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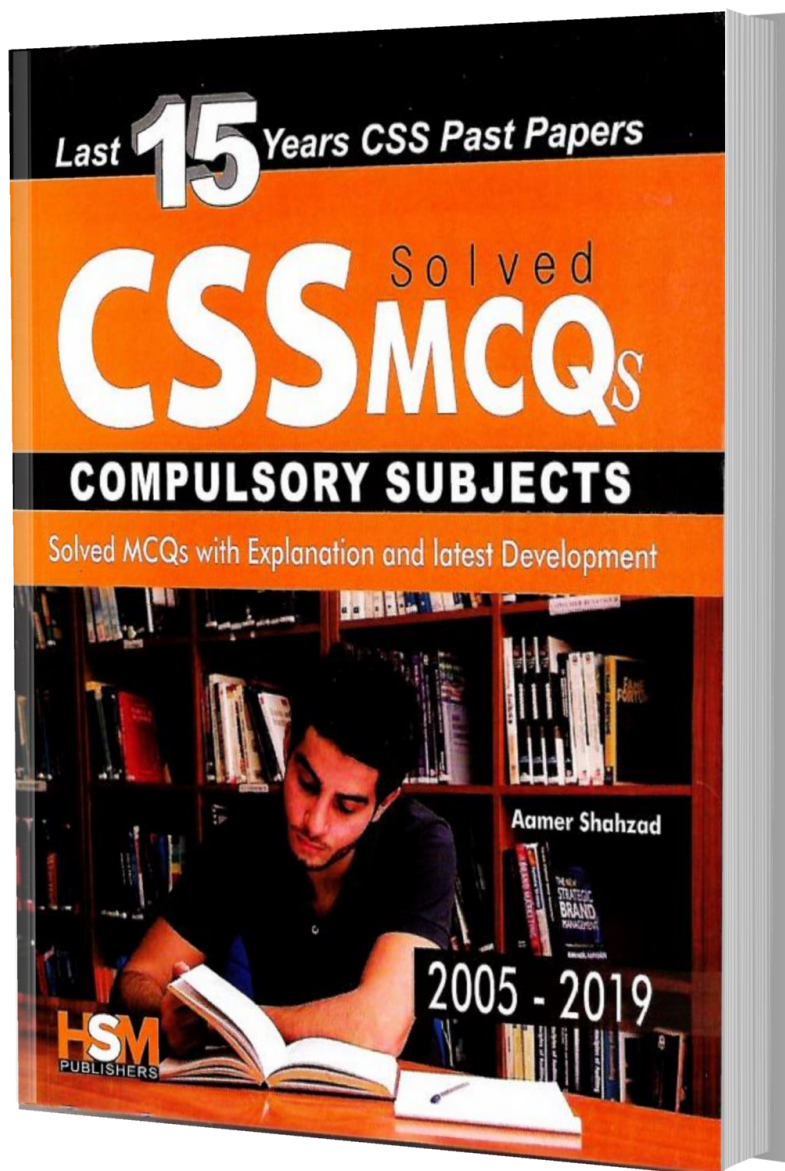
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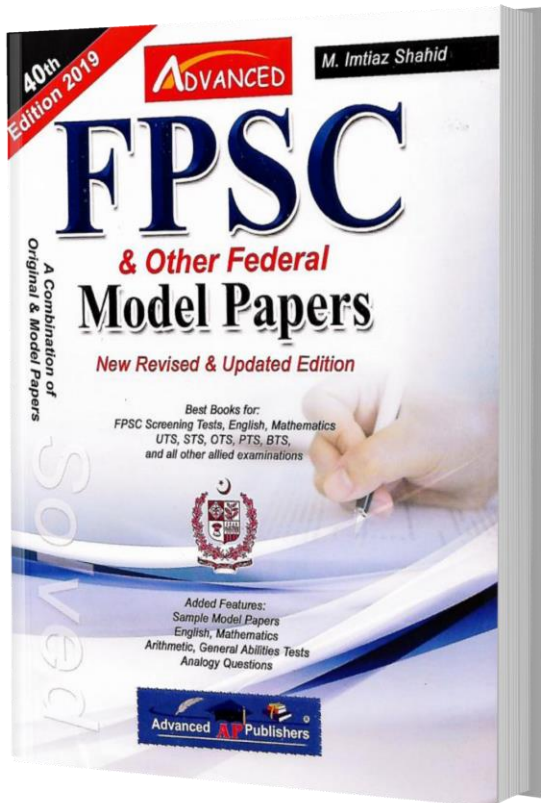
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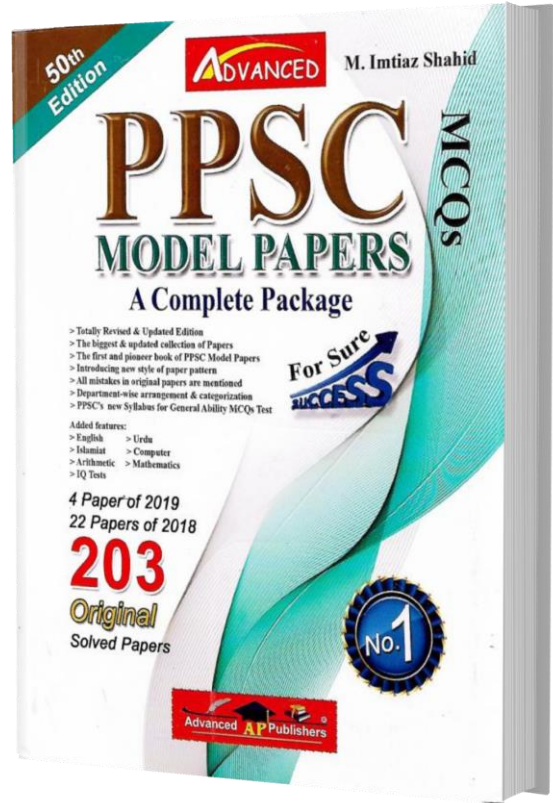


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Nation.

Cover to Cover

What a heart-tugging progression of covers over the last few weeks: First came the March 25 cover featuring “the climate kid” Greta Thunberg—her intense, ageless, unforgettable face, followed by my euphoria over the huge impact she was able to achieve. Immediately following, on the April 1 cover, there was the stark plastic water bottle with the message that pollution is going to get worse. This devastating cover was then followed by the heartwarming April 8 cover that framed the abortion issue in positive terms; I have always deplored the way the label “pro-life” consigned the “pro-abortion” stance to the side of death. It is wonderful that a group of women of color in Mississippi are restoring the right to choose to its proper context: that of truly seeing to the needs of individual women and individual families, including the needs of children already born.

I await future adventures with your covers and magazine, knowing that you will continue to balance the negative and the positive.

CHRISTIANE MARKS
CHATHAM, NY

A Miss on Mueller

Unfortunately, in its lead editorial on the Mueller Report [April 15], *The Nation* echoed the misleading characterization being peddled by President Trump’s apologists that “Mueller found no evidence that Donald Trump or his subordinates conspired with the Russian government to steal the 2016 election.” In fact, no where does William Barr’s March 24 letter say that Mueller found “no evidence” of conspiracy.

Rather, according to Barr, Mueller’s report states that the “investigation did not establish that members of the

Trump Campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities.” Saying that Mueller did not “establish” the federal crime of conspiracy, sufficient to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, does not mean there was “no evidence” of conspiracy.

Given Mueller’s refusal to exonerate Trump on the charge of obstruction of justice, *The Nation* compounds its error by leaping to the unfounded conclusion that “Mueller’s key findings should tamp down the fervor for impeachment.” What “key findings”? To date, none of the 400-page report has been released and Congress has just begun its independent investigation of Trump’s wrongdoing. Since impeachment does not require proof that a crime has been committed, it is entirely premature for *The Nation* to kill impeachment in its crib before all the evidence has been gathered and presented to the American people.

STEPHEN F. ROHDE
LOS ANGELES

Parenting Lessons

I loved Dani McClain’s piece, “What All Parents Can Learn From Black Mothers” [April 15]. As an older, white, never-married, new adoptive mom, I have a lot to learn about social networks, alternatives to patriarchy, and pride and vulnerability from parents like McClain. Thank you so much for running this piece!

I did have to wonder if the illustrator had read the piece. Why all the tears? What a disservice to readers, given how inspiring and helpful piece McClain’s was.

Thank you for running it nonetheless. I can’t wait to read McClain’s book.

JENNIE ULEMAN
JACKSON HEIGHTS, NY

letters@thenation.com

Inciting Hatred

Donald Trump is not an electoral mastermind. He is something far more dangerous: a persistent political grifter who is desperately, shamelessly determined to maintain his grip on the presidency that he assumed after losing the 2016 popular vote by almost 3 million ballots.

Trump's desperation will intensify as the 2020 election approaches. He will turn with increasing frequency to the playbook of racism and xenophobia that he has employed from the moment four years ago when he crept from reality TV onto the Republican debate stage. Trump confirmed his intentions in mid-April, when he began launching incendiary attacks on Congresswoman Ilhan Omar after she observed, regarding the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, that "some people did something and that all of us were starting to lose access to our civil liberties."

No one who has paid attention to how Trump plays politics imagines that he sincerely thinks that Omar was slighting the horrors of 9/11. The president is deliberately inciting hatred against one of the first two Muslim women elected to the House as a gambit designed to divide Americans in general and Democrats in particular. Trump's goal is to create enough chaos to maintain his viability as a candidate for reelection. He couldn't care less about the long-term damage that comes from cleaving a country against itself or about the threats to Omar's life that extend from his combustible campaigning.

Trump and his collaborators—trained in the dark arts of electoral exploitation by Steve Bannon and a cabal of right-wing populists—are always on the watch for openings that will rile up the base and divide the critics. They're particularly determined to turn Democrats against one another, as the president attempted to do with his February State of the Union address, which sought to drive a wedge between establishment Democrats and the rising democratic-socialist movement embodied by Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Trump was testing 2020 campaign themes when he announced, "Tonight, we renew our resolve that America will never be a socialist country." He was doing the same thing when he

retweeted a video slyly edited to make Omar appear dismissive of the 9/11 attacks.

Honest observers like House Judiciary Committee chairman Jerry Nadler (D-NY), whose congressional district includes the World Trade Center site, recognized that Trump had "no moral authority" to attack Omar's reference to 9/11. "She characterized it only in passing," said Nadler. "She was talking about discrimination against Muslim Americans. And she just said that, after [9/11] happened, it was used as an excuse for lots of discrimination and for withdrawal of civil liberties." Yet when a president deliberately mischaracterizes the words and intentions of a member of Congress, it has consequences. "I have experienced an increase in direct threats on my life—many directly referencing or replying to the president's video," Omar reported on April 14.

This is the sort of abuse of power that has historically incensed Congress. When Andrew Johnson attacked his congressional critics as "traitors" after they denounced his failure to defend the rights of African Americans in the South during the Reconstruction era, the House voted to impeach him. And the second article of impeachment authorized by the House Judiciary Committee against Richard Nixon highlighted his targeting of political enemies.

Trump's GOP allies may insulate him from accountability these days. But even the most cautious Democrats had better recognize the game that Trump is playing here. He attacked democratic socialists in the hope of provoking internecine strife among the Democrats; he now attacks Omar for the same purpose. He will keep up these attacks because he knows that if he can fracture the opposition to his presidency, the politics of divide and conquer might again prevail. Do. Not. Give. Him. An. Inch.

JOHN NICHOLS



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May 6, 2019

The digital version of this issue is available to all subscribers April 23 at TheNation.com.

Cover illustration by Doug Chayka.



BY THE NUMBERS

900M

Number of eligible voters in India

10%

Percentage of the world's population expected to cast ballots in India's general election

39

Number of days it will take for all the ballots to be submitted—from April 11 to May 19

12M

Number of poll workers deployed to the 1 million polling stations, which by law may be no more than two kilometers from any eligible voter

15,256

Feet above sea level of India's highest-altitude polling place, which will serve 48 voters and be staffed by officials with oxygen tanks

4

Days traveled on foot by polling officials to the village of Cheppe in Arunachal Pradesh state to serve 24 voters

—Isabel Cristo

Assange's Arrest

This indictment is an attack on journalism.

Julian Assange's strange seven-year residence in Ecuador's London embassy has ended, and Assange, thanks to the American president he helped elect, is now in British custody facing a US extradition request. The question now is what the freshly unsealed Justice Department indictment against him means—and doesn't mean—for Assange, the British courts (which must decide whether to hand him over), and US press freedom.

Compared with the worst that Assange and his supporters have always feared (black-hooded rendition, indictment under the Espionage Act, the death penalty), the indictment, filed under seal in 2017, may seem like good news. It's brief: six pages. He is accused of conspiring with Chelsea Manning to hack one password on one classified government database. There's no criminal allegation of spying, nothing touching Russia or the Democratic National Committee. The password-cracking charge is a felony that carries a maximum prison term of five years—less time than Assange's voluntary confinement in his London diplomatic quarters.

The indictment alleges that in March 2010, Manning, who had already leaked vast Defense Department databases exposing an assortment of US abuses, was trying to access a database without using her own credentials. The indictment, citing decrypted chats, says Assange "agreed to assist Manning in cracking a password." It appears they were not successful.

This is a narrow alleged offense. And in some ways it separates Assange, at least on technical grounds, from journalists who receive leaked material but don't directly participate in extracting secret files. It's the difference between *The New York Times'* Neil Sheehan receiving the photocopied Pentagon Papers from Daniel Ellsberg and, say, a reporter breaking into a government office with a crowbar to yank papers from drawers. It's similar to the troubling, ultimately tragic case of a *Cincinnati Enquirer* reporter who in 1998 torpedoed his paper's hard-hitting investigation into human-rights abuses by the Chiquita Corp. by repeatedly signing into an executive voice-mail system using a password obtained from a company source. That gave Chiquita and criminal prosecutors license to pursue the paper, reporter, and source alike. Ultimately, Gannett, the paper's corporate owner, recanted and withdrew the entire series of articles on the investigation, and the reporter, facing criminal charges, gave up his source's name.

Some reporters and press-freedom advocates see Assange's similarly direct involvement in password cracking as grounds to walk away from the case. The man violated journalistic norms, goes the argument, and regardless of whether his hacking counts as misguided narcissism or a principled act of civil disobedience, it's no longer about freedom of the press.

Yet read that indictment more closely, and the alarm bells should sound afresh. Here's why: Assange and Manning are being charged not just with a simple act of hacking. The indictment explicitly describes Assange's attempted password hack as part of a broader WikiLeaks conspiracy to "publicly disseminate the information on its website," facilitated by WikiLeaks' use of a cloud-based cache for anonymous, confidential document dumps. The indictment, relying—irony of ironies—on hacked and decrypted Jabber chats, delves deep into the source-publisher relationship, saying that Assange "encouraged" Manning's leaking, as in this exchange:

MANNING: After this upload, that's all I really have got left.

ASSANGE: Curious eyes never run dry in my experience.

There's the rub. By trying to crack a government password, Assange may have violated a law. But conspiring to obtain and disseminate leaked information—the overarching claim of the indictment—is something countless reporters do every day. Cloud-based confidential document dumps are now staples of investigative reporting, discussed openly at conferences and advertised on muckraking websites as ways of protecting sources. Most significantly, cajoling, encouraging, wheedling, and nurturing sources who have access to secret information is at the heart of independent journalism.

What we have in the Assange indictment, in other words, is a narrow but consequential attack on the practice of investigative journalism and national-security reporting. The indictment defines as criminal conspiracy many of the practices journalists rely on every day—a backdoor Official Secrets Act.

There's no denying Assange's destructive narcissism, his atrocious political judgment in 2016, his unreasonable expectations as a guest of the Ecuadorians, the seriousness of Sweden's now-dropped sexual-assault investigation (the reason he jumped bail in the first place), or the debatable ethical standards guiding WikiLeaks' editorial decisions. In purely journalistic terms, in stepping over the line from receiving leaks to hands-on password hacking, Assange jeopardized his source—Manning—and WikiLeaks itself. But his indictment by the Justice Department raises far more consequential questions, since it comes from an administration already committed to attacking press freedom on multiple fronts. In that context, this is a politically motivated prosecution—so clearly political that it ought to persuade a British court to deny extradition—and an attempt to build case law constraining national-security reporting. At its core, the Assange indictment is about whether journalists and publishers, from small community news outlets to transnational publishing platforms, enjoy First Amendment protection in their relationships with confidential sources. It is, in other words, about the future vigor of investigative reporting.

BRUCE SHAPIRO

Read that indictment closely, and alarm bells should sound.

COMMENT

Q&A OSWALDO ZAVALA

Thanks in part to documentaries like *Cartel Land* and hit shows like *Narcos*, Mexico has garnered a reputation as a narco-state, a country whose government

and police forces are terrorized or even controlled by drug cartels. Last year, Oswaldo Zavala, a Mexican journalist turned professor of Latin American literature at the City University of New York, set off a debate in his home country when he challenged that idea with his book *Los Cárteles No Existen (The Cartels Do Not Exist)*, which argues that violence and trafficking do not threaten the state but rather are central to its operations. While his thesis is controversial, many believe it offers a plausible account of how drug policy is used to make Mexico subservient to US foreign policy.

