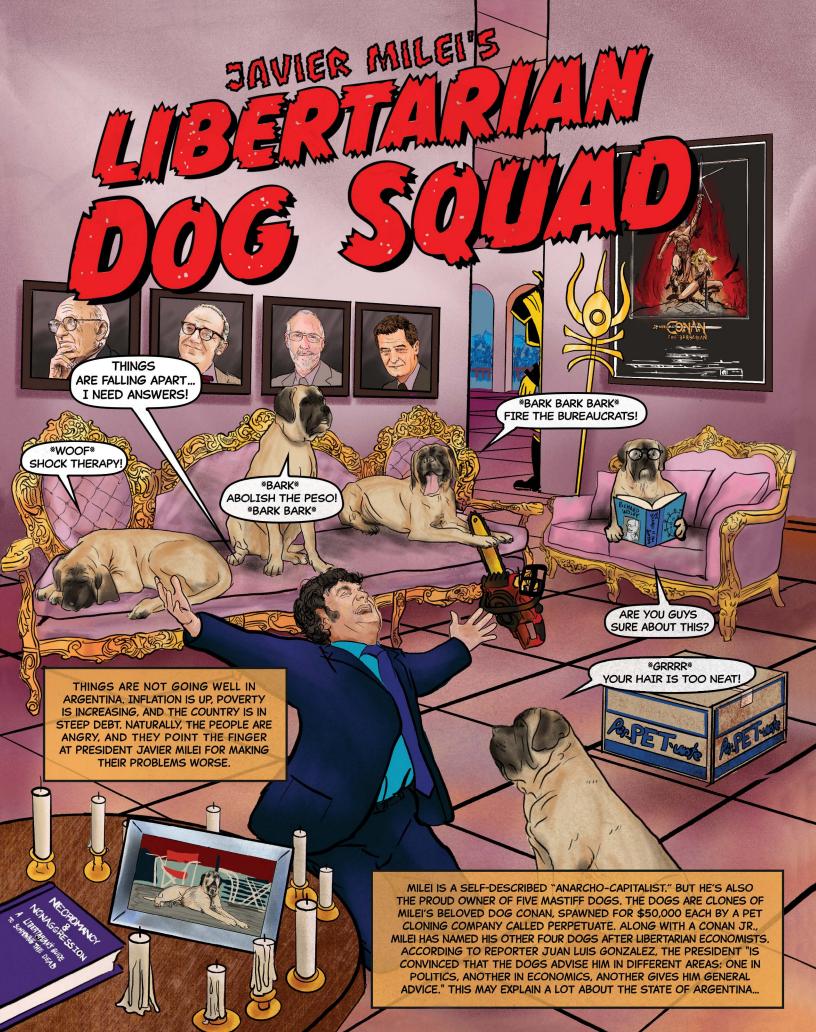
The "fancy college degree doesn't mean shit."

No matter what our level of education, we all need to have solidarity with each other. Our goal as workers shouldn't be to climb the socioeconomic ladder and leave everyone else behind—like I thought I would do all those years ago by becoming an educated, professional-class person—but to end the system where *anyone* is dependent upon the whims of the job market for their survival. The truth is, we can provide a good standard of living for everyone by simply deciding to do so. As the socialist economist Grace Blakeley puts it, describing conditions in the U.K. that also apply to the U.S.: "There is plenty of money to solve our social problems. It's just stuck in the pockets of the wealthy."

HERE'S A TRULY DYSTOPIAN IDEA OF WORK THAT TENDS TO come from the conservative Right. Whether it's children, immigrants, or seniors, conservatives want us working more hours for more years and under more dangerous conditions. Work is the thing, supposedly, that gives children "worth and value," said former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy last year. Not only is this sentiment extremely ableist—it implies that people who physically can't work, lack "worth"—but McCarthy has it backwards. Work doesn't impart value to us as people. We bring our intrinsic value as people to any work we do. This is why, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, all work has dignity—and, in turn, all workers deserve a dignified wage.

# People aren't their jobs. But all people deserve dignified work and a dignified wage and working conditions free from exploitation.

People are more than their jobs, too. We are creatures that think, dream, explore, and create, and we wish to connect with others and the world around us and even get bored sometimes. We might wish to enjoy more of our lives rather than just endure them. We might wish, as Alvarez says on his "Working People" podcast, "to squeeze as much meaning and joy and pride and love" from life as we possibly can. We can't do too much of all that—or truly build a society from the rubble left by neoliberalism—if we're at work all the time. \ddots



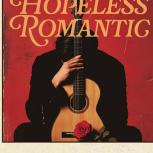
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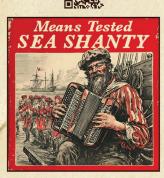
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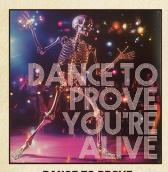


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## BUSINESS PLOT

BY ALEX SKOPIC

In 1934, American oligarchs planned a "Wall Street Putsch" to stop Roosevelt's New Deal. What would today's capitalists do if their power was under threat?

OR THE PAST THREE YEARS, AMERICAN POLITICS HAS EXISTED in the shadow of January 6. Since the right-wing riots at the Capitol, hardly a week has gone by without new press coverage of the congressional hearings, the ongoing criminal case against Donald Trump, and the scandals about Supreme Court justices' alleged support for the "Stop the Steal" movement. As another election draws near, the "threat to our democracy" posed by Trump and his followers has been a central theme of the Democratic presidential campaign, and countless journalists have speculated about a possible repeat performance of January 6 if Trump loses in November. None of this should be surprising. The spectacle of over 2,000 die-hard MAGA supporters breaking into Congress, some of them wearing shirts with neo-Nazi slogans like "CAMP AUSCHWITZ" and chanting "hang Mike Pence," was enough to rattle anyone. But if we take a look through history, 2021 was not the first time the United States faced the prospect of an antidemocratic coup. Nor, for that matter, was it the most serious. For that, we have to turn the clock back to 1934, when the country's financial elite tried to overthrow President Franklin D. Roosevelt. By looking at the "Business Plot," as it's known, we can gain some valuable insight into the political threats of our own time.

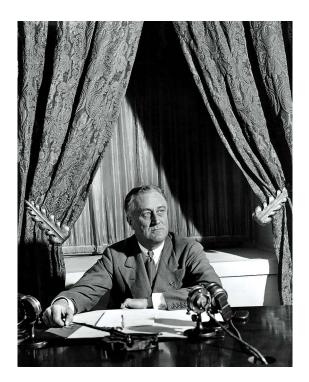
N 1934, FDR WAS A PRESIDENT AT THE BEGINNING OF HIS time. His greatest achievements, like the Social Security Act and the creation of the federal minimum wage, were still ahead of him, as was the outbreak of World War II. But Roosevelt's economic agenda had already begun to anger the wealthiest Americans, earning him powerful enemies. In his first Inaugural Address in 1933, the incoming president railed against the country's "unscrupulous money changers," placing the blame for the Great Depression squarely on bankers, stockbrokers, and the rich as a class:

[T]he rulers of the exchange of mankind's goods have failed, through their own stubbornness and their own incompetence, have admitted their failure, and abdicated. Practices of the unscrupulous money changers stand indicted in the court of public opinion, rejected by the hearts and minds of men. [...] The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths. The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit.