—Jessica Loudis

JL: Is your title just a provocation? Do you really believe that cartels don't exist?

OZ: I really do believe that. That's not to say that drug traffickers aren't real or that the violence isn't real—of course they are—but that our understanding of all that has been filtered through what UNAM [National Autonomous University of Mexico] sociologist Luis Astorga calls the “narco matrix.” This is the idea that drug traffickers are a separate entity from the government and that they've amassed so much power that they pose a threat to the state. That's completely wrong.

JL: So when did the idea of the cartel begin to crystallize?

OZ: When you look at the first

iterations of the word *cartel* in Mexico, it comes into use only in the late 1980s in relation to the Juárez organization. Then in 1995, President Ernesto Zedillo declares that, yes, drug traffickers are a national-security threat, even though traffickers at that moment were largely under the control of the military.

JL: When did things change after that?

OZ: Right at the beginning of Vicente Fox's presidency, his transition team had a meeting with Barry McCaffrey, the US drug-policy director. Before the meeting, the Mexican government was still talking about drug trafficking as a matter of public health, of domestic policing—not of national security. Right after the meeting, the Fox administration changed the narrative and started talking about efforts to militarize the fight against drugs.

What happened is that traffickers began working for the state and municipal police and, of course, the government. The gangs that operate on the outskirts of cities were allowed to work so long as they respected certain conventions, like not attacking tourists or going to the richest areas. The famous Juárez cartel was called *La Línea*, or “the line,” and friends who reported on them claim that this name came about because state police drew a metaphorical line between following the rules and

being allowed to work. So if you were *alineado* with the state police, then they would let you be. It's not that the traffickers control the city. The police control what goes on.

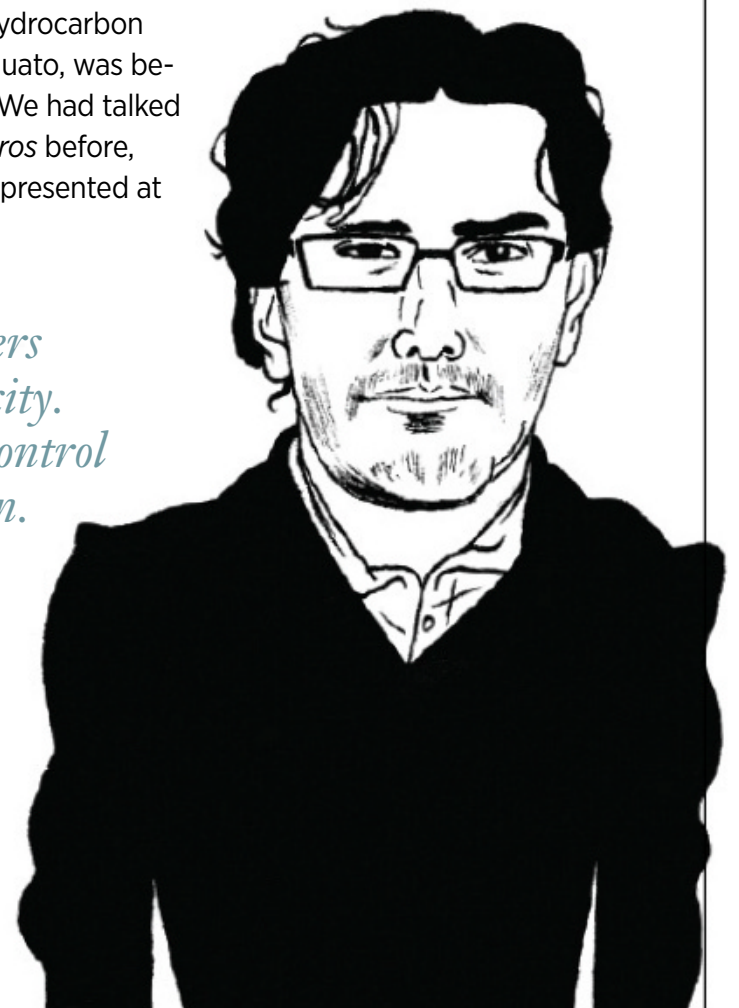
JL: One of the biggest issues in Mexico now is *huachicol*, the theft of oil and gas from national Pemex refineries. Since taking office last December, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador [widely known as AMLO] has vowed to put an end to the robberies, which are thought to cost the government more than \$3 billion a year. What do you make of all this?

OZ: The war against *huachicol* erupted on January 30, the day that AMLO called off the war on drugs. In that same conference, the secretary of the navy started talking about how Santa Rosa de Lima, a new hydrocarbon “cartel” in Guanajuato, was becoming a threat. We had talked about *huachicoleros* before, but the narrative presented at

that conference was profoundly different because they made it sound like *huachicoleros* were not poor people with very few options but members of highly organized armed groups. This is the same thing that happened with drug trafficking.

There are competing narratives about oil theft within the government. On one side, you have AMLO saying that this is mainly about systemic theft inside the refineries and naval bases—according to most journalists, 80 percent of gas theft happens within Pemex—and on the other side, the navy and Energy Secretariat talking about *huachicol*. I'm concerned that the war against the *huachicol* is a new attempt to continue the national-security agenda. ■

It's not that the traffickers control the city. The police control what goes on.



GREEN NEW DEAL

A Generation Responds

StudentNation asked young people across the country, "How could the Green New Deal affect your future?"

Here is one response:

The Green New Deal resolution introduced in Congress on February 7 had a less-than-flattering term for places like the one I'm from in central Pennsylvania: "depopulated rural communities." Deep in Trump country, my hometown newspaper has already printed smears of the ambitious climate-justice platform. But some of the goals outlined in the GND resolution—job security in a time of wage stagnation, investment in clean air and water, and support for family farming—should resonate in small towns across the country.

This is because the Green New Deal, like the New Deal before it, has the potential to combat disinvestment in Middle America. In the 1930s, when for-profit utilities left nine of every 10 rural homes without electricity, the Rural Electrification Act authorized loans nationwide to launch cooperative power companies. The GND platform would replicate this strategy, providing redress for the economic devastation of rural deindustrialization while pursuing a just transition from fossil fuels.

But these policies can't come from the "grasstops," as the Climate Justice Alliance, a coalition of local advocacy organizations, recently put it. The Green New Deal's architects must commit to the lofty ideals laid out in the resolution: a "democratic and participatory process" to "plan, implement, and administer the [GND] mobilization at the local level." That means rural communities need a seat at the table in the coming year as the GND moves from resolution to reality.

—Lucas Smolcic Larson,

a senior at Brown studying anthropology and Portuguese and Brazilian studies

To read more, go to [TheNation.com/gnd-forum](https://www.thenation.com/gnd-forum).

Thanks to the Puffin Foundation for making this forum possible.

Katha Pollitt



Back in Westeros

Game of Thrones' final season depicts a fractured world's last shot at redemption.

The dragons have always been the least of it—not to mention the wargs and the Children of the Forest and the First Men and the hard-to-remember, centuries-long backstories of the Starks, Lannisters, Targaryens, Baratheons, Greyjoys, Tyrells, and Martells. The elements of fantasy that obsess the millions of fans of *Game of Thrones* give the story its strangeness and beauty and feed endless, ingenious speculation. To tell the truth, though, these embellishments also give the series its tedium. I mean, really, zombies? Dragonglass? That whole Three-Eyed Raven subplot?

At its heart, *Game of Thrones* is a story about human beings and the ways they are shaped by the harsh, medievalesque world of Westeros. By now, as the eighth and final season airs, we know these characters better than we know some of our friends—and way better than we know their contemporary real-life equivalents.

Littlefinger, the amoral brothel owner and adviser to kings who schemes and manipulates his way to the almost-top, could be Roger Stone with more quiet self-control. Littlefinger's most famous line, "Chaos is a ladder," echoes Stone's affinity for being "an agent of chaos." (Stone, for his part, was quoting the Joker in *The Dark Knight*.) President Donald Trump is a mash-up of the gluttonous, oblivious King Robert Baratheon and his supposed firstborn, the sociopathic, narcissistic, blond King Joffrey. The High Sparrow, the deceptively mild-mannered leader of a puritanical religious-political movement—is that perchance Mike Pence?

Maybe not. When friends and I tried to pair up *Game of Thrones* characters with contemporary political figures, we found it doesn't work. The Seven Kingdoms—a staggeringly violent, feudal, tradition-bound society over which is laid a (very thin) veneer of chivalry and romance—is just too different from the capitalist, individualistic, democratic postmodern West. Maybe that's why we love the show so much.

When the series began, it looked like a high-school geeks-and-gamers dream: all prostitutes, princesses, swords, and magick. The female characters were "strong" but subordinate. Based on the overt violence and sexism of the first few episodes, many thought women would never

watch. They were wrong: Women love the show as much as men. And what became clear as the female characters gained prominence was that, in spite of its gratuitous, mostly female nudity and every kind of violence, the show sustains a feminist reading.

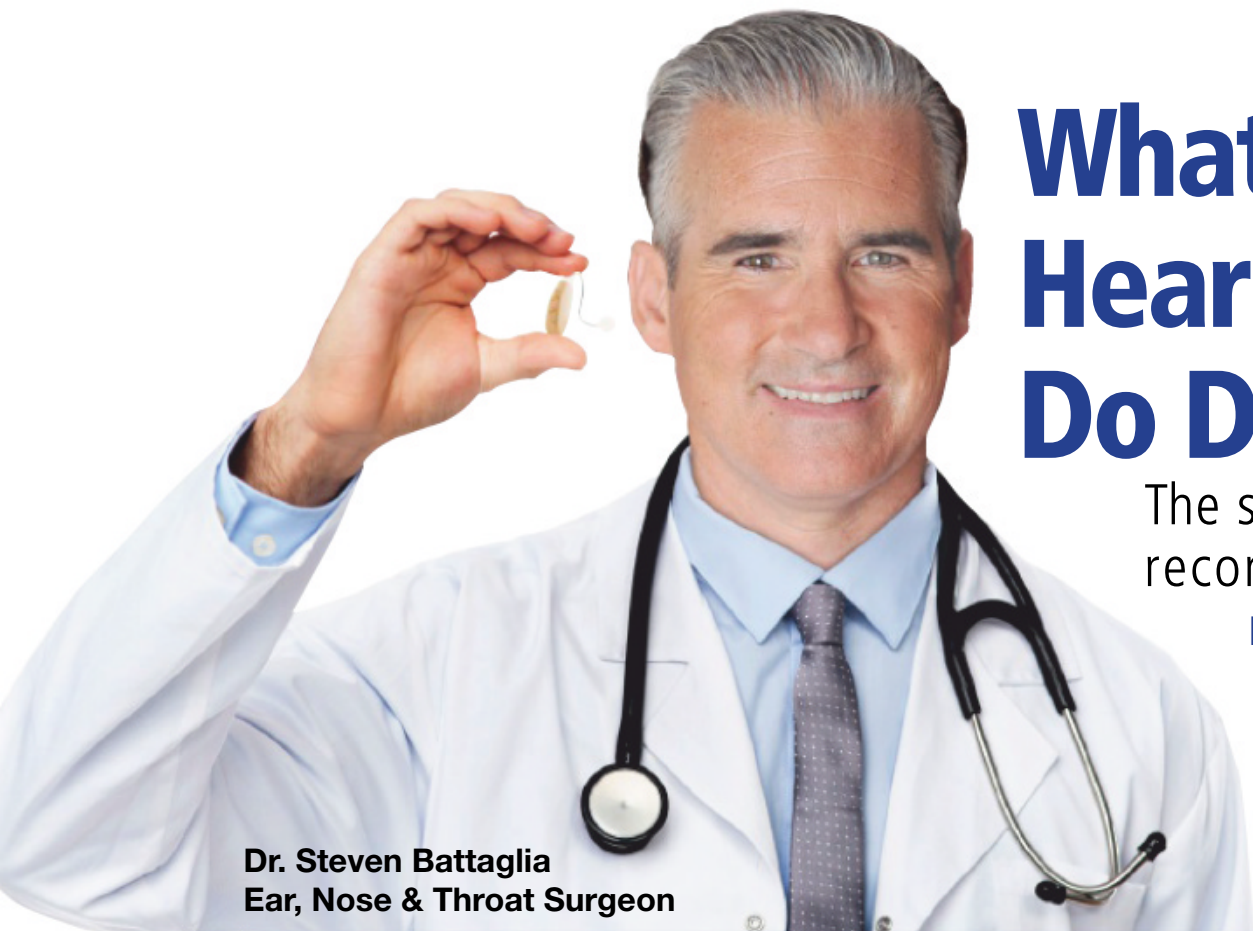
Like all art worth its salt, *Game of Thrones* critiques the values it depicts. Westerosi feudalism demands unflinching loyalty, but people backstab one another constantly. (The real Middle Ages were like this, too.) As for chivalry and honor, the only knight who lives by the rules is Brienne of Tarth, a very tall woman whose literal-minded obedience to the knightly code makes her a laughingstock to the male warriors. Similarly, the only person who buys the ideal romance of aristocratic love is the naive teenager Sansa Stark, whose fiancé Joffrey turns out to be a sexual sadist and tyrant. Early on, poor Sansa was disliked by fans for being passive (read: trying to stay alive), but her narrative is actually the most modern. Even today, it can take a woman most of a lifetime to put herself in charge of her own life.

What gives *Game of Thrones* its strangely compelling quality is the fantasy overlaid on a realistic base. Societies change; people, not so much. That's why we still read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as more than historical curiosities. What motivates the warlords and warladies in *Game of Thrones* are the same things that motivate people now: power, sex, status, greed, family, vanity, and, of course, self-preservation. True, revenge is less important now than in the real or fictional Middle Ages, because honor—saving face—was a greater source of social standing and self-worth in the past. (Just don't tell Trump.)

It figures that there isn't much room for love in this picture and less space still for such progressive virtues as solidarity, compassion, rationality, justice, and hope. Daenerys, who began as just



What gives Game of Thrones its strangely compelling quality is the fantasy overlaid on a realistic base.



Dr. Steven Battaglia
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Like all art worth its salt, *Game of Thrones* critiques the values it depicts.

another megalomaniacal throne claimant, has come a long way since she promised to “take what is mine with fire and blood,” but even she isn’t above dumping a man who loves her for the possibility of a political marriage—to say nothing of slaughtering first and asking questions later. Along with her virtuous ally turned lover, Jon Snow, and her clever adviser, Tyrion Lannister, Dany represents the possibility of a more just and peaceful Westeros. “Our fathers were evil men,” she tells her allies at the end of Season 7. “We’re going to leave the world better than we found it.”

Good luck with that. The spur to this last-minute grand alliance is the arrival of the Night King, who last season broke through the Wall with his enormous zombie army. Many have seen the long winter and the White Walkers as a metaphor for climate change, only with ice instead of fire. As in Westeros, saving our world will

mean making fundamental changes in our ways of living and thinking. Can they do it? Can we?

As the final season begins, most of the villains are already dead. Farewell, Littlefinger, slain in last season’s finale by my favorite tween assassin, Arya Stark. The survivors have mostly become better people, except for Cersei Lannister, the current occupant of the Iron Throne. Why unify to save humanity when she can take advantage of the final war to...?

Meanwhile, Dany and Jon may not be such a great couple after all. His claim to the throne suddenly got stronger than hers, thanks to a revelation about his father and the sexist rules of inheritance; I doubt she’ll be content to be a mere queen consort. Maybe Arya and Sansa will win the day—that is, if there will even be an Iron Throne at all. Chaos is a ladder, but who can climb it? And where does it lead? ■

COMIX NATION

JEN SORENSEN



NATION NEWS

Izzy Winners

The Park Center for Independent Media at Ithaca College recently announced that this year’s Izzy Award “for outstanding achievement in independent media” will be given to three journalists who undertook

groundbreaking and in-depth reporting in 2018. *Nation* contributing writers Laura Flanders, Dave Lindorff, and Aaron Maté will share the award with *Earth Island Journal*.

Flanders was recognized for providing progressive and internationalist perspectives to American audiences and producing forward-looking media that investigate the policies driving racism, sexism, and economic exclusion.

Longtime *Nation* contributor Lindorff spent months investigating the Defense Department’s annual financial reports and funding requests to Congress and found that it had simply been concocting the numbers, making Pentagon expenditures opaque and misleading. His detailed report for *The Nation* was cited by politicians and academics in 2018 and provides a solid basis for public debate around the issue.

Throughout 2018, independent journalist and *Nation* contributor Maté questioned the assumptions and exaggerations by the mainstream media and politicians propelling the Trump-Russia-collusion story. One of the few Russiagate skeptics in the press, Maté’s meticulous reporting for *The Nation* consistently challenged the way the public was being informed about special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation and related issues.