For an interesting mental exercise, try to imagine Joe Biden or Kamala Harris saying anything this bold today. It's hard. Roosevelt set big goals, demanding "a strict supervision of all banking and credits and investments" and "an end to speculation with other people's money." To be clear, he wasn't a true socialist like Eugene V. Debs or Upton Sinclair, his contemporaries. Roosevelt's "New Deal" was aimed mainly at stabilizing the capitalist system, not ending it. But he did assert that democratically elected leaders held authority over commerce and the market, not the other way around. In essence, he told Wall Street: You had your chance in the driver's seat, and you crashed the car. Now the government takes the wheel for a while.

For the ultra-rich, who have never taken kindly to any limit on their wealth and power, this might as well have been fullblown Marxism. William Randolph Hearst, one of the most influential newspaper barons of the era, wrote in the Chicago Tribune that Roosevelt's administration was "more Communistic than the Communists," and the Hearst papers devoted endless column inches to tearing down the New Deal as it took shape. Other prominent capitalists, including the chemical company millionaire Irénée du Pont and General Motors CEO Alfred P. Sloan Jr., founded the American Liberty League in 1934. A precursor to modern conservative networks like the Federalist Society and the Heritage Foundation, the League trumpeted the virtues of property rights and the free market, loudly opposed the Social Security Act, and disparaged left-wing economic ideas at every turn. For both sides, the battle lines had been clearly drawn.

At the same time, one of the United States' most fascinating historical figures was entering a new phase of life. Major General Smedley D. Butler, of the U.S. Marine Corps, had retired from the military in 1931 after 33 years of service. Butler had joined the Marines in 1898, lying about his age in order to enlist for the Spanish-American War at just 16. Over the next three decades, he became a ruthlessly effective soldier for the U.S. empire. Among other wars and military interventions, he fought in the

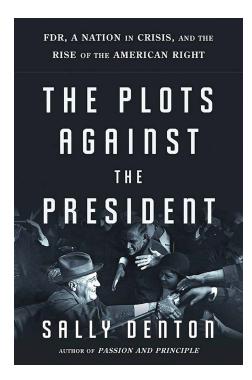


President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933

U.S occupation of Veracruz during the Mexican Revolution, helped to put down the Boxer Rebellion in China, waged the so-called "Banana Wars" to protect U.S. fruit company interests in Central America, and invaded Haiti, where he later wrote that his men "hunted the Cacos [rebels] down like pigs." He even served a brief stint as the head of the Philadelphia police in 1924, taking a leave of absence from the Marines, and led a violent Prohibition crackdown against bootleggers and speakeasies that included 973 police raids. By the time of his retirement, he'd been richly rewarded for shedding all that blood, and was the most decorated Marine in the corps' history up to that point, having received both an Army and Navy Distinguished Service Medal and two Medals of Honor—the highest award the U.S. military has to offer.

Importantly, Butler had also started to clash with the federal government over politics, especially when it came to the treatment of veterans. In 1932, thousands of military veterans who'd been made poor and destitute by the Depression marched on Washington, forming what they called a "Bonus Army" in protest. They'd all served in World War I and been promised a "bonus" for doing so in 1924—but one that functioned like a bond and wouldn't actually be paid out until 1945. But the veterans were struggling *now*, so they demanded their bonuses early. Butler sympathized with them, and traveled to Washington to see their protest encampment for himself, even making a speech there:

I never saw such fine Americanism as is exhibited by you people. [...] You have just as much right to have a lobby here as any steel corporation. [...] Makes me so damn mad, a whole lot of people speak of you as tramps. By God, they didn't speak of you as tramps in 1917 and '18.



"The Plots Against the President" Book Cover

Unfortunately, it was no use. Soon after Butler's visit, then-President Herbert Hoover sent in the Army to disperse the protest. Tents were burned, tear gas filled the air, the veterans were driven out at gunpoint, and nobody got their bonus. For Hoover, it was a PR disaster, one that would contribute to his defeat by Roosevelt in the 1932 election. For Butler, seeing his fellow servicemen treated as disposable pawns was a shock that would alter his politics forever.

Finally, there's a third important strand to this story: the rise of fascism across Europe. By 1934, Benito Mussolini had already made his March on Rome and been in power for more than ten years in Italy, and Adolf Hitler had recently been appointed as chancellor in Germany. In the United States, too, fascism had a degree of support—especially among the upper class—that's shocking to modern eyes. As Noam Chomsky likes to point out, Fortune magazine ran an entire issue about Mussolini's Italy in July 1934, writing in glowing terms about "The State: Fascist and Total":

The young Kingdom of Italy—as yet but sixty-four years old—has found itself. Its people, once almost ashamed to acknowledge their nationality, now survey the rest of Europe not merely with a fervent but with an arrogant pride. Other nations falter or reel hysterically in search of unity. Italy is calm and united under the emblem of common strength and effort which is Fascism.

Yes, that's a quote from a real editorial. Incredible as it might seem today, *Fortune* magazine—the same publication that runs cover stories about Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos today—spent the 1930s applauding the supposed achievements of Il Duce. They weren't the only ones, either. Alf Landon, the Republican governor of Arkansas, said in 1933 that "even the iron hand of a

national dictator is in preference to a paralytic stroke," referring to Roosevelt's agenda, and Republican Senator David Reed declared that "if this country ever needed a Mussolini, it needs one now." The fascist sympathizers in the upper echelon of U.S. society weren't even trying to be subtle.

Take these three elements together—FDR, Smedley Butler, and rising fascism—and you have the ingredients of the Business Plot. But what actually happened? Well, to put it bluntly, some members of the American financial elite were so spooked by Roosevelt and the New Deal that they hatched a plan to overthrow him and install the American Mussolini of their dreams. It's one of the least-known, but most important moments of the 20th century, and it's been chronicled in depth in two recent books: The Plots Against the President: FDR, a Nation in Crisis, and the Rise of the American Right by Sally Denton, and Gangsters of Capitalism: Smedley Butler, the Marines, and the Making and Breaking of America's Empire by Jonathan M. Katz.

Both books are worth reading in full, but the gist of the Business Plot is this: Butler was approached in the fall of 1934 by Gerald C. MacGuire, a bond salesman with extensive connections on Wall Street. MacGuire had been trying to enlist Butler in right-wing political causes for a while, seeking to use his military reputation and influence among veterans to his own advantage. The previous year, he'd tried to convince the general to make a speech to the American Legion—which MacGuire had already commissioned for him—in favor of the gold standard. (Roosevelt had abolished gold as the basis of U.S. currency, but MacGuire and his associates hoped that if the Legion took up an official position against the change, he could be persuaded to reverse course—and thus protect their investments.) He'd offered Butler \$18,000, a small fortune at the time, and said he represented several other East Coast financiers, including Robert Sterling Clark—the heir to the Singer sewing machine company, who'd served under Butler during the Boxer Rebellion—and Grayson M.P. Murphy, an investment banker who sat on the board of Goodyear, Anaconda Copper, and Bethlehem Steel. (Murphy was also the treasurer for the aforementioned American Liberty League.) Butler asked to meet the "principals" of the lobbying effort, and MacGuire introduced him to Clark, who was remarkably open about his plans to subvert Roosevelt's economic agenda. As Denton describes the meeting in *The Plots* Against the President:

"I have got 30 million dollars and I don't want to lose it," Clark told Butler. "I am willing to spend half of the 30 million to save the other half." Clark said he felt certain that if Butler made the speech in Chicago, the Legion would follow his directive and force Roosevelt to return to the gold standard. When Butler asked Clark why he believed that Roosevelt would be responsive to [an American Legion] resolution, Clark replied that when Roosevelt realized that it was his own patrician class directing the pressure, that he would willingly succumb. "You know the President is weak. He will come right along with us. He was born in this class. He was raised in this class, and he will come back," Clark said. "He will run true to form. In the end he will come around. But we have got to be prepared to sustain him when he does."

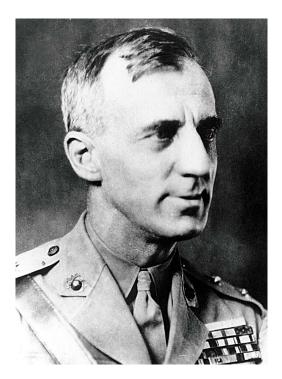
Ultimately, Butler declined to make the speech. But he kept up a relationship with MacGuire, wanting to know more about his Wall Street backers and their plans. Now, in 1934, MacGuire came to Butler's Pennsylvania home in a black limousine, with a whole new idea in mind.

As Denton writes, MacGuire said he'd just returned from a tour of Europe, where he'd been learning all about fascism and the role of military veterans in fascist movements. He'd visited Italy, seeing Mussolini and his "Blackshirts" firsthand. He'd toured Germany and studied the growing Nazi movement, and done the same with Franco's Spain. Finally, MacGuire had been in France and examined the Croix de Feu (Cross of Fire), a right-wing paramilitary made up largely of WWI veterans. This, he told Butler, would be the ideal model to bring political change to the United States. Once again being remarkably direct, MacGuire said his Wall Street friends had agreed to raise up an American Croix de Feu of their own, and they wanted Butler to lead it. Together they'd launch a soft coup against Roosevelt, who would remain the president but be reduced to a figurehead:

The plot was stunning in its presumption and simplicity. "Did it ever occur to you that the President is overworked?" MacGuire asked Butler. He explained that it did not require a constitutional change to authorize a "Secretary of General Affairs" to take over the details of the office of the presidency. The man the plotters had in mind for this task was Brigadier General Hugh S. Johnson, Roosevelt's head of the National Recovery Administration, who, according to MacGuire's purported inside information, was about to be fired by Roosevelt. "We have got the newspapers. We will start a campaign that the President's health is failing. Everybody can tell that by looking at him, and the dumb American people will fall for it in a second" [MacGuire said.] The veterans' army, led by Butler, would march on Washington and induce Roosevelt to step aside because of bad health.

"Stunning," indeed. The plan was a grandiose one—but then again, not as ridiculous as it might initially seem. It's worth remembering that, for most of his 33 years in the military, Butler had been in the business of overthrowing governments, suppressing left-wing political movements, and installing U.S.backed dictatorships. What MacGuire and his cronies wanted to do wasn't really so different from Butler's previous interventions in places like Nicaragua or Haiti, with the exception that the coup on American soil was meant to be bloodless. Then, too, the 1932 "Bonus Army" had shown that veterans' groups could apply serious political pressure to the U.S. government when they got together in an organized march. Additionally, FDR's health issues—he had paralysis in both his legs—had been widely discussed in the media in the 1920s, even if his physical decline didn't really begin until around 1943. So the plotters had reason to think the public might believe them if they enacted their plot and claimed Roosevelt had delegated his authority. Butler himself looked like the perfect ex-military strongman, and although the Business Plot was certainly ambitious, so were Mussolini's March on Rome and Hitler's seizure of power in Germany—and those had succeeded.

What the plotters didn't realize, though, was that Butler's



Smedley D. Butler in uniform, c. 1929

political beliefs were rapidly moving left. The crushing of the Bonus Army had shattered his faith in the U.S. government he'd spent so long serving, and he'd begun to develop a conscience about his many imperial crusades. Just a year later, in 1935, he would write the landmark book War is a Racket, confessing that he had "helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefits of Wall Street" and condemning U.S. militarism as a gigantic scam "in which the profits are reckoned in dollars and the losses in lives." The last thing he wanted was to help U.S. financiers overthrow democracy the way they already had in so many other countries, and he told MacGuire so, saying that "If you get 500,000 soldiers advocating anything smelling of Fascism, I am going to get 500,000 more and lick the hell out of you, and we will have a real war right at home." He then blew the whistle to Congress and the press, even filming a newsreel where he exposed the plot.

In the months that followed, reactions were mixed. The New York Times dismissed Butler's account of the plot as a "bald and unconvincing narrative," treating the whole thing as a joke. But then again, the *Times* had claimed twelve years earlier that "[H]itler's anti-Semitism was not so genuine or violent as it sounded," so its reporting wasn't exactly infallible in this period. For its part, the congressional committee that took Butler's testimony concluded that "There is no question that these attempts were discussed, were planned, and might have been placed in execution when and if the financial backers deemed it expedient." But the committee never released its full report, and even Butler's full testimony wasn't printed in the major newspapers, appearing only in the left-wing New Masses magazine. More disturbingly, the names of all the "financial backers" never came out, and no one was ever prosecuted for their role in the scheme. In a BBC radio documentary, journalist John Buchanan speculates there was a simple reason for this:



Grayson Mallet-Prevost Murphy in 1918

FDR himself may have struck a deal, allowing the organizers of the plot to escape treason charges if they ceased their agitation against him.

O WHAT LESSONS CAN WE DRAW FROM THE BUSINESS PLOT today, as Donald Trump and his MAGA movement rear their heads? One is that we need to be very clear about who poses the actual "threat to democracy" in the United States. Despite the dramatic imagery of January 6, the gravest danger doesn't actually come from street-level rioters like the ones who invaded the Capitol. Rather, it's the wealthy people and organizations who stand behind rightwing movements—the ones who'd never dream of dirtying their thousand-dollar suits in a "Stop the Steal" rally—that we really need to worry about. In 1934 it was the Robert Sterling Clarks and Grayson M.P. Murphys of the world who wanted democracy gone. Today it's the Rupert Murdochs, the Elon Musks, the Peter Thiels, and the Leonard Leos. The average Trump supporter, all fired-up by Fox News and social media posts, is not the enemy of democracy; they're just deluded and misled. The people running Fox News and the social media platforms are the problem.

What's more, the history of the Business Plot shows that democracy and capitalism are fundamentally contradictory forces. This is important to understand, because liberal and libertarian thought claim the opposite: that capitalism and democracy are *allies*. In this worldview, "free markets" are just another kind of freedom a liberal society should afford people, along with freedom of speech, religion, and other civil liberties. Allegedly, free markets allow people to "vote with their dollars," as if the ability to choose one product or corporation over another were the epitome of democracy. Government-run economies, meanwhile, are considered undemocratic and

synonymous with tyranny. The slogan of *Reason* magazine, the foremost libertarian publication in the United States, reflects this dogma: "Free Minds and Free Markets." But as the Business Plot shows, this is completely false. A society that "votes with its dollars" *cannot* be truly democratic, because it will always be dominated by the people with the most dollars to throw around.