The Izzy Award is named after I.F. “Izzy” Stone, the dissident journalist who served as *The Nation*’s Washington editor in the 1940s and launched *I.F. Stone’s Weekly* in 1953, in whose pages he challenged McCarthyism, the Vietnam War, racial injustice, and government deceit. This year’s judges were Raza Rumi, the director of the Park Center for Independent Media; Jeff Cohen, a former PCIM director and the founder of Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting; and Linda Jue, the editor and executive director of the G.W. Williams Center for Independent Journalism. ■



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NATIONAL SECURITY

Marring Mar-a-Lago

On March 30, a Chinese woman named Yujing Zhang, 32, was arrested after bluffing her way into President Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. According to an affidavit, Zhang told Secret Service agents that she was there for a "United Nations Chinese American Association" event scheduled for that evening. No such event existed.

"She lies to everyone she encounters," federal prosecutor Rolando Garcia said.

Secret Service agents found four cell phones, \$8,000 in cash, a USB drive thought to contain malware, and a signal detector—a device used for finding hidden cameras—in Zhang's hotel room.

Investigators concluded that she had purchased a travel package from an organization called the United Nations Chinese Friendship Association, which offers clients the chance to meet powerful US political figures.

The UNCF, which has no relationship with the UN, was founded by the Chinese entrepreneur Charles Lee, who sometimes refers to himself as Prince Charles. According to the company's now-defunct website, its mission is to promote the goals of the Chinese Communist Party through the connections of Chinese business owners.

There is no definitive evidence linking Zhang with the Chinese government, but the concern remains that Mar-a-Lago is vulnerable to spies and influence peddlers. Trump, though, appeared unbothered by the possibility, telling reporters, "I'm not concerned at all. I think it was just a fluke situation."

—Edwin Aponte



Gary Younge



A European Disaster

Brexit is not just a tragedy for Britain.

To be a British commentator traveling through Europe at the moment presents a credibility challenge. The problem is not when people ask you what *will* happen with Brexit. Journalists are not clairvoyants and shouldn't try to be. In a moment as volatile and fragile as this, we should devote our energies to being descriptive rather than predictive. Not least because journalists have proved to be pretty poor at predicting anything of late. Those who did not foresee the rise of the Labour Party's Jeremy Corbyn or Donald Trump's taking the White House or Britain's voting to leave the European Union probably aren't the ones you want to rely on to figure out what will happen next.

The problem occurs when they ask you what *is* happening. That we should know. But the truth is nobody can really tell you. The polity is too fractured, the leaders too weak, the margins too narrow, the permutations too many, the strategies too contingent, the imaginations too barren, the parties too undisciplined, the redlines too numerous, and the egos too large to offer a plausible account. Individual actors can tell you their lines, but the consequent drama that unfolds is unfathomable in real time.

Prime Minister Theresa May keeps presenting her Brexit proposal in what is called a meaningful vote, which only gets more meaningless each time it is rejected. She also invites the opposition for talks, insisting that this is the only way forward. But during these discussions, she apparently concedes nothing of value, ensuring that they break down. Parliament keeps holding indicative votes, which are not binding, and are unable to get a majority for any of them. And then we go to Brussels and ask the EU for more time, seemingly because we think there may yet be new ways to make ourselves look stupid. In April, after Britain was granted an extension until October 31 to figure out what it wanted, European Council president Donald Tusk warned, "Please do not waste this time." Then Parliament duly took an 11-day Easter break.

Since the Brexit referendum, Britain has been a convenient target for continental derision, for good reason: We look ridiculous. But two paradoxes are emerging that should give both Euro-

philes and Europhobes pause for thought. The first is that while Brexit is a folly particular to Britain, in most other pertinent ways relating to what made Brexit possible, Britain is not as different from the rest of Europe as most Europeans would like to think. We may be the worst affected by this sickness thus far, but it is highly contagious.

The second is that the Brexiteers have done such a poor strategic job of capitalizing on their referendum victory. While they have buoyed Euroskeptic, far-right, and anti-immigrant forces across the continent, they have also given leaving the EU such a bad name that nobody who wants to be taken seriously is likely to try it again anytime soon.

At the end of May, we will have elections to the European Parliament, a mainly advisory and consultative body but the only piece of direct democracy the European Union can claim. If the polls are anything to go by, far-right parties will do well from Finland to Italy. Fascism is not only a mainstream ideology again in Europe;

the presence of fascists in government is now a banal fact of life across the continent.

The xenophobia, racism, and bigotry that contributed to Brexit and have certainly grown since the vote are by no means unique to Britain. Electorally at least, they have been less pronounced in Britain than elsewhere. Across Europe, traditional political parties have crumbled while far-right parties have grown. In Spain, the upstart Vox seems poised to become the first far-right party to gain more than a single seat in the Cortes Generales since the death of fascist dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

Recent soccer matches have increasingly seen racist incidents. In Italy jeering was so bad that players implored their own fans to stop. In Montenegro the Union of European Football Associations president called racist chants against England's players "a disaster." And in Germany



The problem occurs when they ask you what is happening. That we should know. But the truth is nobody can really tell you.

fans yelled Nazi slogans at their national team's players of African and Turkish descent. Meanwhile, anti-Semitic attacks are up throughout the continent, with a 74 percent increase in reported offenses in France and a 60 percent rise in violent anti-Semitic attacks in Germany from 2017 to 2018.

These far-right groups have always mixed their antipathy toward immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, Muslims, nonwhite people, and Jews with a general contempt for the European project, which they blame for diluting their national character. The irony is that, thanks to Brexit, leaving the EU can no longer be bandied about as a vague threat. People can look at Britain—clueless, hapless, bold in its announcement that it would leave but now sheepish in its capacity to actually go—and think,

“Whatever else it is we want, we don't want that.”

As such, Brexit is not just a tragedy for Britain; it is a disaster for the continent. The EU is in desperate need of the kind of reform that will make it more democratic, transparent, responsive, and engaged. Britain's petulant and erratic behavior over Brexit has not just made it look bad; it has made the EU look far more coherent, popular, and impressive than it deserves. The project of European unity faces serious threats that it is, at present, ill-equipped to deal with.

Winston Churchill is one of many credited with the saying “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” In Brexit, Britain first created a crisis for itself and is now wasting whatever good could have come out of it for the rest of Europe. ■

The EU is in desperate need of the kind of reform that will make it more democratic, transparent, responsive, and engaged.

SNAPSHOT

In Flames

A monstrous fire engulfed the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris on April 15, 2019. No one was killed, but the spire of the 850-year-old cathedral collapsed, and two-thirds of its roof was destroyed. Experts say the building remains structurally sound, and France has vowed to rebuild.

WELCOME HERMAN CAIN

Calvin Trillin
Deadline Poet

The late-night comics make it plain
They're thrilled to have back Herman Cain—
Reminding us of days more sane,
When folks like Herman would campaign
For posts we knew they'd not obtain—
Existing just to entertain,
Not win by fluke, and therefore gain
The White House for a four-year reign
That pulls the country down the drain.



FIXING THE MEDIA'S

*Journalists are writing
a new playbook for
a 1.5°C world.*

by MARK HERTSGAARD
and KYLE POPE

LAST SUMMER, DURING THE DEADLIEST WILDFIRE SEASON IN CALIFORNIA'S HISTORY, MSNBC's Chris Hayes got into a revealing Twitter discussion about why US television doesn't much cover climate change. Elon Green, an editor at *Longform*, had tweeted, "Sure would be nice if our news networks—the only outlets that can force change in this country—would cover it with commensurate urgency." Hayes (who is an editor at large for *The Nation*) replied that his program had tried. Which was true: In 2016, *All In With Chris Hayes* spent an entire week highlighting the impact of climate change in the US as part of a look at the issues that Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were ignoring. The problem, Hayes tweeted, was that "every single time we've covered [climate change] it's been a palpable ratings killer. So the incentives are not great."

The Twittersphere pounced. "TV used to be obligated to put on programming for the public good even if it didn't get good ratings. What happened to that?" asked @JThomasAlbert. @GalJaya said, "Your 'ratings killer' argument against covering #climatechange is the reverse of that used during the 2016 primary when corporate media justified gifting Trump \$5 billion in free air time because 'it was good for ratings,' with disastrous results for the nation."

When @mikebaird17 urged Hayes to invite Katharine Hayhoe of Texas Tech University, one of the best climate-science communicators around, onto his show, she tweeted that *All In* had canceled on her twice—once when "I was literally in the studio w[ith] the earpiece in my ear"—and so she wouldn't waste any more time on it.

"Wait, we did that?" Hayes tweeted back. "I'm very very sorry that happened."

This spring Hayes redeemed himself, airing perhaps the best coverage on American television yet of the Green New Deal. *All In* devoted its entire March 29 broadcast to analyzing the congressional resolution, co-sponsored by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Senator Ed Markey (D-MA), which outlines a plan to mobilize the United States to stave off climate disaster and, in the process, create millions of

green jobs. In a shrewd answer to the ratings challenge, Hayes booked Ocasio-Cortez, the most charismatic US politician of the moment, for the entire hour.

Yet at a time when civilization is accelerating toward disaster, climate silence continues to reign across the bulk of the US news media. Especially on television, where most Americans still get their news, the brutal demands of ratings and money work against adequate coverage of the biggest story of our time. Many newspapers, too, are failing the climate test. Last October, the scientists of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a landmark report, warning that humanity had a mere 12 years to radically slash greenhouse-gas emissions or face a calamitous future in which hundreds of millions of people worldwide would go hungry or homeless or worse. Only 22 of the 50 biggest newspapers in the United States covered that report.

Instead of sleepwalking us toward disaster, the US news media need to remember their Paul Revere responsibilities—to awaken, inform, and rouse the people to action. To that end, *The Nation* and the *Columbia Journalism Review* hereby announce *Covering Climate Change: A New Playbook for a 1.5-Degree World*, a project aimed at dramatically improving US media coverage of the climate crisis. When the IPCC scientists issued their 12-year warning, they said that limiting temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius would require radically transforming energy, agriculture, transportation, construction, and other core sectors of the global economy. Our project is grounded in the conviction that the news sector must be transformed just as radically. This article is intended as a white paper, offering initial thoughts on how that can be done.

The project will launch on April 30 with a conference at the Columbia School of Journalism in New York City—a working forum where journalists will gather to start charting a new course. We envision this event as the beginning of a conversation that America's journalists and news organizations must have with one another, as well as with the public we are supposed to be serving, about how to cover this rapidly uncoiling emergency. Judging by the climate coverage to date, most of the US news media still don't get grasp the seriousness of this issue. There is a runaway train racing toward us, and its name is climate change. That is not alarmism; it is scientific fact. We as a civilization urgently need to slow that train down and help as many people off the tracks as possible. It's an enormous challenge, and if we don't get it right, nothing else will

"Every single time we've covered [climate change] it's been a palpable ratings killer. So the incentives are not great."

—Chris Hayes of MSNBC

CLIMATE FAILURE





matter. The US news media, to their great discredit, have played a big part in getting it wrong for many years. It's past time to make amends.

You can't solve a problem by ignoring it. Moderators did not ask presidential candidates a single question about climate change during the three prime-time general-election debates in 2016—or in 2012 or 2008 or ever. News stories about Hurricane Maria's devastation of Puerto Rico, this spring's floods in the Midwest, and other extreme-weather events almost never mention climate change, though scientists have been drawing the connection for decades. Instead, human-interest fluff prevails. In an 18-month period, TV and print outlets gave 40 times more coverage to the Kardashians than to the acidification of oceans caused by rising temperatures, according to a 2012 report by the press watchdog Media Matters.

This journalistic failure has given rise to a calamitous public ignorance, which in turn has enabled politicians and corporations to avoid action. According to polls by Pew and others, as recently as the 2016 presidential race, only half of the people in this country said they thought that climate change was occurring and was attributable to human activities, and only 27 percent said they knew that almost all climate scientists held this view. The other half of the population said climate change was either not happening or was a result of natural cycles. This 50-50 split has existed since at least 2006, the polls indicate. By December 2018, the number of Americans who said they were "somewhat worried" about climate change had risen to 69 percent, in part because many had now experienced its effects. Still, only 29 percent said they were "very worried," though "very worried" is exactly how most climate scientists have long felt.

Must it be this way? Is climate change too depressing to fit the happy-talk tone of most TV news? Has the gutting of newsrooms made it too logistically demanding a story to cover? Or are there deeper forces and habits at work?

US media have a history of covering the incremental at the expense of the immense and of coddling rather than confronting corporate power. If there is a media lesson to be drawn from the Trump years, it is that most of the profound problems of the United States—the ingrained racism, the xenophobia, the rank sexism—have been percolating for years, unnoticed by much of the American press; it took a singularly racist, sexist, xenophobic leader to finally force the media to reckon with the stew that had long been simmering.

Without a serious and immediate correction, the press will continue down the same path with climate change, except this time the implications are exponentially greater. Surely, it can do better.

The urgent question is how: What are the climate stories that will resonate with viewers, listeners, and readers? What do those stories look like, concretely, and how can they be different from a status quo that is clearly failing? And even if journalists can figure out a new climate-coverage playbook, can they surmount the widespread public distrust of the press and the budget cut-

backs that are ravaging newsrooms across the country?

The Nation and the *Columbia Journalism Review* were inspired to ask these questions by a piece that Margaret Sullivan, the media columnist at *The Washington Post*, wrote last fall. She was responding to that landmark IPCC report, *Global Warming of 1.5°C*, which warned that the previously accepted target of climate policy—limiting the temperature rise to 2°C above the preindustrial level—was far more dangerous than realized. The IPCC scientists warned that new research and real-world observations, such as the unexpectedly rapid melting of polar ice and sea-level rise, dictated a 1.5°C limit instead. Over the next 11 years, global emissions of carbon dioxide must therefore fall by a staggering 45 percent on the way to net zero by 2050. The challenge is technologically feasible and economically affordable, the scientists added, though

there is "no documented historical precedent" for the scale of the changes required.

Sullivan, a former *New York Times* public editor whose *Post* column has become a critical watchdog for American journalism, articulated the challenge this way:

Just as the world, especially the United States, needs radical change to mitigate the coming crisis, so too for the news media.... This subject must be kept front and center, with the

pressure on and the stakes made abundantly clear at every turn.... Just as the smartest minds in earth science have issued their warning, the best minds in media should be giving sustained attention to how to tell this most important story in a way that will create change.

So how would the media do that? And *can* they do it? The answer to both of these questions requires returning to the one that Hayes and his Twitter critics were debating: Why haven't the media been covering the climate crisis thus far?

JUDGED STRICTLY ON JOURNALISTIC GROUNDS, climate change is a great story. Bill McKibben, who published the first mass-market book on the subject, *The End of Nature*, 30 years ago and who remains the most knowledgeable reporter on the beat, said that climate change is "an exciting story filled with drama and conflict. It's what journalism was made for." The struggle between the fossil-fuel industry and its opponents—a fight he joined as an activist when he co-founded the grassroots group 350.org in 2008—offers compelling characters and eye-catching visuals, not to mention high political and economic stakes: Witness the sit-in last November at House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office that spotlighted



Climate devastation: A girl walks alongside houses destroyed by Hurricane Irma in Isabela de Sagua, Cuba.

In an 18-month period, TV and print outlets gave 40 times more coverage to the Kardashians than to the acidification of the oceans caused by rising temperatures.

the Green New Deal. For years, the fight to respond to climate change has been the sort of David-and-Goliath story the press would normally love: oil-company CEOs and compliant legislators on the one hand, earnest environmentalists on the other. And yet it is a fight that has gotten only sporadic, mainly simplistic coverage.

Meanwhile, climate change touches virtually every beat in the newsroom, meaning that nearly every journalist has something to contribute to its coverage. For business reporters: Mark Carney, the governor of the Bank of England, has been warning for years that climate change could tank the world economy if the scientific imperative of leaving most remaining fossil fuels in the ground leaves investors holding trillions of dollars in “stranded assets.” For the national-security beat: Military leaders, in the US and abroad, have warned that drought, sea-level rise, and other climate impacts are threat multipliers that increase the likelihood of armed conflict and even nuclear war. Food production, human health, immigration, even the viability of baseball in increasingly hot summers—climate change touches nearly every aspect of American life and every facet of the American press.

All of which is to say that the failure of news organizations to adequately cover the story is structural rather than the fault of environmental-beat reporters or climate experts. If anything, those journalists are the drum-beating exceptions to the news industry’s problem. The shortfall is everywhere else, as newsroom managers have failed to see the climate crisis as fundamental, all-encompassing, and worthy of attention from every journalist on their payrolls.

It is our great misfortune to live at a time when the global peril of climate change coincides with a structural undermining of the media’s economic ability to cover a story of this magnitude. Newsroom budgets and staffs are being slashed. Specialized-beat reporters, who tend to be the most expensive, are being cut. Assignment editors rely too much on Twitter, a lazy habit that tends to work against a story like climate change, which requires a longer view and a willingness to challenge the pack.