As long as you have economic inequality, you don't actually have democracy. What you have is a faux democracy with invisible fences around it. The economic elite will tolerate your elections and your "democracy" as long as it always delivers the outcomes they want: most importantly, free markets and the sanctity of property. But if an elected government strays beyond the fences, as Roosevelt began to with the New Deal, the elite will step in to prevent it, and what the majority of the people might want or vote for is completely irrelevant. We see this pattern today, too—from unelected "superdelegates" tipping Democratic primaries toward business-friendly candidates, to Super PACs that spend millions to influence the outcomes of congressional elections, to an openly corrupt Supreme Court striking down abortion rights that the majority of the American people support. There are all kinds of antidemocratic levers of power, some more subtle than others.

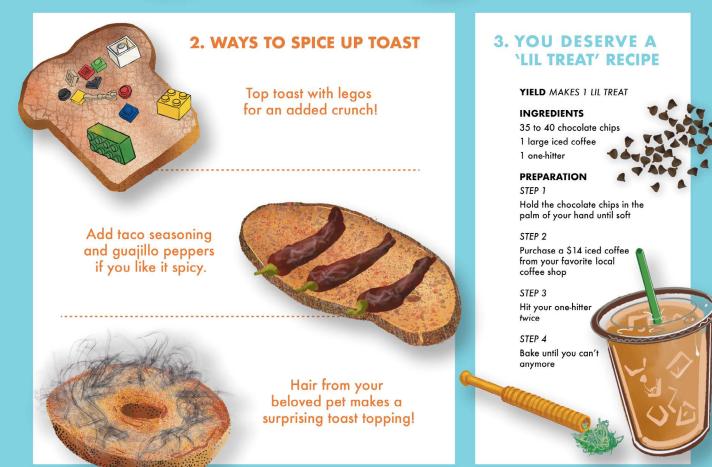
Ultimately, only one side can get what it wants. A nation's economy can be controlled democratically by its elected leaders, who attempt to make decisions in everyone's best interest, or it can be controlled undemocratically by bankers and shareholders, who only look out for themselves. But it can't be both. For finance capital to flourish, democratic influence over its operations has to be curtailed. Likewise, for democracy to flourish, capital has to be curtailed.

Really, the Business Plot is a mild example. A little later in the 20th century, in 1970, Salvador Allende was elected democratically as the president of Chile and tried to implement a popular socialist agenda, nationalizing his country's mineral resources so his own people could benefit from them instead of U.S. corporations. For that offense, the United States backed a brutal military coup against him and installed the Pinochet dictatorship that would ravage Chile for the next 20 years. They did the same in Iran in 1953, and in Guatemala in 1954. Since then, less has changed than you might think. In 2019, yet another U.S.-backed coup overthrew the government of President Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Elon Musk decided to just state the views of his class openly, posting online: "We will coup whoever we want! Deal with it." That, in less than 140 characters, is the relationship between capitalism and democracy. And is there any reason to think that "whoever we want" wouldn't also include the government of the United States, if Musk and his fellow billionaires deemed it necessary?

The last takeaway from the Business Plot, though, is the most important: that the world's economic elite aren't invincible. They failed in 1934, all because one person refused to go along with the plan. Even a Major General in the Marines, it turns out, is capable of seeing through decades of lies and ideology and choosing a new path. That means there's hope. Democracy—and I mean real democracy, not the hollow imitation that pits red capitalists against blue ones in meaningless Coke-or-Pepsi contests—can win. Smedley Butler beat the wealthy fascists of his day, and so can we. •

# curent affairs









## VELVET ROPES AND POOR DOORS

BY ROB LARSON

HE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE ACROSS BORDERS HAS endured as a divisive political issue in rich nations. First, there's the West's xenophobia and paranoid fear of migrant violence, whether it be of Salvadoran MS-13 gang members or Islamic State sleeper cells. Then there are the very real economic anxieties faced by the local working class, the people whose jobs the migrants are coming to take, so the politicians tell us. The political Right remains eager to exploit this issue to break working-class solidarity, encouraging struggling workers to see their economic problems as *not* caused by the landlords raising their rent or the employers cutting their health insurance but instead by fellow struggling workers from other countries who happen to be seeking refuge from oppressive conditions.

Whether in the U.S., Australia, the U.K., or European Union, the fear of migrants has one consistent feature: it is hysterically focused on poor, "illegal" migrants. Those entering legally are subject to far, far less interest, even though this group includes some who, cynically exploiting national residency loopholes and visa-to-passport gateways, do not actually wish to work hard and contribute to the country. People who are effectively buying their way into residency.

The rich, in other words. Their ability to collect safes full of visas, passports, and residency documents for their awful ruling class families draws a hell of a contrast with desperate peso-less Central American families dealing with corrupt border guards, drug cartels, fanatical right-wing opposition, and the need to keep their kids from falling off the top of freight trains. When the

wealth-hoarders wish to move around, their money props them up through frictionless golden corridors to their destination. The poor, on the other hand, must go through the gates of hell in search of a better life.

## **BLOOD AND SOIL AND TV**

For unfortunate sub-millionaires, extralegal migration isn't just inconvenient, uncomfortable, or unpleasant. It will fucking kill you. Corrupt border guards, leaky ships, steamy jungles, cartel-linked migrant smugglers—there is no end to the heinous ungodly trials faced by extralegal migrants, the people at the very, very bottom rung of our twisted hierarchical global society.

While most informal migrants to the U.S., for example, take the same buses as the broad working class, the really poor ones bear the mark of the Beast. *La Bestia* is the nickname given to a large, dangerous freight train running from southern Mexico to the U.S.-Mexico border. Blazing hot by day and freezing cold at night, the train transfers desperate people who have hitched unsanctioned rides on the godforsaken thing, putting them at tremendous risk as they ride long stretches on rough rails, which results in numerous unfortunate travelers falling off and losing their limbs or lives. These are the real results of "strong foreign policy"—our military intervention and electoral meddling in Central and South American countries that causes poverty and social decline, forcing peso-less families to confront the extreme danger of secretly riding freight trains. Our "strong on the border" policies have also resulted in established routes of travel

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being cut off, thus necessitating treacherous jungle travel by migrants crossing the Darién Gap from South America to Central America. Then, migrants face the added burden of hiding from Mexican cops and train security, with whole families riding a screeching industrial machine, a sad incongruity of scarred, rough freight cars carrying small, precious children hopping on and off.

In response to millions of truly hair-raising migration horror stories, the developed world has slammed its doors in the face of people whose living conditions have been made dangerous and dismal in the first place mainly because of policy decisions made in developed-world capitals. To the U.S. and Europe, the endless suffering of extralegal migrants is something you watch on TV, to like or dislike, but which affects other people far away. Liberals (and leftists), we should recall, spent years condemning the Trump administration's cruel, notoriously ugly immigration policies, like separating children from parents and routinely denying clearly-justifiable asylum cases. But when his wildly ill-conceived reelection campaign was eating shit in the polls, President Joe Biden did a full one-eighty and returned to the Trump policy of expelling potential asylum claimants—with indeed the same emergency-based rationalization. Once 2,500 migrants have claimed asylum each day, asylum rights are considered suspendpolitical tactic to prevent people arriving on European shores at all costs." Another is to close their ports to rescue ships, as Italy's right-wing government has done. In a move more outwardly evil, European governments and the EU have been paying off hideous North African regimes to interdict voyages, sending hundreds of millions of euros to Tunisia, Morocco, and other African states to viciously repress migrant-looking groups, especially Black Africans. Those caught on boats in the Mediterranean may be detained or driven inland and "dumped" in the Sahara Desert, left to walk for days back to civilization without water or supplies, as the *Washington Post* and others have reported.

Even more notoriously, the Greek Coast Guard has been caught watching—and withholding aid—as sinking ships carrying hundreds of souls very gradually submerge. They do this either deliberately as a discouragement or by waiting too long until ships sink or capsize. In some instances, authorities have outright abandoned migrants at sea, as in an infamous case involving the Greek coast guard.

The Wikipedia list of such incidents is extremely long and blood-curdling, and of course represents only the small fraction of such incidents that earn media reports. With so many desperate people crowded onto tiny boats in the Mediterranean, strange moments can occur, as when the \$175 million superyacht *Mayan* 

## OPEN BORDERS ARE LESS THREATENING WHEN THE WORLD'S CITIZENS HAVE AT LEAST ROUGH ECONOMIC EQUALITY

ed. Further, border agents are no longer required to ask migrants if they fear for their safety in their home country, a crucial requirement for an asylum claim. Instead, migrants must now raise the issue themselves. Further, migrants caught attempting to enter the U.S. without legal sanction, even if doing so through a legal point of entry, are banned from the country for five years.

The European Union, for its part, has experienced its own extralegal migration primarily via the maritime smuggling of people. Cruel traffickers pack the desperate travelers onto rickety, overcrowded, often unseaworthy craft that fail to reach their developed-world destinations. The EU, despite being known as relatively generous toward its citizens through its extensive welfare states (which have managed to survive years of austerity and privatizations), is capable of being perfectly punitive and cruel to these luckless maritime travelers.

In order to thwart the arrival of desperate people who could actually *help* with these countries' labor crises, Europeans use a number of ugly practices. One is sanctioning charitable aid and rescue groups that attempt to rescue migrants (when they ought to be rescued by European and African coast guards). For example, Italy has put restrictions on search and rescue ships that the humanitarian group Médecins Sans Frontières has called a "dirty

Queen IV happened to be in the vicinity of a giant barge full of humans that was capsizing off the coast of Greece. Normally populated by pampered billionaires and anchored off Monaco and Italy, the yacht, after a hasty rescue mission, was suddenly filled with dozens of soaked and traumatized people from Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Pakistan. The New York Times dryly wrote, "The incongruous image of the devastated survivors disembarking the Mayan Queen on a port in Kalamata last week underlined what has become the strange reality of the modern Mediterranean, where the superyachts of the superrich, equipped with swimming pools, Jacuzzis, helipads and other trappings of luxury, share the seas with the most destitute on smuggler-operated boats perilously crossing from northern Africa to Europe."

## **PASSPORTFOLIO**

While the truly elite have always coveted global mobility as a hedge against adverse events—from coups to wars to government upheavals to the long-hated income tax—the most enriched capitalists, whose wealth mainly relies on passive income from assets in their investment portfolio, now find themselves needing to

expand and diversify their portfolio of visas and passports.

Consider what could be called today's visa and passport market. Today, fourteen countries offer visas or passports to those making a qualifying real estate investment. Many more countries, including the U.S. and most of the EU, offer residence visas for non-property investors, which can often lead to a passport over time. A number of smaller states, plus Turkey, will directly issue passports to property buyers regardless of residence. The New York Times notes, "The picky passport shopper needs to consider price, each country's tax system and the speed of its bureaucracy: Dominica is the fastest to hand over a passport, and Turkey the slowest among nations that go straight to a passport. [...] Wealthy Chinese are by far the biggest buyers of both visas and passports, followed by Russians, experts say. There is also growing interest among French citizens eager to avoid high income taxes and Britons desperate to maintain their European Union membership..." A consultant cited in the article estimates that among Ultra-High-Net-Worth Individuals (UHNWIs—those with assets over \$30 million), 36 percent have a second passport.

Investment consultants and money managers are happy to help their clientele with the details. Consider the Spanish "golden visa," an attractive option that offered a quick path to legal residency and potentially full Spanish citizenship. A major side benefit was legal access to the full Schengen Area, a union composed of 29 European states (including most of the European Union) that allows visa-free travel across the continent. The golden visa was obtained through a number of routes, including a qualifying 500,000 euro real estate investment, a million-euro Spanish bank deposit, or an equivalent investment in Spanish companies. In an indication of the market we're talking about, a consultancy advises: "Applicants must demonstrate they have sufficient funds to support themselves without the need to work."

The Spanish visa was quite successful at attracting the global wealthy, bringing in billions of euros from Russians, post-Brexit English, and especially wealthy Chinese people. So much so, in fact, that it helped drive up Spanish housing prices, and Spain decided to kill the program this year. Portugal also recently changed its golden visa rules to exempt real estate to ease the pressure, while Ireland killed its program. The Greeks merely raised their investment threshold.

Of course, many countries have broadly similar programs, like the Green Card in the U.S. Everyone knows that people overseas may apply for this legal resident status if they have family in the country who sponsor them or a sponsoring employer. But investors committing cash above certain thresholds may apply as well, with the numbers varying by investment type but usually being over \$1 million. The EU has similar programs. Of course, for smaller, poorer countries, prices are more economical. For example, *you* can become a citizen of Vanuatu, the tiny Pacific island state, for as little as \$130,000.

It's a picture of incredible ease, not just for entry into a country's physical territory but for fully legally-sanctioned entry, with nice clear rules for residence and a grateful reception as developed countries are eager to thank the rich for their growth-boosting investments. Comparing these perks with the staggering cruelty, hardship, and ugliness that poor extralegal migrants are subjected

to, you can argue that the migration system has a class-based set of tiers, and the conditions for "illegals" are reminiscent of "poor doors."

In recent years, some liberal cities like New York and London have required developers to include among their mega-ritzy luxury developments some affordable units for normal people, in order to help people cope with the housing shortages wracking urban markets. Developers obliged and grudgingly built some middle-class-type units within new buildings of otherwise mostly high-end models but included separate entrances for tenants of the more affordable units, which became known as "poor doors." The Guardian described a main entrance as "luxury marble tiling and plush sofas, and a sign on the door alert[ing] residents to the fact that the concierge is available. Round the back, the entrance to the affordable homes is a cream corridor, decorated only with grey mail boxes and a poster warning tenants that they are on CCTV and will be prosecuted if they cause any damage." An agent flatly added that the separate doors are "so the two social strata don't have to meet."