Some of the best media coverage of climate change has come from local TV weathercasters, who are increasingly using their expertise to educate audiences about the science and what it means for their communities. “There has been a sea change in our profession in the past few years,” said Dan Satterfield, a meteorologist with WBOC in eastern Maryland who has been doing TV weather reporting for 39 years. “There are still a few of my colleagues around the country who’ve been explicitly ordered by management not to mention climate change on the air, but the vast majority of us no longer doubt the scientific reality of climate change, and we communicate that to our audiences.” Satterfield works at a Fox- and CBS-affiliated station, and he said his ratings are “number one in our market.”

For some time now, by far the best daily reporting on



Clueless in chief: President Donald Trump, who denies man-made climate change, gestures at maps of Hurricane Michael in 2018.

US media have a history of covering the incremental at the expense of the immense and of coddling rather than confronting corporate power.

climate change has come from *The Guardian*, which covers the science, politics, economics, and health aspects throughout the world with great force and clarity (and recently started putting global CO₂ levels in its weather reports). At *The Washington Post*, Chris Mooney provides authoritative, timely coverage of the most important advances in climate science. *The New York Times* has distinguished itself with multimedia presentations, including stunning visuals of ice sheets melting in Greenland captured by a drone-lofted camera.

But US journalism’s climate coverage cannot be judged solely by the work over the past few years at a few prestige outlets. Coastal elites may read the *Post* and the *Times*, but the American news media’s center of gravity remains the television networks and their local affiliates, whose audiences and political influence dwarf those of other outlets.

The sad fact is that the US media as a whole and television in particular have downplayed and distorted the climate story from the beginning, with devastating consequences. A big part of the reason our civilization today faces the prospect of extinction is that we have waited so long to take action, not least because the media left the public and policy-makers misinformed about the threat and its solutions. When the media weren’t ignoring the story, they were being suckered into misrepresenting it as a matter more of political opinion than of scientific fact. These failures were the climate equivalent of the journalistic derelictions that helped elevate Trump to the presidency in 2016: an obsession with political infighting over substance and policy; a false equivalence of points of view, even when one of them was dubious or downright false; and a tendency to let a vocal, extreme minority define the debate, notwithstanding the facts.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL DANGER OF BURNING FOSSIL fuels has been clear since 1988, when NASA scientist James Hansen testified before the US Senate that man-made global warming had begun and, if unchecked, would trigger destructive heat waves, droughts, and sea-level rises. *The New York Times* put the news on its front page, leading other outlets to follow up. *Time* named “Endangered Earth” as its “Planet of the Year” in 1988. Politicians responded as well: Running for president the same



year, George H.W. Bush pledged to combat the greenhouse effect with “the White House effect.”

Had this journalistic and political trend continued, the earth likely would be facing a very different future today. Instead, the media lost interest in the story and, when they did cover it, fell victim to fossil-fuel-industry propaganda. With both scientific literacy and political courage in short supply in too many US newsrooms, the coverage of climate change declined in volume and quality. As a result, politicians felt no pressure to act, and the emissions kept climbing. Of all the greenhouse-gas emissions now overheating the oceans and atmosphere, 41 percent have occurred since 1990. In other words, even after being warned by NASA, we made the climate problem nearly twice as bad, in part because the media did not do what Sullivan urges today: keep the issue “front and center, with the pressure on and the stakes made abundantly clear at every turn.”

Perhaps the media’s most damaging climate-change error has been to cover a science story as if it were a politics story. Beginning in the early 1990s, US print and broadcast outlets repeatedly presented climate-change stories and on-air debates as a disagreement between two equally valid viewpoints: one from a scientist who affirmed the consensus articulated by the vast majority of peer-reviewed studies, the other from a contrarian who disputed that consensus and, in many cases, was funded by fossil-fuel interests, though rarely was that association known or disclosed.

For example, a *Washington Post* article on March 28, 1995, asserted a “lack of international consensus on the causes and hazards of global warming” and quoted Piers Corbyn, a British weather forecaster (and, coincidentally, the brother of future Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn), who predicted that the theory of man-made climate change “will probably be regarded as the biggest scientific gaffe of the [20th] century.” From 1988 to 2002, 53 percent of the news stories about climate change in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times* “gave ‘roughly equal attention’ to the view that humans were contributing to global warming, and the other view that exclusively natural fluctuations could explain the earth’s temperature increase,” concluded an analysis of 3,543 newspaper articles published in the peer-reviewed journal *Global Environmental Change*.

“I think I know why people still think [climate change] is open to debate. Because on TV, it is.”

—John Oliver, on *Last Week Tonight*

Demanding action: Environmental activists occupy the office of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi.



News outlets defended their approach by citing the journalistic need for fairness, though in fact they were being fair to neither the science nor their audiences. John Oliver hilariously skewered this false balance in 2014 on HBO’s *Last Week Tonight*. “I think I know why people still think this issue is open to debate,” he said. “Because on TV, it is.” He then presented what he called the only “mathematically fair” way to depict the climate debate by cramming 97 scientists onto his set, surrounding three deniers.

OF ALL THE REASONS FOR THIS JOURNALISTIC FAILURE, perhaps the most decisive is also the most nefarious: For decades, ExxonMobil and the rest of the fossil-fuel industry deliberately deceived the press and thereby the public. Just as the tobacco industry, beginning in the 1960s, lied about the dangers of smoking and deployed a public-relations strategy dubbed “Doubt is our product,” so the fossil-fuel industry began lying in the 1990s about its product’s dangers. And it relied on the same public-relations strategies and tactics—even the same scientists—that Big Tobacco used. The goal was to “reposition global warming as theory (not fact),” in the words of a corporate planning document leaked to the Sierra Club.

But the fossil-fuel industry’s lies succeeded only because US news organizations swallowed the industry’s propaganda and regurgitated it as supposedly objective news. The result was to mislead the American people and their elected representatives about the perils of climate change and to blunt any sense of urgency about reacting. In his new book, *Falter*, McKibben calls it “the most consequential cover-up in human history.”

Although the industry’s disinformation campaign was exposed in 2015 by *InsideClimate News* and also by the *Los Angeles Times* and the Columbia School of Journalism, most of the rest of the media have not reckoned with their decades of culpability. It’s not as if they weren’t warned. The “reposition as theory (not fact)” memo first appeared in *The New York Times* in 1991. Writing in *Vanity Fair* in 2006, Mark Hertsgaard, a co-author of this article, exposed the tobacco connection to climate denial, revealing that physicist Frederick Seitz received \$45 million in funding from the R.J. Reynolds company to obscure smoking’s risks and then, with funding from fossil-fuel companies, became the highest-profile climate denier in the US, penning op-eds for *The Wall Street Journal* and other leading news outlets. In 2010, historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway published *Merchants of Doubt*, a comprehensive takedown of the industry’s deceptions.

Few US news outlets still apply false equivalence to climate science today, but the underlying error—treating climate change as a political dispute rather than a scientific reality—continues to undermine coverage. As Carlos Maza of *Vox* points out in a video titled “Why you still don’t understand the Green New Deal,” mainstream reporting has failed spectacularly to perform the essential journalistic task of describing what a Green New Deal would actually do: mobilize the US government and economy to fight climate change by retooling energy, transportation,

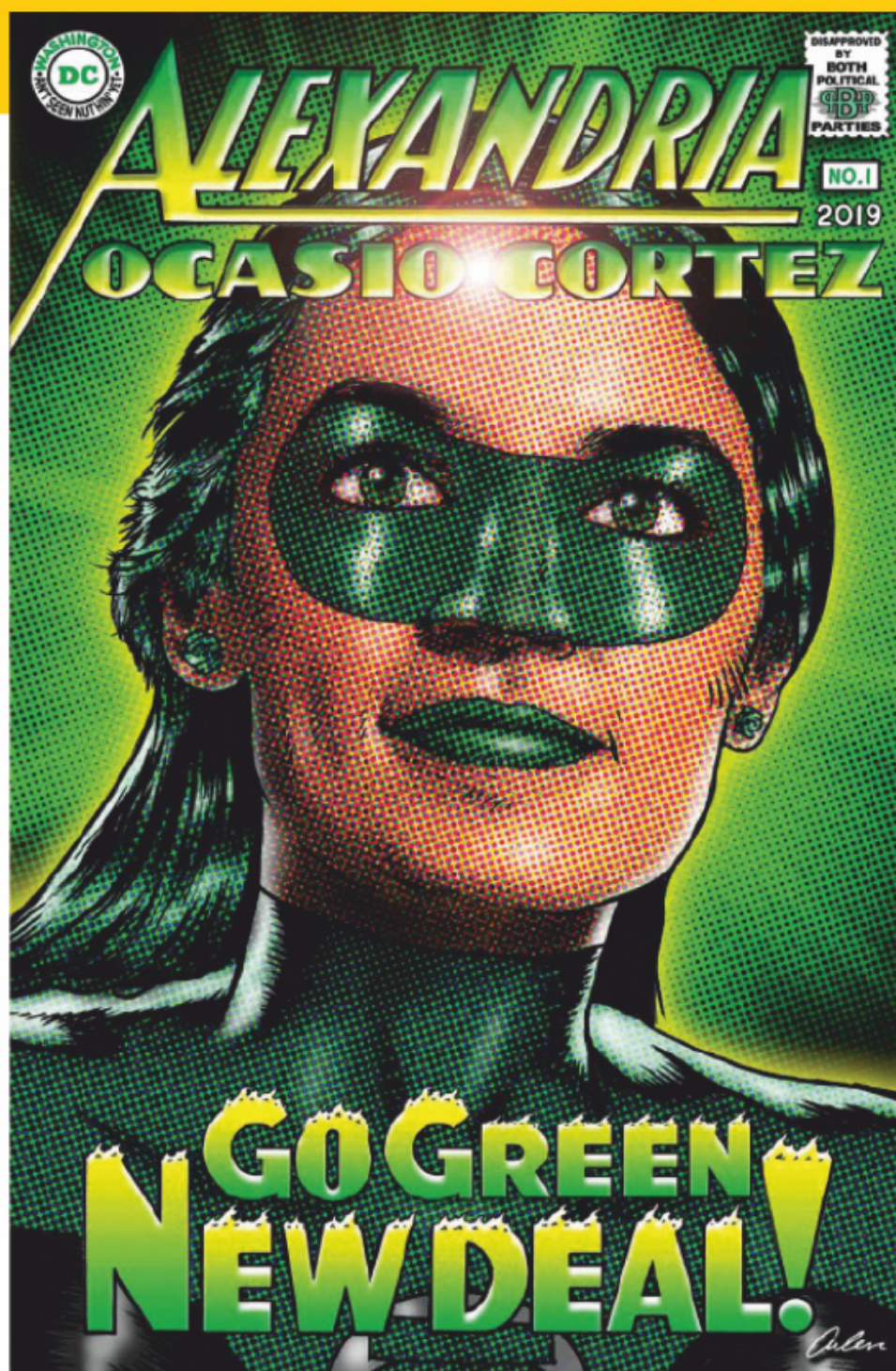
agriculture, and other sectors to create millions of jobs and business opportunities, much as the New Deal of the 1930s countered the Great Depression.

Maza's video shows clip after clip of network-TV coverage that instead obsessed about what a Green New Deal would mean for Democratic and Republican prospects on Capitol Hill and in the 2020 presidential race. "Did Democrats give Republicans a huge 2020 gift?" asks Erin Burnett on CNN. "Are you concerned the perception of the Democratic Party is going to move too far to the left?" *Meet the Press* host Chuck Todd asks Tom Perez, the chair of the Democratic National Committee, on NBC. Such coverage, Maza explains, was an example of "tactical framing, an approach...that focuses on strategy and polling rather than a policy's substantive benefits." Citing research by media scholars Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Capella, Maza adds that tactical framing not only deprives the public of the information needed to be informed voters but also "increases audiences' cynicism" that the policy under discussion will be implemented.

Most Green New Deal coverage has also ignored climate science, failing to explain that, at this late date, a crash program to decarbonize is the only hope for keeping the temperature rise near 1.5°C. As a result, the Green New Deal's critics—notably Trump and congressional Republicans—have been able to act as if that scientific imperative doesn't exist. When Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell declared on March 26 that he believed in man-made climate change, most news coverage reported his remark credulously, without pressing McConnell for an explanation of this sudden reversal after decades of denial. Nor are Green New Deal critics being asked the other question that science demands: If you don't like the Green New Deal, then what is your plan to achieve the rapid decarbonization that science says is necessary for human survival?

IF 1.5°C IS THE NEW LIMIT FOR A HABITABLE PLANET, how can newsrooms tell that story in ways that will finally resonate with their audiences? And given journalism's deeply troubled business model, how can such coverage be paid for? Some preliminary suggestions:

§ **Follow the leaders.** The fastest way to catch up is



Green Lantern of hope: AOC has become a superhero among climate-change activists.

Mainstream reporting has failed to describe what a Green New Deal would actually do.

to emulate outlets that are already covering climate change well. You can't do better than *The Guardian*, which has been running incisive stories and commentary for years. It has a team of nine full-time reporters and editors who focus on climate developments in Europe, the US, and the rest of the world. Part of the reason *The Guardian* can afford to do so is that its journalism is subsidized by a trust, freeing it of the business-model tensions faced by most other major news outlets. So one urgent question remains: If more news organizations are going to do justice to the story of climate change, how can such coverage be funded? Foundations like Knight, Ford, McCormick, and Emerson Collective are rightly increasing their support for local news organizations across the country. Other foundations should join this effort and earmark budgets for climate coverage at the local level.

Meanwhile, for broadcast outlets, Hayes's Green New Deal special is worth studying. One can quarrel with the producers' decision to stage the discussion in an auditorium crammed with hundreds of Ocasio-Cortez's fans, but Hayes did an admirable job of explaining what the proposal is and isn't and what stakes are involved. The congresswoman shared the stage for almost the entire program and did not disappoint, telling Hayes that she expected Republicans to attack her plan, but "didn't expect them to make total fools of themselves" by falsely claiming that a Green New Deal would mean the end of cows. Each segment of the hour featured two additional guests who discussed the substantive elements of a Green New Deal, including how the policy would affect economic inequality and the politics of getting it implemented.

These aspects of the *All In* special—knowing the science, focusing on substance, attracting eyeballs without being frivolous—coexisted with something that almost never happens in climate coverage: The talking heads were overwhelmingly people of color, and half were women. It's a sad truism that the impacts of climate change punish nonwhite, nonmale, nonaffluent people the most, yet this point is rarely made in mainstream coverage, in part because the coverage is dominated by white men.

§ **Don't blame the audience, and listen to the kids.** The onus is on news organizations to craft the

story in ways that will demand the attention of readers and viewers. The specifics of how to do this will vary depending on whether a given outlet works in text, radio, TV, or some other medium and whether it is commercially or publicly funded, but the core challenge is the same. A majority of Americans are interested in climate change and want to hear what can be done about it. This is especially true of the younger people that news organizations covet as an audience. Even most young Republicans want climate action. And no one is speaking with more clarity now than Greta Thunberg, Alexandria Villaseñor, and the other teenagers who have rallied hundreds of thousands of people into the streets worldwide for the School Strike 4 Climate demonstrations.

§ **Establish a diverse climate desk, but don't silo climate coverage.** The climate story is too important and multidimensional for a news outlet not to have a designated team covering it. That team must have members who reflect the economic, racial, and gender diversity of America; if not, the coverage will miss crucial aspects of the story and fail to connect with important audiences.

You can't do justice to the climate crisis if you don't understand the scientific facts, in particular how insanely late the hour already is.

At the same time, climate change is so far-reaching that connections should be made when reporting on nearly every topic. For example, an economics reporter could partner with a climate reporter to cover the case for a just transition: the need to help workers and communities that have long relied on fossil fuel, such as the coal regions of Appalachia, transition to a clean-energy economy, as the Green New Deal envisions.

§ **Learn the science.** Many journalists have long had a bias toward the conceptual. But you can't do justice to the climate crisis if

you don't understand the scientific facts, in particular how insanely late the hour is. At this point, anyone suggesting a leisurely approach to slashing emissions is not taking the science seriously. Make the time to get educated. Four recent books—McKibben's *Falter*, Naomi Klein's *On Fire*, David Wallace-Wells's *The Uninhabitable Earth*, and Jeff Goodell's *The Water Will Come*—are good places to start.

§ **Don't internalize the spin.** Not only do most Americans care about climate change, but an overwhelming majority support a Green New Deal—81 percent of registered voters said so as of last December, according to Yale climate pollsters. Trump and Fox don't like the Green New Deal? Fine. But journalists should report that the rest of America does. Likewise, they should not buy the argument that supporting a Green New Deal is a terrible political risk that will play into the hands of Trump and the GOP; nor should the media give credence to wild assertions about what a Green New Deal would do or cost. The data simply do not support such accusations. But breaking free from this ideological trap requires another step.