With penniless, traumatized, exhausted parents and children languishing in Mexican border towns for years on end while stinking-rich inheritors are gliding overhead in private jets to their vacation homes in countries where they hold a purchased visa, one comes to see that our border crossings are simply poor doors for many countries.

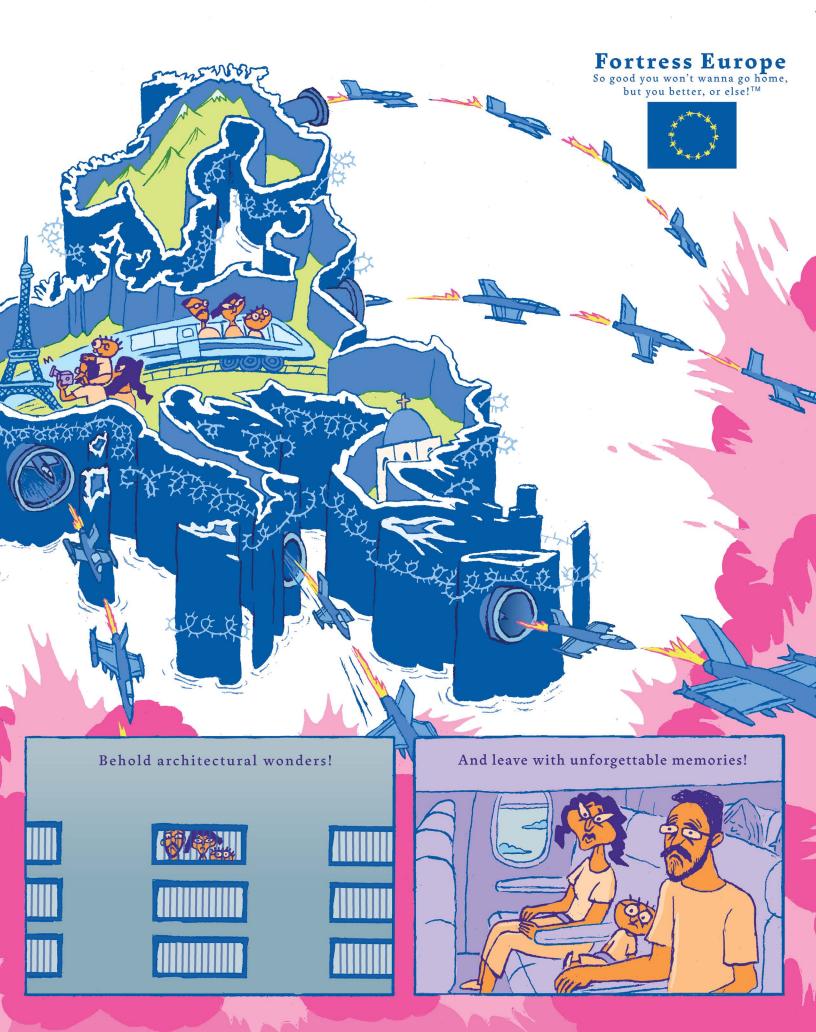
## **GULFSTREAM AND THE BEAST**

The Left has sometimes argued for open borders, where national frontiers still exist but are mostly porous to the movement of people and goods. The Right has eagerly jumped on the idea to beat the Left with claims that we want to allow violent foreign gang members to rampage freely, while the Left can point to conservatives' own alleged views promoting freedom of commerce: the unhampered flow of goods, people, and ideas they claim markets are perfect for. Clearly, the Right has been very effective in freeing gigantic global firms from limitations so that they can import and export stunning volumes of goods and sponsor real volumes of skilled workers.

But for all this controversy, in much of the world, open borders already exist. They exist for the truly wealthy, who are easily in a position to make the investments and hire staff to keep track of the timelines and paperwork. For the ruling class, border guards are less likely to lock up your kids than open the velvet ropes for you, and the towering dystopian edifice of today's rising border walls look like revolving doors to your next global shopping excursion.

Open borders are less threatening when the world's citizens have at least rough economic equality, rather than a gigantic global mass of desperate poor giving the northern middle classes anxiety, to the advantage of the ruling rich elite. The stupendous trillions of dollars of global wealth hoarded by the rich could readily be shared with the working majority and used to uplift the lives of people in the developed and developing world. With socialism, equality of dignity would give everyone a passport to a far better world. •





## ON ENDING UNEQUAL SCHOOLING

JONATHAN KOZOL is one of the leading critics of the U.S. education system. He has written a series of widely acclaimed books across a 60-year career, including Savage Inequalities, The Shame of the Nation, and Letters to a Young Teacher. Here, he discusses his new book An End to Inequality: Breaking Down the Walls of Apartheid Education in America, which sums up his argument about what is wrong with public schools and what we can do about it.

## NATHAN J. ROBINSON

Could you start by just giving us an overview of the central argument of the book?

## JONATHAN KOZOL

The public schools in the United States today are an ethical embarrassment and a betrayal of democracy, not only because of the glaringly unequal way we fund our public schools, but, at this moment of so much racial tension in America, because of the seemingly eternal segregation of the schools and the brutalizing toll this takes on Black and Latino children for no fault of their own. With school segregation right now at its highest level since

the early 1990s, the nation has eviscerated the legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education* and ripped apart the dream of Dr. King.

Apartheid education is like the big white elephant in the middle of the room that we pretend that we can't see. None of the cycles of highly publicized urban school reform that come and go from year to year and temporarily make the headlines—and I've seen probably two dozen of them in my career—have made the slightest difference in the outcomes of the schools where a vicious code of discipline takes the place of anything like democratic learning. The refusal of the powerful—and I don't mean simply po-

litical conservatives, but also the refusal of too many timid liberals, what I call semi-liberals—to batter down the walls between two separate worlds of education has resulted in what I call the routine amputation of potential of millions of our most vulnerable children.

I began by teaching in a classic segregated school, and I've probably visited more than a hundred similar schools all over the country, but I've also visited the good suburban schools for contrast. While the children in the best suburban schools are allowed to learn out of a healthy appetite for learning, to pursue their curiosities, and to ask discerning questions, the children with whom I've

been working in the inner-city schools are all too often compelled to learn out of a sense of fear of failure and punishment. And in my book, as you've already seen, I describe some of the Draconian punishments that most Americans appear not to want to recognize—lockdown rooms, for example, for minor misbehaviors, for little kids. I walked into a segregated school in Boston where a child who misbehaved in the most limited way, with no danger to anyone, who just slowed down the pace of learning, was put in a storage closet in the hallway. They euphemistically called it the "calm down room." But lockdowns aren't the worst. Physical abuse is shockingly common. Corporal punishment is still allowed in 23 states.

Perhaps the worst is the frequency of juvenile arrest, of calling in the police on a child who might be only 6 or 7 years old. I describe a little girl in Orlando, Florida, a Black child who was 6, and she had a mild tantrum in class, which, in a good school, could be dealt with by a counselor or a psychologist. Instead, they called in the police, and they put her in [restraints] and dragged her off to a detention center.

So, about these cycles of reform that come and go, the latest one is phonics. We rediscovered phonics as a magic answer to all our problems about two years ago. But that's just one example of what I mean, things like [the 1983 report] "A Nation at Risk," No Child Left Behind, Common Core, etc. The intention of these efforts is somehow to prove that separate need not be unequal, that you can have good separate schools. I call it the search for perfectible apartheid, a term that a lot of people don't like. The point is, it hasn't worked. Are you familiar with the work of Nikole Hannah-Jones?