(continued on page 21)

SLEEPING WITH THE

Why are *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* creating ads for Big Oil?

by AMY WESTERVELT

THE LATE HERB SCHMERTZ WAS A PUBLIC-RELATIONS LEGEND, a dedicated oil man who revolutionized the way his industry and other corporations manipulate American news, public opinion, and government policy. As a senior PR executive for Mobil, Schmertz pioneered what he called the op-ad. Beginning in October 1970, Mobil paid *The New York Times* to publish regular op-ed articles, written by the oil company, in which it delivered its views on energy, the environment, and other issues of the day. In a 1991 interview revealed here for the first time, Schmertz explained: "Everything we did was organized as if it was one big political campaign." The goal of the campaign, Schmertz continued, "was to win elections also. On public-policy issues."

And win they did. By 1983, Schmertz and his colleagues in Mobil's press office were privately congratulating themselves on how their advertorials had shifted *The New York Times*' editorial positions. There has been a "substantial change in The New York Times editorials over the years toward the very positions we have argued," the Mobil PR team crowed in an internal report uncovered by the nonprofit Climate Investigations Center. "Of course, we can't prove a direct relationship," the team added. But that was the goal, Schmertz confirmed in the 1991 interview, saying it was "part of the political campaign."

Schmertz's influence lives on in the increasingly common practice of US news organizations featuring content prepared by and with oil companies and other large corporations. Known as native advertising, branded content, or sponsored content, it looks and sounds like genuine news, even as it provides a one-sided, corporate-friendly take on climate change, clean energy, or other issues. And these days,



PR legend: Mobil's Herb Schmertz was Big Oil's greatest propagandist.

the oil companies don't even have to produce the content themselves. Numerous top news organizations—including the *Times*, *Politico*, and *The Washington Post*—have pocketed hundreds of thousands of dollars from ExxonMobil, Shell, Chevron, and organizations such as the American Petroleum Institute to create the companies' advertorials.

Call it greenwashing with a twist—the twist being that the fossil-fuel companies' claims of good corporate citizenship are now being supported by respected news organizations. At a time when the same news organizations must dramatically improve their coverage of the climate crisis (see Mark Hertsgaard and Kyle Pope's article in this issue), such a financial relationship with the very companies that are helping drive the crisis is problematic at best. Journalistic catechism commands a strict division between the

Amy Westervelt is a journalist who reports for and hosts the podcast Drilled.

THE (GREENWASHING) ENEMY

...the problems are
comparable to Japan's
After a long, in-
credit-backed boom,
first for Japan in the
1980s, the Japanese
government's reluctance to
reduce its indebtedness
has contributed to decades of
stagnant growth.

Environment Host

Executive Decisions

That's the title of our new Monday morning companion of interesting news. Also in the business pages, today and Tuesday, are the activities of...

...the problems are comparable to Japan's After a long, in-credit-backed boom, first for Japan in the 1980s, the Japanese government's reluctance to reduce its indebtedness has contributed to decades of stagnant growth.

Late Edition

Today, periodic rain, thunderstorms, breezy, high 63. Tonight, showers, thunderstorms, breezy, low 58. To-
morrow, showers, high 73.

New York Times

In the process, California is not only fighting to protect its legacy of sweeping environmental protection, but also holding itself out as a model to other states — and to nations — on how to fight climate change.

...the problems are comparable to Japan's After a long, in-credit-backed boom, first for Japan in the 1980s, the Japanese government's reluctance to reduce its indebtedness has contributed to decades of stagnant growth.

THURSDAY, STYLES D1-8

NEW YORK, APR. 25

AL 118-20

business and editorial sides of a news organization. In an era when revenue losses are leading to draconian staffing cuts in newsrooms across the country, it strains credulity to believe that any news outlet can receive hundreds of thousands of dollars in outside funding and not be influenced, if only unconsciously. After all, as Schmertz and his colleagues confided, Mobil achieved that influence by the 1980s, long before the revenue crisis struck American journalism.

I asked the *Times*, the *Post*, *Politico*, and *Axios* to respond to this critique of their collaboration with corporate greenwashing: How do they keep their lucrative production of advertorials for oil companies from affecting their news coverage and editorial positions? (I also asked CNN how it ensures that oil-industry ads that run before segments on climate change don't counterbalance its reporting.) Only the *Post* replied, saying, "All sponsored content is clearly labeled as advertising and includes the name of the advertiser. *The Washington Post* newsroom is not involved in the creation of this content."

This is a fairly standard response from news outlets about this practice, but the *Post* explicitly advertises its newsroom as part of what makes its Brand Studio valuable. On the Brand Studio home page, the sell is: "We apply the Washington Post's award-winning investigative lens and a deep understanding of our audience to create compelling multimedia stories—from concept to production to distribution."

Schmertz's recollections suggest that companies do end up exercising influence over news organizations' internal decisions and public product. The companies are too shrewd to do this in any obvious way. Instead, Schmertz had the genius idea of funding *Masterpiece Theatre* on PBS to foster an "affinity-of-purpose," creating a positive impression of his company in the minds of policy-makers and the public by associating Mobil with high culture.

PBS has downplayed Schmertz's and Mobil's role in the series, but Schmertz revealed in the 1991 interview that he, in fact, had a lot of "hands-on" control. "Nobody was going to spend Mobil's money but me," he said. When the interviewer said, "[British producers] told me you had script approval, casting approval, producer and director," Schmertz replied, "That's true." He also had a hand in selecting individual shows for *Masterpiece Theatre* and later for Mobil Showcase, a group of TV stations that was assembled, he said, for the sole purpose of putting "material into commercial television that would enable us to have a vehicle for the advertisements we wanted to

run." He chose to use journalists rather than actors as the hosts for Mobil-funded shows because, he said, "actors don't really have as much credibility as journalists."

THese days, media outlets aren't even trying to hide such cozy arrangements with oil companies. *The New York Times*' campaign highlighting ExxonMobil's algae-based biofuels, created by the *Times*' T Brand Studio, was featured on the studio's website and ran across the *Times*' site. "The Future of Energy? It May Come From Where You Least Expect," the story proclaims. And: "How scientists are tapping algae and plant waste to fuel a sustainable energy future." In late February, Shell's social-media team tweeted proudly about the company's Sky Scenario campaign, which promotes "potential pathways" for getting to an emissions-free world by 2070 (far too late, by most scientists' reckoning) while nevertheless keeping fossil fuels in the mix: "Sky Scenario shows a challenging but technically possible pathway to a cleaner future. Read our paid post on @nytimes created in partnership with @TBrandStudio. #MakeTheFuture."

As if guided by Schmertz, these advertorials aren't so crass as to spout outright nonsense like "Climate change isn't happening." No, they suggest "solutions" that would just so happen to keep fossil-fuel companies profitable—and the climate spinning out of control—for decades to come. The *Post* created an advertorial for the American Petroleum Institute that asserted the importance of natural gas as a bridge fuel in the transition to clean energy. Never mind that science now recognizes that natural gas is even worse for the climate than coal because gas production invariably leaks methane, which is up to 86 times as potent as carbon dioxide when it comes to trapping heat.

Corporate PR influence campaigns "don't focus on mass public opinion—they say they influence the influencers," observed Robert Brulle, a professor of sociology and environmental science at Drexel University.

This is why, his research shows, the fossil-fuel industry's spending on advertising, PR, and lobbying rises and falls depending on which politicians are in office and how

much of a perceived threat there is to industry profits. Thus, spending spiked in the run-up to the UN climate negotiations for the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and fell once Republicans held a majority in the Senate. Spending rose again during Barack Obama's presidency, then dropped to almost nothing. Brulle says it's logical to expect a ramp-up in spending in response to the Green New Deal.

Advertising may be a necessity for privately owned news organizations, but the press's primary responsibility is to the public. Imagine that US news outlets were still running advertisements for the tobacco industry—and not only running them but creating them, despite the well-known dangers of smoking. In 2019, the dangers of climate change are no less well-known. Why, then, are some of the country's most prominent news organizations lending their prestige to greenwashing by companies whose business plans, if executed, would spell the end of civilization as we know it?

Big Oil's advertorials propose "solutions" that would actually keep the climate spinning out of control.

The new PR: Unlike Mobil's past op-ads, today's advertorials are created by news companies themselves.

Science: what we know and don't know

As the debate over climate change heats up, science is being upstaged by the call for solutions. At stake is a complex issue with many questions. Some things we know for certain. Others are far from certain.

First, we know greenhouse gases account for more than one percent of Earth's atmosphere. The ability of these gases to trap heat and warm Earth is an important part of the climate system because it makes our planet habitable. Greenhouse gases consist largely of water vapor, with smaller amounts of carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane and nitrous oxide and traces of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs).

The focus of concern is CO₂. While most of the CO₂ emitted by far is the result of natural phenomena—namely respiration and decomposition, most attention has centered on the three to four percent related to human activities—burning of fossil fuels, deforestation. The amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has risen in the last 100 years, leading scientists to conclude that the increase is a result of human activities.

Although the linkage between the greenhouse gases and global warming is one factor, other variables could be much more important in the climate system than emissions produced by man.

The UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) thought it had found the magic bullet when it concluded that the one-degree Fahrenheit rise in global temperatures over the past century may bear a "fingerprint" of human activity. The fingerprint soon blurred when an IPCC lead author conceded to the "uncertainty inherent in computer climate modeling."

Nevertheless, nations at Kyoto are being asked to embrace proposals that could have potentially huge impacts on economies and lifestyles. Nations are being urged to cut emissions without knowing either the severity of the problem—or that it, will Earth's temperature increase over the next 50-100 years?—or the efficacy of the solution—will cutting CO₂ emissions reduce the problem?

Within a decade, science is likely to provide more answers on what factors affect global warming, thereby improving our decision-making. We just don't have this information today.

Answers to questions on climate change will require using satellite measurements of temperatures at many places on Earth, better understanding of clouds and ocean currents along with greater computer power.

The process shouldn't be short-circuited to satisfy artificial deadlines, like the conference in Kyoto. Whatever effect increased concentrations of man-made gases may have, it will develop slowly over decades. Thus, there is time for scientists to refine their understanding of the climate system, while governments, industry and the public work to find practical means to control greenhouse gases. If such measures are called for, adopting quick-fix measures at this point could pose grave economic risks for the world.

Human Activities 35-45%
Natural Methanogens 10-15%

An energy policy for the new administration

Throughout last year's election campaign, energy was one of the more controversial public policy issues. Now a new administration will have to move beyond pronouncements toward concrete, long-term policy steps.

Above all, policies should encourage more efficient use of energy as the will benefit both the environment and national security. Even with conservation, as our economy grows energy use will grow. The U.S. will need to supply over 60 percent of U.S. energy needs. While new technologies such as hybrid and fuel cells may ultimately gain a foothold, they will still require carbon-fuels. Alternative sources such as solar and wind will not become significant until after 2020. Fuel sources will be in great demand but will increasingly be supplied by natural gas.

supply diversity. Thus, sanctions policies are also ripe for revision.

Maintaining strategic stocks for severe supply disruptions makes sense, but storing these stocks to manipulate prices during temporary market surges can discourage private sector actions and be counterproductive.

Second, in pursuing environmental improvement, the goal should be a science-based, cost-benefit approach. Common sense should be used when pursuing ambitious goals, including reasonable standards and time frames for new technology introduction. Regarding climate change policy, the unrealistic and economically damaging Kyoto process needs to be rethought.

Third, private companies should be encouraged to use what pursuing ambitious goals, including reasonable standards and time frames for new technology introduction. Regarding climate change policy, the unrealistic and economically damaging Kyoto process needs to be rethought.

Fourth, technical innovation will be vital to finding energy supplies, lowering costs, addressing environmental concerns, and developing future energy systems. The government should support technological change but avoid temptations to subsidize or to pick winners. Technological progress can endure only when subjected to consumer preferences and market tests.

A sound energy policy is not beyond reach if approached without partisanship. We encourage the necessary dialogue and stand ready to participate.

U.S. oil pipeline imports growing

Year	Imports (Million Barrels per Day)
2015	~1.5
2016	~2.5
2017	~3.5
2018	~4.5

Mobil The energy to make a difference.

(continued from page 18)

§ **Lose the Beltway mind-set.** It's not just the Green New Deal that is popular with the broader public. Many of the subsidiary policies—such as Medicare for All and free day care—are now supported by upwards of 70 percent of the American public, according to Pew and Reuters polls. Inside the Beltway, this fact is unknown or discounted; the assumption by journalists and the politicians they cover is that such policies are ultraleftist political suicide. They think this because the Beltway worldview prioritizes transactional politics: What will Congress pass and the president sign into law? But what Congress and the White House do is often very different from what the American people favor, and the press should not confuse the two.

§ **Help the heartland.** Some of the places being hit hardest by climate change, such as the Midwestern states flooded this spring, have little access to real climate news; instead, the denial peddled by Fox News and Rush Limbaugh dominates. Iconic TV newsman Bill Moyers has an antidote: “Suppose you formed a consortium of media that could quickly act as a strike force to show how a disaster like this is related to climate change—not just for the general media, but for agricultural media, heartland radio stations, local television outlets. A huge teachable moment could be at hand if there were a small coordinating nerve center of journalists who could energize reporting, op-eds, interviews, and so on that connect the public to the causes and not just the consequences of events like this.” Moyers added that such a team should “always have on standby a pool of the most reputable scientists who, on camera and otherwise, can connect natural disasters to the latest and most credible scientific research.”

§ **Cover the solutions.** There isn't a more exciting time to be on the climate beat. That may sound strange, considering how much suffering lies in store from the impacts that are already locked in. But with the Green New Deal, the US government is now, for the first time, at least talking about a response that is commensurate with the scale and urgency of the problem. Reporters have a tendency to gravitate to the crime scene, to the tragedy. They have a harder time with the solutions to a problem; some even mistake it as fluff. Now, with climate change, the solution is a critical part of the story.

§ **Don't be afraid to point fingers.** As always, journalists should shun cheerleading, but neither should we be neutral. Defusing the climate crisis is in everyone's interest, but some entities are resolutely opposed to doing what the science says is needed, starting with the president of the United States. The press has called out Trump on many fronts—for his lying, corruption, and racism—but his deliberate worsening of the climate crisis has been little mentioned, though it is arguably the most consequential of his presidential actions. Meanwhile, ExxonMobil has announced plans to keep producing large amounts of oil and gas through at least 2040; other companies have made similar declarations. If enacted, those plans guarantee catastrophe.



Spreading the GND gospel: Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez discusses the Green New Deal on *All In With Chris Hayes*.

“[News teams should] always have on standby a pool of the most reputable scientists who...can connect natural disasters to the latest... research.”

—Bill Moyers

Journalism has a responsibility to make that consequence clear to the public and to cover the companies, executives, and investors behind those plans accordingly.

ALTHOUGH BRILLIANT investigative journalism established in 2015 that ExxonMobil and others have been lying about the dangers of burning fossil fuels since the 1970s, this fact has not been incorporated into most ongoing news coverage. Leading figures in climate science and

diplomacy have accused top fossil-fuel executives of crimes against humanity: They not only knew the damage their products would cause, but they also lied about it to continue profiteering. “This was a crime,” said Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, the chief climate adviser to Angela Merkel's conservative government in Germany, in an interview for Hertzgaard's book *HOT*. Tim Wirth, who as US under secretary of state helped negotiate the Kyoto Protocol—the international treaty that committed dozens of countries to curbing carbon emissions—in 1997, agrees: Those CEOs and political leaders who deny the well-established science of climate change “should be tried for crimes against humanity.”

Instead, climate deniers are still given respectful treatment by US news outlets across the ideological spectrum. The companies that funded the disinformation, the Republicans (plus a handful of Democrats) who carried their water on Capitol Hill, and the right-wing media machine that injected their lies into the public consciousness continue to be treated as legitimate participants in the debate. But these entities in fact deserve to have their social licenses revoked, just as tobacco companies did. More than anyone else, it is climate deniers who got us into this mess; they don't get to decide what we do about it now.

If American journalism doesn't get the climate story right—and soon—no other story will matter. The news media's past climate failures can be redeemed only by an immediate shift to more high-profile, inclusive, and fearless coverage. Our #CoveringClimateNow project calls on all journalists and news outlets to join the conversation about how to make that happen. As the nation's founders envisioned long ago, the role of a free press is to inform the people and hold the powerful accountable. These days, our collective survival demands nothing less. ■

Mark Hertzgaard, The Nation's environment correspondent, has covered climate change since 1989. His books include On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency, Earth Odyssey, and HOT. Kyle Pope is the editor and publisher of the Columbia Journalism Review. He previously has worked as an editor at Condé Nast, The Wall Street Journal, and the New York Observer and in 2017 testified before Congress about threats to the press.

EVERY THING *ONE* MUST GO!

*Hedge-fund owners drove Sears and Toys
"R" Us into bankruptcy and put thousands
of people out of work. **Now those former
employees are fighting back.***

BRYCE COVERT

ALL
SALE
FINA
NO RETU

STORE CLOSING
30% OFF
30% OFF
30-40% OFF
40% OFF
70% OFF JEWELRY

STORE CLOSING
ALL TOYS
SALE
40% OFF
JEWELRY

BRUCE MILLER GOT A JOB AT A SEARS IN TOM'S RIVER, NEW JERSEY, "fresh out of high school," he said. He didn't have any experience other than repairing cars in his backyard, but a friend who worked in the maintenance department knew he was looking for work and recommended him. That was the beginning of a 36-year career with the company. "Everyone I had talked to said, 'Get into Sears. Stick with them. They're a great company. They'll take care of you,'" he recalled. "I just kept my eyes open and my nose clean and worked my way up." He eventually became an auto mechanic.

In 2005, the hedge fund ESL Investments Inc., owned by Eddie Lampert, took over the company. In the 1990s, Sears struggled to keep up with big-box competitors Walmart and Kmart and to compete with online retailers. When Lampert took over, he focused on reducing costs and increasing shareholder returns. Miller immediately noticed the difference that made to the quality of service and offerings in the stores. "We went from the top of retail to the bottom of the barrel," he said. His pay was changed from an hourly rate to commission-based, which meant he and his co-workers started competing with one another. It also meant that when sales declined, as customers fled the dilapidated stores, his income did, too. When he started, Miller said, a slow day in his department meant repairing 100 cars—at its peak, 185 daily. But toward the end, "We were lucky to get 10 cars a day."

Benefits changed as well. The company took away five personal days. Sick days disappeared. And though he had worked a steady schedule Tuesday through Saturday from 8 AM to 4:30 PM, the company started asking him to work at all hours, he said, adding that some days he worked until midnight and then had to be back at 7 the next morning.

Lampert bought Kmart in 2003 and merged the two companies in 2005. He came into ownership of both with basically no experience in retail; his background was in risk arbitrage at Goldman Sachs. To buy Sears and Kmart, Lampert, through his hedge fund, used the private-equity model of a leveraged buyout: He financed the purchase of those companies by saddling them with debt and using little of his own capital. Once he became a retail CEO, he stuck with the Wall Street playbook. He sold off Sears's most valuable assets, such as the Lands' End clothing and Craftsman tool brands. Many business lines ended up in separate companies that he has invested in through his hedge fund and profited from as Sears withered. Lands' End, for instance, is now worth more than Sears. He also sold off a cluster of Sears stores for \$2.7 billion to Seritage, a real-estate company that he headed as chairman. Sears then had to pay rent at many of those locations.

Meanwhile, Lampert's hedge fund loaded the company up with debt through loans it issued itself, making money off commissions and interest. ESL and its affiliates lent Sears some \$2.6 billion—about half the total debt it had as of September—earning \$400 million in interest and fees. All those losses, all that debt, and all the rent it was paying on its stores left the company little to invest to keep up with Walmart and Amazon.

From the perspective of Sears and Kmart employees, the strategy failed miserably. Sears lost about \$5.8 billion over the last five years and closed more than 1,000 stores over a decade. During that time, 175,000 employees lost

their jobs. Then, on October 15, 2018, the company filed for bankruptcy protection. At the time, it said it had \$11.3 billion in liabilities, including \$5.6 billion in debt, and just \$7 billion in assets. But Lampert and his hedge fund will make out just fine: The loss of ESL's stake in the company has been offset by the gains he made from interest and fees on the company's debt over the years and his investments in the spun-off businesses.

Typically, retailers keep their debt levels low and own their locations so that they have cash to spare for inevitable industry disruptions, like a recession or Amazon. The Wall Street model does the exact opposite, affording these companies no cushion. Bankruptcies often follow. Nine of the 10 largest retail bankruptcies in 2017 were backed by private-equity firms, as were 40 percent of the largest ones from 2015 to early 2017. A third of retail job losses in 2016 and 2017 can be pinned on private-equity ownership.

Then came the Toys "R" Us bankruptcy. The company, owned by the private-equity firms KKR and Bain Capital and the real-estate firm Vornado Realty Trust, declared bankruptcy toward the end of 2017, liquidated all of its stores, and laid off about 30,000 people. "You have to ask yourself: Why is it that Toys 'R' Us [and] Sears did not invest, did not try to compete? What stopped them?" said Eileen Appelbaum, a co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research. "The answer is, they don't have any resources."

But bankruptcies and mass layoffs are not necessarily a problem for private-equity firms or hedge-fund owners. They're not in it for the long run; the plan is usually to hold a company for a few years and try to have it go public again. If it works, they make a killing. If it doesn't, they've still accrued all that money along the way. "The house never loses," Appelbaum said.



Fighting back: In January, former Sears and Toys "R" Us workers rallied in New York to demand better severance pay.

"These companies never thought twice about taking my job and my livelihood and my medical insurance."

—Giovanna del Rosa, former Toys "R" Us employee

MILLER LEARNED SEARS WAS DECLARING bankruptcy by reading the news on his phone. "I was shocked," he said. "It's an outrage that a hedge-fund billionaire could get away with stripping Sears for parts and treating my job like crap." In April of last year, his store closed, along with 141 others. He got eight weeks of severance pay. Two weeks after it ran out, he lost his house. His health insurance ended around the same time, and he's still uninsured. He is now 56. He hasn't been able to find a new full-time job, instead doing "little odd jobs here and there."

About two months ago, he joined a burgeoning campaign called Rise Up Retail. Launched just last year by the workers'-rights organization United for Respect, it aims to secure better benefits and more economic stability for retail employees. It began by organizing Toys "R" Us workers, who were laid off without severance pay. With Rise Up Retail's help, former Toys "R" Us workers demanded a \$75 million hardship fund from KKR and Bain. They got \$20 million. Miller, who joined Rise Up Retail after learning about the organization on Facebook, said he doesn't know if he'll be able to get any

more money from Sears. But he added that he hopes the effort will make things better for retail employees in bankruptcies to come.

In early February, Miller told his story at a press conference in a small room in the New Jersey Senate building, alongside former Babies “R” Us employee Joseph Ryan (as part of the Toys “R” Us bankruptcy, Babies “R” Us also closed stores), in support of the first-in-the-nation legislation backed by United for Respect. The bill, introduced by State Senator Joseph Cryan, a Democrat, aims to bolster financial security for employees in the state by making them less disposable. Currently, there is no law anywhere in the country that guarantees severance for workers after a layoff. His bill would mandate that laid-off employees of large companies in the state be paid a severance equal to one week of wages for each full year of employment. “It is critical for holding Wall Street accountable...to the retail employees they take over,” Ryan told assembled media and lawmakers, sporting a purple vest with the Babies “R” Us logo stitched in yellow.

The bill would also require companies to give employees more notice before layoffs, including at least 15 days’ warning ahead of a bankruptcy filing or change in ownership, and would prohibit mass firings for 180 days after such an upheaval. It would ensure that Wall Street firms—like KKR, Bain, and Eddie Lampert’s hedge fund—are responsible for severance claims by classifying them as joint employers along with the executives who run their portfolio companies, and would classify severance as wages so that such payments would get top preference in the bankruptcy process alongside creditor claims.

“The genesis point for this legislation,” Cryan said, “was me standing with hundreds of Toys ‘R’ Us workers, listening to stories of folks who dedicated 27, 28, 31, 32 years and were basically getting nothing.” Democratic State Senator Nellie Pou, who backs the bill, noted that when Toys “R” Us laid off employees with little to no warning and refused to give them severance, it wasn’t “doing anything technically illegal, but they did something I believe to be reprehensible.”

The measure would be “game-changing,” said Carrie Gleason, the policy director of United for Respect. It would mean more than giving workers money to help after a layoff. It could change the calculation that companies make when deciding to cut workers in the first place, by putting a price on it. Right now, it’s “virtually costless” to fire employees, Appelbaum said. Private-equity firms in particular tend to turn to layoffs quickly after taking over a company. “Squeezing labor is the fastest way to increase cash flow to be able to make payments on the debt,” Appelbaum explained. This measure could “cause companies to think twice about whether laying off workers is their go-to solution for every problem that they face.”

“Squeezing labor is the fastest way to increase cash flow to be able to make payments on the [owner’s] debt.”

—Eileen Appelbaum, Center for Economic and Policy Research

The house always wins: Eddie Lampert bought Sears, then sold off its most profitable lines.

It could also make creditors hesitate to liquidate companies like Sears in bankruptcy if the cost of paying out severance would outweigh the cost of restructuring and continuing to operate. “We want solutions that ultimately protect people’s jobs, not just give them support after they face unemployment,” Gleason said.



ABE MAGUIRE STARTED WORKING AT A KMART seven years ago, nine years after Lampert bought the business. Even then, they witnessed decline. (Maguire uses gender-neutral pronouns.) Staff cuts meant that eight people ran the store for an entire shift. The store, which was built decades ago, was aging. The heating and cooling system malfunctioned, making it uncomfortably hot. Ordering new products and supplies became more and more difficult. “People have been asking for a long time if we’re going out of business,” Maguire said, “because our shelves looked bare a lot of the time.” Even so, Maguire said, they and their fellow employees thought the location might stage a comeback. Then, two days after this past Christmas, the store’s employees were told it would be closing. “As the store slowly empties, it’s kind of sad, really,” Maguire said. “These are people you see 40-plus hours a week. They’re kind of like family.”

Maguire has poured that emotion into organizing with Rise Up Retail, which they found out about after stumbling across videos of Toys “R” Us workers on social media sharing their stories and demanding hardship pay. Maguire messaged Rise Up Retail and asked to get involved. Before that, it felt like “screaming into the void,” they said. But organizing is “very empowering.” Toys “R” Us workers are “guiding us and leading the way and showing how it’s done,” Maguire said. “It was really inspiring to see the people who got a little bit of justice out of their actions supporting us.” Maguire plans to stay involved, “until we see justice for our co-workers, for Sears and Kmart employees, and then in the future to improve conditions for fellow retail employees.” That solidarity is one of Rise Up Retail’s key assets as it seeks to organize workers. “What’s really amazing to see [is] the mentoring and the mutual support [among] Toys ‘R’ Us and Sears workers,” said Lily Wang, the Wall Street campaign manager at United for Respect. “Toys ‘R’ Us workers are saying, ‘We know what it’s like to not only lose your job, your benefits, and this community you’ve been part of.... We also know what it’s like to fight back and win, and this is how we’re going to do it.’”

When former Toys “R” Us employee Giovanna del Rosa heard about what was happening at Sears and Kmart, she knew she had to get involved. “I was very motivated to be there for them, because Rise Up Retail was there for me when I had no idea what was going to happen with my life,” she said. She started at Toys “R” Us three weeks after her 18th birthday and stayed for 20 years, working her way up from a summer cashier job to assistant manager. In March of last year, she found out that all Toys “R” Us locations would close. The news was devastating. “It was a mourning process,” del Rosa said. She had frequent panic attacks, many at work. “For a lot of people, it’s just another store that closed, but there’s so many of us that that was our life.” Then, two weeks before the company filed



for bankruptcy, she found out that the severance plan was being eliminated. “I was like, ‘Twenty years of my life is going to be worth nothing.’ These companies never thought twice about taking my job and my livelihood and my medical insurance.” Working with Rise Up Retail “started my healing process,” del Rosa said.

Her first major action was speaking at a board meeting of CalSTRS, a pension fund that invests in KKR and Bain, asking the fund to reconsider its investments in private-equity firms that had cost so many their jobs.

TWENTY-NINE YEARS AGO, KATHY CAGLE GOT A job at a Sears store in Newark, New Jersey, through an aunt who worked there. She started out in clothing and moved up to selling appliances. “I was able to make a living,” Cagle said. She took vacations, paid off her condo, and helped pay for her daughter’s college education.

But after Lampert took control, Cagle’s commissions plummeted. Her hours were cut. She had to take on extra work, like dog walking, to make ends meet. “It gradually got worse and worse,” she recalled. “I feel like [Lampert] just ran it down to profit himself and he didn’t care about the employees at all.”

When she was told at the end of June 2018 that her store would be closing, management said that as long as employees stayed till the very end, they would receive severance pay. Cagle was due eight weeks of pay—which would have come to about \$5,600, she estimated—plus 10 weeks of health and dental coverage. On the final day of the store’s operation, she and her co-workers got paperwork to apply for severance, which they were told to fax in the following Monday, October 15. Two weeks later, no one had gotten a response. Cagle tried to make a doctor’s appointment and found out that her health insurance, which also covered her daughter, had been cut off.

The promised severance never materialized. “They never paid us, didn’t call us, didn’t write to us,” Cagle said. “They dropped my health and dental without telling me at all.” She and her co-workers didn’t get an answer until they wrote the company a letter; in response, the company told them that because it had filed for bankruptcy on October 15, no one in their store would be getting severance. That was the same day that Cagle and her co-workers were told to send in their paperwork. “They must have known they were going to file for bankruptcy, but they still led us to believe that if you stayed until the end, they would give you this package,” Cagle said. “I feel like they tricked people because they didn’t want people to leave the company.”

Losing out on severance meant that she couldn’t afford Christmas gifts. She’s getting unemployment benefits, but they don’t compare with what she would have made. “It’s been hard to pay my bills,” Cagle said. She’s had to borrow money from family and cut down on expenses. “I just mostly drink water. I don’t buy soda or stuff like that. I



Paying it forward:

Laid off by Kmart, Gabe Maguire joined United for Respect. Until then, it was like “screaming into the void,” Maguire said.

been to take time off to visit her daughter in Washington, DC, while she got severance pay and then work for a different Sears location that hadn’t closed yet, but now she feels too burned to work for the company again. “I feel like they really tricked me and cheated me,” she said. She never took the trip.

SEARS AND TOYS “R” US EMPLOYEES ARE NO longer just seeking severance pay or hardship funds for themselves. “Across companies, we’ve heard consistently people expressing a frustration with the current economy, where they feel like they’re the casualties of Wall Street firms and their profit-making schemes,” Wang said. Sears and Kmart workers are calling for representation on the new company’s board, which will restructure with 223 Sears locations and 202 Kmart stores now that Eddie Lampert put in a winning bid for what remains of the companies during the bankruptcy process. And workers also want a seat at the creditors’ table when companies go into bankruptcy. United for Respect is supporting a bill sponsored by Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) that would give employees of public companies the right to directly elect one-third of the board of directors. When the bill was introduced last year, it didn’t even get a committee hearing, but three 2020 presidential candidates—Senators Kirsten Gillibrand, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren—are now co-sponsors. Warren has championed a similar idea on the campaign trail, calling for a requirement that workers elect 40 percent of corporate board members. United for Respect is also looking at whether state unemployment systems can be better funded to ensure more adequate payments for retail employees who lose their jobs. And it supports recent efforts to curb stock buybacks, a means by which money that could be invested in companies and their employees is used to enrich shareholders instead.

Employees at Charlotte Russe, Gymboree, Nine West, and Payless ShoeSource—all private-equity-backed retailers that have been going through bankruptcy—have joined Rise Up Retail’s online communities. This “broader movement,” as Gleason calls it, may even start to examine private equity’s signature practice of the leveraged buyout. “It’s a fundamentally flawed business model that isn’t really set up to support a thriving economy or create good jobs,” Gleason said. “The real owners don’t really care if the business does well or not.” For Kathy Cagle, the goal is clear: “They should change the rules so that Wall Street companies can’t keep playing games with hardworking people’s lives.”

“Toys ‘R’ Us workers are saying, ‘We know what it’s like to lose your job, your benefits, this community.... We also know what it’s like to fight back and win.’”

—Lily Wang,
United for Respect

Bryce Covert is a contributor at The Nation and a contributing op-ed writer at The New York Times.

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Books & the Arts.



IS THIS REALLY HOW IT ENDS?

Democracy's midlife crisis

by JAN-WERNER MÜLLER

At the beginning of 2018, the Dutch social scientist Cas Mudde made a prediction: 2017, he observed, had been the year when academics competed to explain the seemingly unstoppable populist wave that had resulted in (to name just two examples) the Brexit referendum in June 2016 and Donald Trump's election that November. In the coming year, the message was going to be: "Democracy is dying, but you can save it... if you buy my book."

Now, in 2019, we can safely say that

Jan-Werner Müller teaches politics at Princeton. His most recent book is What Is Populism?

his prediction has proved right. Apocalyptic talk of authoritarianism abounds, and a veritable democracy-defense industry has emerged. Dozens of books—*The People vs. Democracy*; *Can It Happen Here?*; *Fascism: A Warning*; *How Fascism Works*—fill the publishers' catalogs, detailing democracy's sadly dimming prospects. Their authors mostly make predictions on the basis of historical analogies—it's the 1930s all over again—or extrapolate from recent authoritarian takeovers in countries like Russia or Turkey. But how plausible are such reference points? Of course, ideally everyone should want to learn from the past, but

easily prepackaged "lessons from history" or forced analogies with countries that have never had a proper liberal democracy pose the danger that we will fail to grasp precisely what is peculiar about our age.