## NATHAN J. ROBINSON

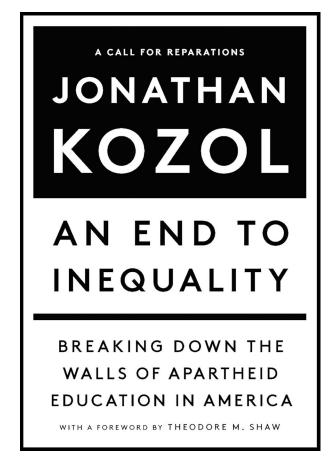
Yes, I've read some of her work.

## KOZOL

Hannah-Jones is a writer for the *New York Times*, and in an interview, she was asked, if these reforms don't work, what does work? And she answered with a single word, and that word was: integration. It's possible. It's not unthinkable, even today in America. I mentioned this in the

book: here in the Boston area, there's a spectacularly successful but little known integration program in which thousands of Black and Latino kids from segregated sections of the city ride the bus to more than 30 terrific, well-funded suburban districts, and the results are remarkable. Unheard of statistics in the inner city: 95 percent of the kids in the program graduate from high school in four years, and virtually all of them go on to four-year colleges. So, even by the toughest measurable standards, they're achieving

that and do that elsewhere. But political leaders in Washington have refused to see this kind of program as a model for the nation. Why? Because it requires bussing, and bussing is a scare word for ambitious politicians. President Biden, sad to say, had a powerful role ever since his Senate years in placing a stigma on that word. Today, he claims he believes in integration, but he's still opposed to one of the few ways by which to make it possible. And I hate to say this, but cumulatively, over the years, he has done



at a level that's virtually unheard of in the inner city. The program is also very carefully curated to be sure that it never subtracts from the racial identity of the children, that it respects their racial identity. So, that's a summary of where I stand right now.

Just to make one more point: this is not a foreign country—Massachusetts is a little more liberal than the rest of the nation—but you would think that people would look at this and say, let's replicate

more harm to the cause of integration than even the overtly racist Donald Trump. I'll still vote for [the Democrats], of course, inevitably, but not without a sense of shame that we have no more noble, more visionary choices.

### ROBINSON

You've laid out with some passionate intensity some of the horrors that we inflict on children: as you say, the amputation

of potential and the stark differences between the schools that are given to our poorest children, particularly Black and Latino children, and the schools that more affluent white children go to. You have, in the course of your career, visited many schools at both ends of the spectrum. You've described a little bit what happens in the worst schools with these punitive measures, but if we're thinking about the kind of schools that embody this ideal of democratic learning, in your observations of all these schools, what makes a good school? What is the kind of school that every child should be entitled to?

## KOZOL

I would start by saying a school in which all the children are allowed to take some joy in learning, where they're not compelled to swallow the accepted verities, and where they can laugh and smile and whisper to each other or look out the window at a squirrel without the sword of punishment above their heads, such as what I hear in inner-city schools: "You're in red zone," meaning some kind of bad place in the teacher's estimation. Also, a school where children are not perceived as just so many little economic units to be groomed to find their place in the corporate society but are given the tools they're going to need to thrive and flourish through their adult years as creative citizens, as citizens above all else, and clear-thinking citizens. Finally, I would say, a school where wonderful teachers are not compelled to give up all their autonomy and suppress their personalities to conform to what I call a standardized banality.

Quick example: here in Massachusetts, there's an industrial town called Lawrence, and the students there are almost all either Dominican or Puerto Rican or else Black. And a classic situation—I've seen this elsewhere—is when a sixth grade teacher's classroom is invaded by three so-called experts from a private foundation, a private corporation. They were brought into the school to stiffen up the behavior of the teachers, to get them to be more stern and didactic with the children. So, they're sitting in the back of her classroom, and she has to wear an earpiece so they can talk to her

while she's teaching, and they tell her: you look too happy; you're smiling too much; don't move from leg to leg-she's told to stand in something called Mountain Pose. And one of the little boys in her class notices the earpiece, and he says, "What's that thing you're wearing in your ear?" And the experts tell her, "Don't answer him, and if he asks again, give him a detention." I love kids who are politely audacious. The boy stands up, and he says to the teacher, "Don't listen to them, listen to me. You're a person, teacher. Be a person. Be you." I love that. But that's just an example of this sort of business-driven corporate trend that's driving good teachers out of the classroom.

Most of the wonderful teachers I know, and I know a lot of them, didn't come into education out of a wish to be a classroom cop. They want to seed the lives of their children with exhilaration and joy and humor about learning. There are plenty of great teachers, but I'm sure you're familiar with the fact that there's a terrible flight of teachers now from our public schools.

## ROBINSON

One of the primary targets of your criticism is the kind of method that emphasizes obedience, regimentation, and quantification. You point out that when you started teaching, the wisdom was something like that slogan, "every day we must obey." They don't say it quite that explicitly now, but they devised all sorts of other systems, some of which are very complicated, like when you describe the various levels of conversation that are allowed, or the misbehavior tax, all kinds of bureaucratic language where the entire purpose is to regiment and discipline the children.

## **KOZOL**

Yes. There are these corporate foundations which are coming into the public schools—I call it the corporate invasion. They're coming in as alleged experts, and one of them had this thing about levels of permissible conversation for children. There was level one, level two, level three, and I think level four was regular speech and conversation, which was forbidden. And in lunchrooms,



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where there might be six classes having lunch simultaneously, no one is allowed to talk. Total rule of silence. One of the Harvard professors I know went and asked the principal of the school why they all had to be silent. He said, it's to give them a rest in the middle of the day, something like that. She said, facetiously, it didn't seem much like a rest, it seemed more like a prison.

And then, in a middle-class suburb within 20 minutes of Boston, in a town like the one where I grew up, it's fun to come into the classroom, and the kids look forward to Monday morning—not all of them, but most of them. They look forward to what's going to happen on Monday morning, and the teachers are relaxed and not uptight. In the inner city, I often feel that teachers are trained to see the children as adversaries, as the enemies of the state, to borrow from Orwell.

## ROBINSON

One of the arguments that would be made in favor of a punitive approach is that we have to have harsh discipline, or these "zero tolerance" or "no excuses" policies, because this is the foundation of learning, and that actually children succeed more when you have this kind of regimentation. But what you're pointing out is that in these affluent schools, this is not the approach taken. The best schools that you have visited do not treat the children like they're prisoners to be controlled.

## **KOZOL**

Absolutely. That's the point. The "no excuses" ethos, to me, is just incompatible with the best virtues of the United States of America, if we would simply honor those virtues. "No excuses" education sounds like Stalinist Russia or Germany, maybe, in the 1930s. It's an intolerant cruelty. And it's not just no excuses, but it's no independent thinking. That's the point. It's like they're afraid to let the children interrogate reality. I use that term because it's not merely to ask questions like, why is the sky blue? but to challenge the world in which we grow up and to be a part of its transformation when we're adults. I worry about having a generation of voters who are trained to absolute obedience. What do they do when they're



Photo courtesy of www.jonathankozol.com

faced with tyrannical leaders?