Of all the books that this new democracy-defense industry has produced, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die* makes the most coherent case, by way of comparison, for why Trump's presidency may well endanger one of the world's oldest republics. As scholars who have worked primarily on Latin America and Europe, Levitsky and Ziblatt demonstrate how a global per-

spective should shake many people out of the complacency created by their cherished beliefs about American exceptionalism. Like all students of comparative politics, they are mindful that 1990s Venezuela, post-1945 West Germany, and interwar Belgium—all of which make an appearance in their book—differ profoundly. And yet they think one lesson can be generalized: that democracies depend not just on institutions like courts committed to protecting the rule of law; they also require informal norms that all political players need to observe to keep the democratic game going. Like many liberals, they think that serious norm violators such as Trump should be kept out of the game entirely, and so they call for reinforcing the power of elite gatekeepers as a powerful line of defense.

In his similarly titled *How Democracy Ends*, David Runciman, the most original theorist of democracy writing in the United Kingdom today, provides a convincing alternative to the products that come off the assembly line of the democracy-defense industry. The Cambridge professor is deeply wary of historical analogies. He worries that, by becoming fixated on fascism and other instances of democratic self-destruction, we will miss today's real challenges—the catastrophe of climate change, above all, but also how social-media networks are undermining democracies in subtle yet potentially fatal ways. Democracy, Runciman says, is about keeping the future open and enabling people to change their minds after encountering different views and new information; the Internet giants, by contrast, profit from always giving us more of the same. Combine the power of algorithms with a state committed to all-out surveillance of its citizens and you get contemporary China, an authoritarian model that Runciman regards as a serious rival to democracies today.

Levitsky and Ziblatt's book starts with what by now should be an uncontroversial observation: Democracies do not necessarily go out with a bang (as in the case of a military coup); they can also end with a whimper. True, coups have not disappeared altogether—think of Egypt and Thailand in recent years—but our situation is clearly different from the Cold War era, when coups d'état accounted for nearly three out of every four democratic breakdowns. Instead, today we face what the democracy-defense industry variously calls democratic “erosion,” “decay,” or “backsliding.”

The choice of these metaphors to de-

How Democracies Die

By Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt
Crown. 320 pp. \$26

How Democracy Ends

By David Runciman
Basic Books. 256 pp. \$27

scribe democracy is not neutral; the terms suggest quasi-natural processes, when in fact democracy's demise is the result of many conscious decisions. Levitsky and Ziblatt also use these metaphors, but they point the finger at particular people; for them, democracy's breakdown is about elites abandoning the norms needed to hold politics together. They provide a checklist of what these norms are and when their trespass should set off alarm bells: Do politicians reject the rules of the democratic game—for instance, by questioning the legitimacy of their opponents' winning an election? Do they deny the legitimacy of their rivals altogether? Do they tolerate or encourage violence in politics? And do they threaten to curtail the liberties of their political adversaries and possibly also of the media?

No prizes for guessing who checks off all four of the items on Levitsky and Ziblatt's list. Trump made it clear enough that he would not be ready to accept the legitimacy of a Hillary Clinton victory when he promised voters, “I will tell you at the time.” As president, he has consistently demonized opponents, encouraged brutality against demonstrators at his rallies, and attempted to restrict the rights to political participation—most obviously through phony claims of electoral fraud in order to legitimate voter suppression. Levitsky and Ziblatt rightly insist that Trump is not a lone demagogue who came out of nowhere; instead, they argue, he was produced by a culture of “extreme polarization” that created an environment in which the normative “guardrails” of democracy were first loosened and now might get broken off altogether. In particular, political actors no longer accept the legitimacy of the other contenders for power, and they cease to exercise “forbearance”—a willingness to not always push institutional prerogatives to the limit.

Levitsky and Ziblatt recognize that polarization in America is not symmetrical. Only Republicans have, in living memory, denied a hearing to a Supreme Court nominee with a view to capturing the Court, in defiance of long-standing norms. And only Republicans and conservatives have

made it their business to deepen cultural and even racial divisions through what the authors call a “conservative entertainment complex.” Yet Levitsky and Ziblatt do not just blame right-wing elites; they also blame the people. Give citizens a chance to participate in primaries and let them speak their minds on social media, they warn, and democracy might go to hell. In the absence of gatekeepers—party leaders and professional journalists who uphold democracy's norms—the great unwashed could destroy the very machinery that enables self-rule.

This unashamedly elitist account sits uneasily with the book's underlying narrative about the republic's decline and possible fall. Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that there was a long stretch in 20th-century US history when norms were broadly observed—until the passage of civil rights made the South go Republican. Of course, racist attitudes were not created ex nihilo by elites, but the strategy to consistently strengthen them was a choice that predates Trump by a considerable period of time—and it was made by elites, including icons of responsible centrism like the Republican patrician George H.W. Bush.

Contrary to the clichéd talk of the United States as one of the world's oldest and most enduring democracies, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that we should think of the South in the 20th century as something almost akin to what the independent watchdog organization Freedom House calls a “country in transition” to democracy—and that therefore has all the attendant problems of transitioning. Hence, while Levitsky and Ziblatt insist, on the one hand, that America's democratic guardrails have been dangerously weakened, they implicitly argue, on the other, that the earlier norm compliance depended on the country not being properly democratic to begin with. The emphasis on racial inequality here, however, also casts doubt on the usefulness of comparing the United States with countries that do not have a legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. Its omnipresence today, too, also makes our future look much bleaker. As Levitsky and Ziblatt note, “few societies in history have managed to be both multiracial and truly democratic.” Their concern is vindicated in that, quite apart from Trump, Republicans appear to be committed to occupying institutions like the Supreme Court and, if necessary, bending or breaking norms, all in order to defend an old order against an ever-stronger Democratic majority.

In the end, Levitsky and Ziblatt have

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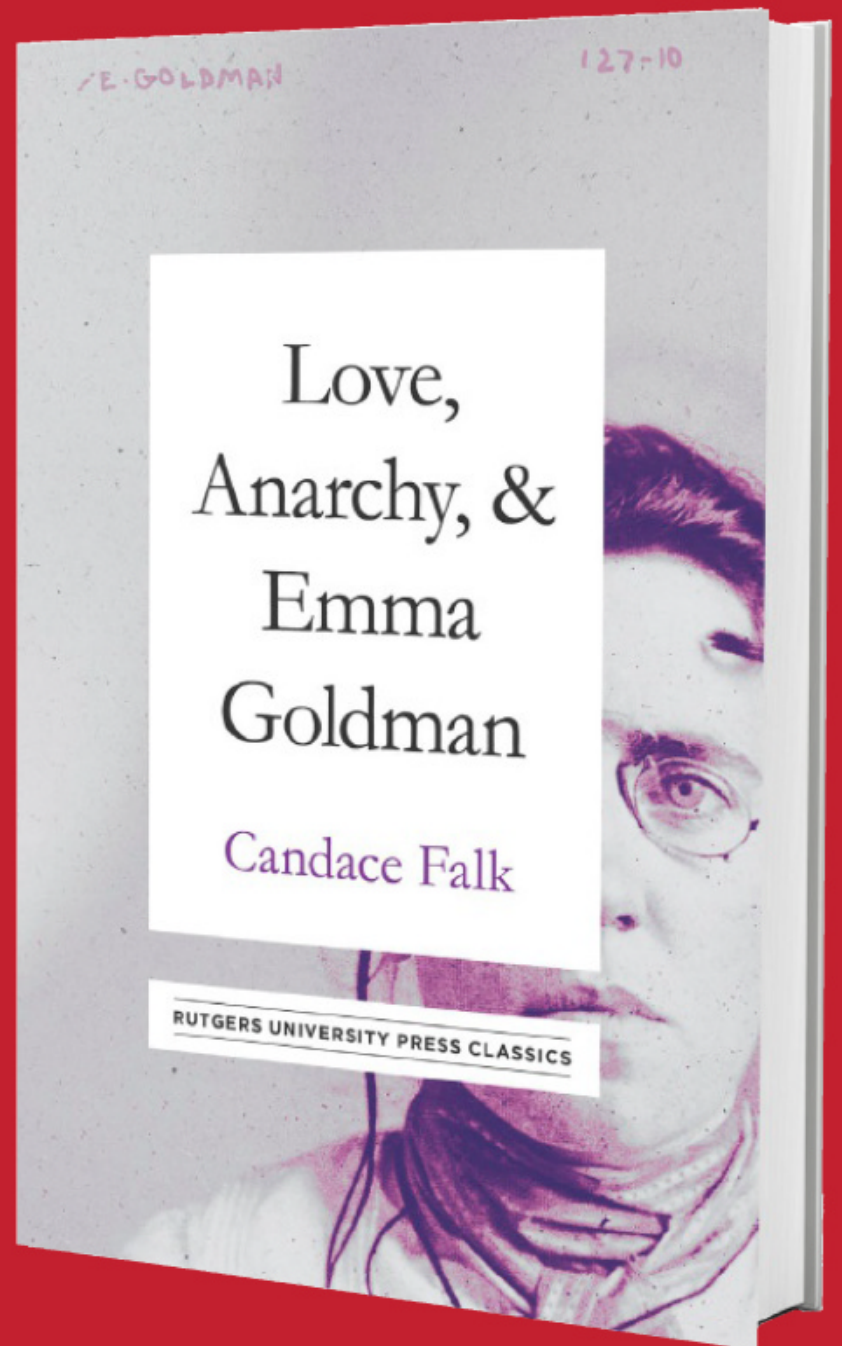
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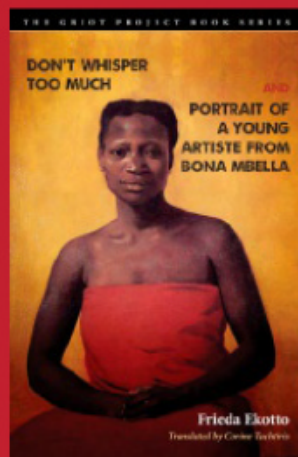
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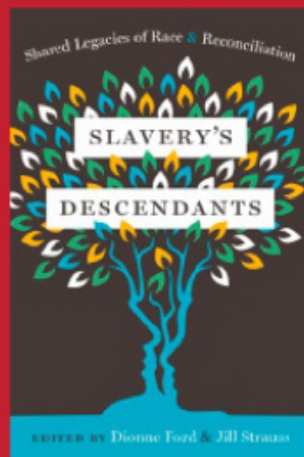
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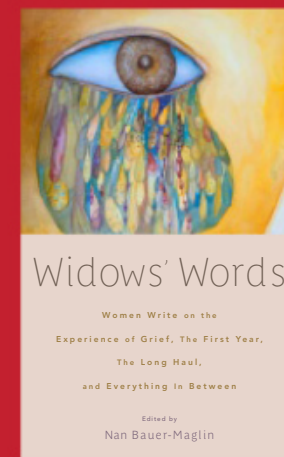
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Dear Melissa—

On each body is
carried the shape of its
absence—the uncontrollable morning—
a hammock over-turned
by the wind—bird-
shit—which implies beauty
but is not beautiful in and of
itself—now on both sides
of the cloth—

How does it feel
to not want—

I want
a woman's body that isn't afraid
of me—my back against
whatever is stronger—a pillow,
a table, the hood of a car—I want to lift
and be spread out—a blanket
on the deck—the earth
turning at a thousand miles
per hour—18 miles
a second hurtling
through space—I want to be held
to the ground—a bird
after it has been a bird
against a window—I want
what any woman wants—a body
she can sleep in—my own—sheets
pushed to the side—

TC TOLBERT

no real answer to this challenge. The only thing they are absolutely sure about is that norm-breaking should not be countered in kind. From a strategic perspective, this is far from obvious—sometimes only tit-for-tat can encourage a return to compliance. Nancy Pelosi's recent hard-nosed response to Trump's antics might also point in that direction.

It is a mistake to think that democracy only works if there is niceness or consensus about observing norms—as if it were okay to run an apartheid state, so long as polite Southern gentlemen do it. What really matters is not how to prevent conflicts; rather, it's how to understand them. Though the commentariat constantly laments that the US is so “divided,” it is important to remember that democracies exist precisely so that we can deal with our divisions. The question is whether a political battle can be waged without denying the legitimacy of one's opponents, and it is here that a president who maligns his critics as “un-American” has done so much damage.

There is also more room for “the people” than Levitsky and Ziblatt may allow. The midterms have made it plausible to believe that the answer to democracy's problems is not to reempower the gatekeepers—after all, the gatekeepers on the right caved to Trump and keep on enabling him—but rather to get more people to participate. Last November's election and the impact of the Democratic freshmen in Congress also suggest that we don't all have to be actors in Trump's brand of reality-TV-style political theater.

In *How Democracy Ends*, David Runciman suggests as much: “If Trump is the answer, we are no longer asking the right question,” he declares. Runciman is politely dismissive of much of what the democracy-defense industry is producing today. He sees no real danger of fascism returning; after all, “our societies are too different—too affluent, too elderly, too networked—and our collective historical knowledge of what went wrong then is too entrenched.” That might sound complacent, but Runciman is right that nowhere in the West do states propagate the same kind of systematic cult of violence and racism that was at the core of fascism in the 20th century. We are also not witnessing a comprehensive mobilization, let alone militarization, of societies (though Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, who also checks all the items on Levitsky and Ziblatt's list, will likely

become a test case for this proposition).

Yet Runciman also cannot entirely resist the historical-analogies game. For him, the relevant comparison is with the Gilded Age at the end of the 19th century, which saw rapid technological change, rising inequality, and plenty of populism. But he only makes the comparison to highlight how different our own times are. During that period, and the Progressive era that followed, there was still what he calls “slack” in the political system, and so a generation of social democrats on both sides of the Atlantic were able to extend the franchise, enlarge the tax base, and, above all, deepen and expand the public’s sense of trust in the state. Today, that slack simply isn’t there, and as a result, citizens see political institutions as unresponsive.

By contrast, for Levitsky and Ziblatt there is still plenty of slack, and democracy remains to be fully realized in the United States. But for Runciman, democracy is tired and worn out. This exhaustion is not a terminal condition, he notes, but rather the misery of a midlife crisis. People are no longer energized by the prospect of change in which all might gain; if citizens act at all, they do so only to get something back that they feel they’ve lost—which means a great deal of energy goes into blaming those who were allegedly responsible for the losses.

So what is the takeaway for Runciman? He argues that liberal democracies certainly can make the most of their middle age, but that they cannot expect to get their youthful enthusiasm back. If they try, they might end up with a Trump, who appears as the political equivalent of a motorbike for middle-aged men.

Yet Runciman’s analogy to middle age does inescapably imply that death is on its way, and he sketches three main scenarios for democracy’s demise. One mortal threat, he argues, is climate change, which he says lacks an immediacy to inspire the necessary political action for combatting it. It is indeed telling that the Yellow Vest protesters in France complain that Emmanuel Macron, in order to justify raising green taxes on gas, can only talk about the end of the world—whereas they worry about the end of the month. This does not mean that democracy will perish anytime soon; it is just, as Runciman

laconically puts it, that climate change is too much for democracy to cope with, but also not enough to kill it off.

Another challenge, Runciman argues, is Facebook and the rise of social-media networks. He really does believe that the Internet changed everything, and that social networks might become a serious rival to the state. This seems implausible at first sight: Facebook’s power is connective rather than coercive, and unlike the Leviathan, sword in hand on the cover of Hobbes’s foundational book, Mark Zuckerberg merely wields the smartphone. The former promises security; the latter only “likes.” But in a manner comparable with Hobbes’s sovereign, Facebook hoards its authority: Its horizontal networks also come with a steep organizational hierarchy, and there is no accountability to democratic institutions.

Above all, Runciman argues, Facebook’s challenge to democracy is epistemological. The Internet giants want to get to know us so that they can always give us more of what we want. By contrast, democracy is a form of institutionalized uncertainty: You cannot know what will happen in elections and political developments more broadly. This openness is a source of strength; it means that democracies can learn and adapt. The Internet, despite all its promises about gathering the world’s knowledge at our fingertips, actually closes our minds by tailoring that knowledge to reinforce our political biases.

Facebook exercises a soft, subtle despotism, and in one respect, the third major threat that Runciman identifies is comparable with it. China is increasingly presenting itself as a force for global harmony; Runciman thinks that this market-friendly dictatorship is a genuine rival to democracy. The latter used to promise a combination of dignity for the individual—one person, one vote—plus collective benefits in the form of things like the United States’ Social Security or Britain’s National Health Service. China, by contrast, makes no promises to the individual other than the chance to enrich oneself. True, Chinese citizens also want recognition, but they get it in the form of nationalism and great-power status. This collective dignity is perfectly compatible with individual political exclusion, and Runciman wonders: If democratic states cannot deliver collective goods, will indi-

vidual respect for democracy be enough to help it survive?

Runciman doesn’t provide a direct answer to this question, but he does pose another that he believes might serve as a possible response: Where would you rather be when something goes wrong? Yet the idea that worst-case scenarios bring out the best in democracies seems hard to square with Runciman’s fretting about democracy’s incapacity to deal with climate change. Those who think that an intellectual Cold War with China is now on will find precious little ammunition here.