Anyway, a month or two ago, *The New York Times* sent a reporter up to Cambridge to interview me, and she actually did a very nice and favorable portrait of my book and my career, and I was grateful. But one moment stands out in my memory: the reporter asked me, "Why do you need to use scathing terms like apartheid education instead of more moderate and conciliatory language?" And I'm sure others will ask that as well. All my life, I've been asked that kind of question. But to be honest, especially at my present age, I just don't have time to steer away from accurate and forceful words.

There was a great New Englander, one of the most famous abolitionists, named William Lloyd Garrison. He was a white man and lived in a town north of Boston. Ultimately, the most important abolitionist was Frederick Douglass, but Garrison helped set the way. Somebody asked him once, Why, William, are you all on fire? And he answered, I have need to be on fire. There are mountains of ice about me I must melt. I wouldn't dare compare myself to Garrison, but I thought that was the good American spirit of independent thinking. I don't think that was subversive. If it was subversive of slavery, then that was a good time to be subversive.

## ROBINSON

Certainly. Garrison said he would be "as harsh as truth." You're not going to get that question around here because I

believe very strongly that injustice should make you angry. The first time I went to the campus of Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, I was giving a talk, and it made me angry because I saw how lovely it was. It was like Harvard Yard, and it was a high school. I wasn't angry at the kids there. They were really nice. But I realized that the spectrum of the experience of school runs from something that is as lovely as the Harvard Yard for some of these private schools to something that really is, as you point out, basically indistinguishable from prisons, or perhaps even worse. You document the way that children are poisoned at some of these schools that are in disrepair. The buildings are falling apart, with bathrooms that they won't even let the adults use because they're so disgusting. At one school you visited, they said, No, use the guest bathroom.

## **KOZOL**

That's right. I describe schools that are not just ugly and decrepit, which is bad enough because that sours the mentalities of children, but where lead paint is crumbling from the walls and ceilings. We've known certainly since the 1970s that lead paint exposure, when children breathe it in, or in some cases, chew the flakes, does irreversible damage, often to their cerebral function, and there's no way to ever make up for that later on. Once that happens, that year of your life is gone forever. You're never going to get

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that year again to live in a healthier environment and to study in a place that's not going to damage you.

I've never seen poisonous flaking lead paint in the good suburban schools I visit. It's not just that they're respectful of the children's basic elemental health and safety, but they spend enough money so that it's a charming place and a likable place, not unlike the school you mentioned, Andover Phillips Academy, which I know very well, and Exeter, its rival school, and Groton, and the similar exceptionally well-known and justly famous prep schools attended by generations of privileged people. Some of these private schools are willing to spend the money not just to make the school building attractive, but they often have art galleries with priceless art—not simply galleries for the children's art but for classic works that graduates probably donate to the school. I say this because the old question that I've been asked by conservatives ever since I started teaching in 1964 is the following: does money really matter in the determination of a good school? And I always say, of course it does. If it didn't matter, why do you think I specifically say this? Why do you think that schools like Andover, where the children of presidents go to school, are willing to spend so much money to create a stimulating and often beautiful environment? I often say that ugly settings cheapen the souls of children: beautiful environments refine their souls. So, there are two worlds of education in America. I'm getting pretty old, but to my dying day, I'm not going to give up on this struggle.

### ROBINSON

It seems to me that one of the values underlying your work is this belief that the poorest children deserve the best as well, that nobody should be given up on, and that, in fact, if anything, we should spend more on the children who have the least because those are the ones who have the most obstacles to overcome. The children of presidents might need to be invested in a little less.

I want to turn to the path forward. You mentioned bussing programs. But surely that can only be a partial solution because ultimately, we want all schools to be brought up to the level of the best.

## KOZOL

Yes, that's true. I won't go off on a long detour about this, but I'm determined. I've always at least urged political allies here in Massachusetts and other states not simply to expand a one-way bussing program from the city to the suburbs but to develop at least a ring of spectacular magnet schools on the edges of the inner city which are so good that kids will be eager to make the ride in reverse, essentially to create what I would call a metropolitan school district, which might include as many as 25 districts, including the inner city itself. And in cities like Boston, New York, or Chicago—I'll just to speak for Boston because that's where I live—with all its world-class medical facilities, health research, scientific labs, and extraordinary museums, imagine what it would be like if you created a school that was identified with one of those institutions. like the Massachusetts General Hospital School of Life Science. I think, with ingenuity and imagination and ethical audacity, we could crack open this hardened shell of racial isolation.

It wouldn't be so hard. It would take a president who would authorize and even devote the huge amount of funding it would take to make this a reality. I said I knew enough about Joe Biden's background. I met him when he was in the Senate. He once invited me to his home. Yes, he probably will think I'm not grateful now, but that was before I knew much about his politics. He invited me to his home to give a talk on adult literacy because his wife was a volunteer, and he's a very nice man. He gave me cookies and milk, I recall, as I sat in his kitchen afterward with him. And he is likable. That's the trouble. He's likable, but there's something ethically missing, and I just hope someday we'll have another president, maybe with leadership as high-minded as FDR, for example.

I hark back to Franklin Roosevelt partly because I can remember the day he died. I'm old enough. I remember that day. I remember my mother crying in the kitchen, but I don't want to get

lost in nostalgia. I think this is a great country, and I think we deserve great leadership.

## ROBINSON

I was just looking back at another old book of yours, which is called Children of the Revolution: A Yankee Teacher in the Cuban Schools. One of the things you talk about is that Cuba, after the Cuban Revolution, made a national commitment to literacy. And for whatever serious criticisms we might have of Castro's Cuba, the idea that every child deserves that education was taken seriously. It was a massive national project. You point out that in the United States, we've never done or said that we're going to embark on a collective mission to make sure that every child has their basic needs met and their basic rights fulfilled. There have been many promises that we will invest in building schools, and then somehow it always gets cut from the legislation and put to the wayside.

### **KOZOL**

Typically, what happens is they appoint a commission to look into that, to look into the matter of unequal funding, or to look into the matter of lead paint in inner-city schools, and the commission then is given 10 years to come up with a report or something like that. That's kind of a classic urban political ritual. The thing is, we don't need to look to Cuba. There are plenty of other nations where the education of children, particularly very young children, is a very high priority. France, for example. It's just embarrassing that in the United States, almost since I became a teacher, successive presidential candidates have promised that if they're elected, we will have universal preschool or Head Start, and every one of them has broken that promise to the present day. I'm going to be 88 in the fall, and I don't expect to live long enough to see the transformations for which I've struggled over the past 60 years. What I hope is that a younger generation of thoughtfully rebellious young people, students, and their teachers will carry on the torch.

Transcript edited by Patrick Farnsworth.



## the Illustrators



49TH EDITION
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"Contemporary Heroes" is a large woodcut reflecting on the practices of Operation Migration, a conservation group that has helped bring back Whooping Cranes from the brink of extinction. Donning "bird outfits" so that the Whooping Crane chicks don't imprint on the scientists, they would use ultralight aircraft to teach migration to captive raised chicks.