But maybe that isn’t the point. Runciman, in his urbane, self-deprecating way, admits at the end of his book that he has no solutions. *How Democracy Ends* could not be more different from the sometimes rather authoritarian-sounding political self-help manuals of the democracy-defense industry, which proclaim: “This is what you must do to save democracy, as dictated by history.” Runciman instead only suggests what we should think about, not what we should think, and his book is an impressive exercise in political imagination, even if it sometimes comes out as pure speculation.

After all, how does Runciman—or anyone else, for that matter—really know whether his assertion that “democracy is over the hill” is actually correct? One might argue that Trump is not the political equivalent of a midlife-crisis motorbike; instead, he’s the product of a youthful lapse in judgment that, once its costs become painfully clear, at last concentrates the mind and makes democracy more mature—not in the sense of, say, finally appreciating the great norms and institutions that our parents left us (that would be the mainstream liberal intuition written up so well by Levitsky and Ziblatt), but in understanding how, in some ways, we have never been serious about some of our democratic ideals to begin with, and that we need to be so now.

Runciman’s volume will be of interest long after Trump has left the presidency, and long after the democracy-defense industry’s products have been consigned to the scrap heap. Its only real weakness is a perhaps all too British penchant for being contrarian for contrarianism’s sake. Plenty of paradoxes and arresting phrases (things like “Al Gore did not invent the internet—Gandhi did”) are never really explained and might better have not left the senior common room. But that’s a small price to pay for a brilliant book. ■





LOST IN THE FUN HOUSE

Maurice Carlos Ruffin's bracing debut novel

by **STEPHEN KEARSE**

Maurice Carlos Ruffin's debut novel, *We Cast a Shadow*, details the harm inflicted by a black man upon himself and his family in pursuit of "demeledanization," a surgical procedure that removes melanin from the body. To fund this ghastly surgery for his son, whom he wishes to be white, the narrator will do anything, and *We Cast a Shadow* uses his feverish desperation and the ensuing antics to skewer the world that allows it.

Set in a time that might be described as the *new* New Jim Crow, the book mines America's racist past to construct an outrageous but plausible and not too distant

future. At its best, Ruffin's satire is an unflinching reminder that the ignored blemishes of today—de facto segregation, colorism, police brutality—could be the cankers of tomorrow.

Transformative procedures and racism have been a common pairing in recent films, TV series, and novels precisely because of their terrible yet also fun-house quality. From the body swapping in *Get Out*, to the body modifications in Jess Row's novel *Your Face in Mine*, to the garish Teddy Perkins and Benny Hope in *Atlanta*, to the horse-men in *Sorry to Bother You*, metamorphosis is suited to examining racism's destructive twists and turns because it reifies monstrous ideas as monstrous people. To see a body designed by racism is to witness racism's inherent disfigurement, its necessary warp-

We Cast a Shadow

A Novel

By Maurice Carlos Ruffin

One World. 336 pp. \$27

ing of real people into unreal forms. But *We Cast a Shadow* takes the metaphor further than these previous works. By conjuring a society in which whiteness is literally attainable, the book turns it from an unachievable ideal into a graspable luxury—a commodity. This is the American dream in its rawest, most honest form, and *We Cast a Shadow* bathes in that ugly truth, exposing who is hurt and preyed upon when whiteness is the default. But in ways that plague its microgenre as a whole, the book spends more time romping around the fun-house than exploring the carnival that props it up.

Stephen Kearsse is a writer and critic. He has previously contributed to The Baffler, Pitchfork, and The New York Times Magazine.

ILLUSTRATION BY **TIM ROBINSON**

Written in the first person, the book is profoundly shaped by the narrator's relentless self-hatred and paranoia. Cast in the self-effacing mold of Ralph Ellison's invisible man, and armed with the snark of Paul Beatty's "sell-out," Bonbon, *We Cast a Shadow's* narrator is a shrewd observer and an eager talker. An attorney, he is always on the defensive, justifying his worldview by constantly detailing the tragedies unfolding around him.

People treat the protagonist like a dunce, but he accepts it, using his perceived inferiority to better position himself to "save" his son through demelanization. He views his meekness as pragmatic, and the ambient delirium around him lends that stance some support. The unidentified Southern city he calls home is gratuitously racist: The law firm where he works also owns a plantation, where "strange fruits" are used as decorations; images of black fists have been made illegal; and a police vehicle monitors his home because his family has integrated the neighborhood. ("They're safety patrols, not surveillance vans," he assures himself.) As the husband of a white woman and the father of a mixed-race child, the narrator screens as much of this twisted reality as he can, outsourcing the moments he can't bear to "Plums," purple painkillers that numb him to the horrors. He suffers so that his family can thrive.

The narrator's candidness about his goals and his world give the novel a gonzo intimacy that's as engrossing as it is repulsive. Demelanization is the lens through which he views his entire life, so his narration is tinged with a constant sense of denial. The promotion that would allow him to afford the procedure for his son is always just beyond his grasp, but he continues inching forward, no matter how much he must debase himself. From the novel's opening scene, where he dances in front of the white partners of the law firm in a loincloth, to his support for a mayor who proposes deporting black criminal offenders to Zamunda (the fictional African nation from *Coming to America*), there's a wry sting to his tenacity. He will truly pay any price to procure the presumed safety of whiteness for his son, and Ruffin plays up the one-sided cost of

this transaction. His plight is so painful that it borders on the absurd.

The narrator's quest to quell his pain only begets further suffering around him, an irony that Ruffin uses to get to the heart of his anguish. In one scene, as the narrator applies a pungent and corrosive bleaching cream to his son's skin, his defense is so convoluted that it speaks volumes:

I am a unicorn. I can read and write. I have all my teeth. I've read Plato, Woolf, Nikki Giovanni, and Friend. I've never been to jail. I've voted in every election since I was eighteen. I finished high school. I finished college. I finished law school. I don't have diabetes, high blood pressure, or the itis. If you randomly abduct a hundred black men from the streets of the City and deposit us into a gas chamber, I will be the only one who fits this profile.

The narrator claims to be protecting his son, but the truth is that he's so lonely, so alienated by the dearth of black men who have walked his path, that he decides to erase the path altogether. By scrubbing the accident of his blackness from his progeny, he hopes to make the world less black, too. If he's the only black man with a fulfilling life, he rationalizes, then it was never meant to be. In his view, unicorns are mishaps, not wonders.

This outlandish admission gives the narrator's agony an origin point, and conveys why he's so obsessed with his son's looks, but it sells his paranoia haphazardly. He mounts a defense that might actually be reasonable. Because the racism found in the novel's world is so heinous, there's no way to discern whether the narrator is being shrewd or irrational. The motivations of his actions are clear from a personal standpoint, but at the expense of all other angles.

Ruffin pairs the anxiety of black parenthood and the hubris of the upwardly mobile with too much ambiguity. While it certainly is bleak for generations of black parents to have had to prep their children to be hated, "the talk" has always struck

me as a deeply subversive ritual. If Ruffin's intention is to mock the way the bourgeoisie use their personal success as a yardstick, it's perplexing that the narrator doesn't encounter other black people of his stature who might challenge or undermine his perceptions—who might push back against his ambitions.

The narrator's tone is manic and unhinged, yet ultimately still authoritative, while the novel lacks a certain dialectical quality; there is a pull but no push. When he says he's a unicorn, as arrogant as that sounds, there's no way to verify or disprove the assertion. Whereas writers like Ellison, Beatty, and April Sinclair have stylishly used the idiocy of racism to comically offset its grayscale misery, Ruffin's jokes are muted and hard to spot. What is parody and what is not is sometimes difficult to parse.

As the narrator's quirks accumulate and his backstory lengthens, he comes across as a highly stressed individual, bogged down by his singular hang-ups. His hatred of blackness is always in the foreground, especially when it comes to his biracial son; yet the more time you spend with the protagonist, the more his desperate desire to escape his blackness remains his alone, never building into any broader insights into how his worldview was molded by the racism around him. He covets whiteness, but whiteness isn't imposed on him: There are no skin-whitening ads, no cops harassing his son, no clear structural forms of racism preventing him from obtaining equal status. The net effect of all this one-sided wrestling with whiteness is that his misadventures read as pathology, individual neurosis, not a parable about a racist world spiraling out of control. The structures and pressures that haunt him are elusive and phantasmagoric, referred to but rarely rendered with any weight beyond his quest for demelanization.

Consider his trip to a public-housing development called "Tiko," where the narrator grew up and returns in order to secure the promotion that will allow him to afford his son's surgery. Evoking an internment camp, Tiko is introduced with a bleak deadpan: "The complex was surrounded by a tall barbed-wire-rimmed fence, and we had to show our IDs to get inside," the narrator says. "If we lost our IDs, they wouldn't let us out." He still has family there, and Ruffin uses his palpable discomfort to amplify the misery and neglect of the black people who are still forced to call it home. But rather than pathos, we



Love Prodigal

I make love when I am bored.
 That's how I know I'm an intelligent
 animal. It's easy to tremble—a pistil
 brushed with a bumblebee's fur—
 and who doesn't want to be golden,
 like pearls of fat glistening in an artery
 or a mother's first milk? I want
 to send you photos of dead fledglings
 on the sidewalk, those perils of the lavish
 season, but we are wrong, a news story
 tells me so, explaining beauty drives
 evolution, not a mate with an advantageous
 beak. I wish I could tell you this. Letters
 and novels keep seducing me with
 their fantasies of closure, but I like
 the way your silence wastes inside me.
 I am a grieving animal. Let's not pretend
 souls are beautiful. They're as ugly
 as white petals wilting, crisping
 and curling in on themselves
 in cloudy water and green-rot. But let
 them fall into me like loose change
 in a leg cast. What's broken cannot be
 healed with anything but superglue
 and imagination, but let it be tended to.
 Let it be tender. Let's imagine a miracle
 together at a distance, the reunion
 of a pronoun and its first verb. I'm not
 over it—the elk's blood blackens the bottom
 of the fridge, and when I wipe it, it leaves
 a pink quarter, blood-ghost, hunger stain
 in the shape of your birthmark.
 I'm a regretful animal. My heart tries
 to grow as fast as velvet in May.
 It's trying to attract an ending with
 a crown of daisies, an archive
 of spring, of wants, of waterfalls,
 of woods, good God, I know you
 won't take me back.

TRACI BRIMHALL

come away only with the narrator's own self-loathing. "He stank of gingerroot," the narrator says of his uncle. "His black hedge of an Afro probably hadn't been trimmed in months, if not years."

While Ruffin succeeds at conveying his character's worldview, that attention to detail slackens as he zooms out into the world itself.

This struggle to scale up the narrator's woes into larger insights about the social system that perpetuates racism is a frequent problem in the recent narratives about racial transformation. The *Atlanta* episode "Teddy Perkins," for instance, uses the titular character to stage a grisly Michael Jackson allegory. Teddy is a retired black musician with skin as white as porcelain and eyes that retreat into his artificially chiseled face. An unblackened Frankenstein's monster, he waxes on about his creator—an abusive father—with a relaxed demeanor that only feebly hides his pain. The episode is good television—suspenseful, funny, immersive, distinctive—but Teddy's story is a one-off nightmare. His behavior and appearance are so idiosyncratic that his tragic fate seems to be his alone, not a revelation about the racism that shaped it.

That same narrowness plagues Jess Row's *Your Face in Mine*, a tale of white men who live out their fantasies of exoticism by literally becoming people of color. Using Jewish-man Martin Lipkin's metamorphosis into black-man Martin Wilkinson as his focus, Row lambastes the narcissism of white appropriation. His white characters admire the differences in others just to fill the void within themselves, and Row is acutely attuned to that slippage between admiration and dispossession—the easy swing from theirs to ours to mine. But what his psychoanalytic frame misses is how impersonal that process can be. White people do not have to be lonely kooks to be crooks; they can abscond with blackness through the law or through lopsided access to wealth and capital and political power, not just because they're empty inside. White people don't even have to want blackness for a particular reason, which is one of the subtler insights of Jordan Peele's *Get Out*: A blind white man who envies the black hero's photography skills wins the silent auction for his body, but not before every white person in attendance makes a bid!

The narrator's arc in *We Cast a Shadow* and its notable number of asides allude to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Like Ellison's

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protagonist, Ruffin's narrator lacks a name. He participates in a humiliating spectacle for white viewers. He gets approached by a questionable organization after an arresting speech. He is injured in an explosion. He is antagonized by an extremist Afrocentric group and even runs through sewers. Homage is fine, but the fulcrum of *Invisible Man* isn't its imagery or allegory. That novel's secret strength is its cacophony of voices: The titular character stalks through an America filled with preachers, con men, and sophists, all of them talking over him or exhorting him to conform to their will. As he narrates, he also competes, fighting to be heard above the tumult. (There's a reason Ellison's book ends with the question "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?") Ruffin's narrator essentially monologues for the entire book, overshadowing all of his opponents besides those in his head. He's too loud and too visible.

Ruffin's pastiche helps him effectively reproduce the white gaze, but in the end, *We Cast a Shadow* rarely explores how white supremacy operates as a system—the animus that fuels it, the society that sustains it, the lives and resources it consumes. Like its counterparts, the story relies so heavily on the inherent spectacle of racial transformation that it obscures the forces that conspire to make whiteness desirable. There is no Brotherhood, no Chthonian, no Mr. Norton. Outside of the shareholders who use the narrator as a pawn within his law firm, levers of power simply do not exist in the novel.

One of the book's key moments is the revelation that the narrator began to detest blackness after witnessing his father defend his mother from a cop. His dad was consequently beaten and imprisoned, setting the narrator up to covet the safety and stability of whiteness. The flashback reveals the way that powerlessness manifests itself as a yearning for any form of control, providing an empathetic context for the narrator's reckless pursuit of whiteness. But it could also have been a moment that more fully explored the structures—the police, the prison system, the family—that help reinforce American racism, that make outrageous inequality feel normal rather than deeply unjust. Unfortunately, just as *We Cast a Shadow* scratches the surface of systemic racism—the way that injustice ripples through generations—it ends up settling for little more than a neat character portrait. This is the lasting impression of the book, and of so many of these stories of racial transformation: Unicorns get lonely. ■



SOLACE IN THE SOUNDSCAPE

Helado Negro's deeply intimate electronic music

by JULYSSA LOPEZ

In 1978, the Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid published her seminal single-sentence short story, "Girl," in *The New Yorker*. The piece is shaped around an immigrant mother giving her daughter sharp-tongued, insistent advice on how to behave like the kind of woman she thinks society will accept: "This is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard," she directs; "this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely...."

The daughter interjects just a few comments. When the mother demands that she "always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh," the girl asks somewhat innocently, "but what if the baker won't let me feel the

bread?" She's still a child and perhaps too young to understand why her mother feels the need to arm her with so many instructions. But her mother's words, harsh and caustic though they may be, are meant to prepare her to face the world.

The Ecuadorian-American electronic artist Helado Negro takes the title of his sixth album, *This Is How You Smile*, from Kincaid's "Girl" and writes his own set of rules for persevering in a tumultuous era. To find a sense of comfort and healing, he rummages through memories of a carefree childhood and past moments of joy. He returns to the splashing public pools and steaming sidewalks of Miami, where he grew up; he revisits past relationships with lovers, friends, and family members; and he revels in everyday acts like walking through the park. He houses all of these recollections in a twinkling soundscape, built on layered synths and radiant pianos that outline the experiences that have led him to the present day.

Julyssa Lopez is a writer based in Berlin, who covers music, art, and culture. Her work has appeared in The Washington Post and The Fader, and on NPR.

Helado Negro, aka Roberto Carlos Lange, has always made deeply intimate music. He wrote his last album, 2016's *Private Energy*, in response to the destructive rhetoric of Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Songs like "Young Latin and Proud" and "It's My Brown Skin" became defiant anthems and understated forms of resistance in Latinx communities. (A T-shirt that Lange sold on tour with the words YOUNG, LATIN & PROUD became a common accessory at Latinx shows and immigration protests.) But while *Private Energy* empowered people to stand up for themselves, *This Is How You Smile* gently lays out the ways to endure as the fight continues.

The album is an inward-looking exercise that shares a commonality with the popular Audre Lorde mantra "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Combating oppression is necessary, but it doesn't work long-term if the individuals engaged in that struggle burn out. Lange centers the album's bruised and beautiful opener, "Please Won't Please," on the weariness that many people of color feel after years under a threatening government: "And we'll light / Our lives on fire / Just to see / If anyone will come / Rescue / What's left of me," he murmurs over dreamy piano and a light bass that pulses like a tired heartbeat. Still, resilience and spiritual fortitude linger in lines like "Lifelong history shows / That brown won't go / Brown just glows."

The tender ache of "Please Won't Please" sets the stage for the rest of the album. As Lange takes stock of "what's left of me," he seeks solace in nostalgia and quiet remembrances of his loved ones. Over the strum of an acoustic guitar on "Imagining What to Do," he recalls nights spent in bed with his partner, waiting for the cold, dark winter to end: "We'll stay under the covers / Until there's no snow." The bouncier "Seen My Aura" is a head-bop back to simpler childhood afternoons with his older brother: "I got no shoes on / Walking on sun-burned pavement, trying to look cool."

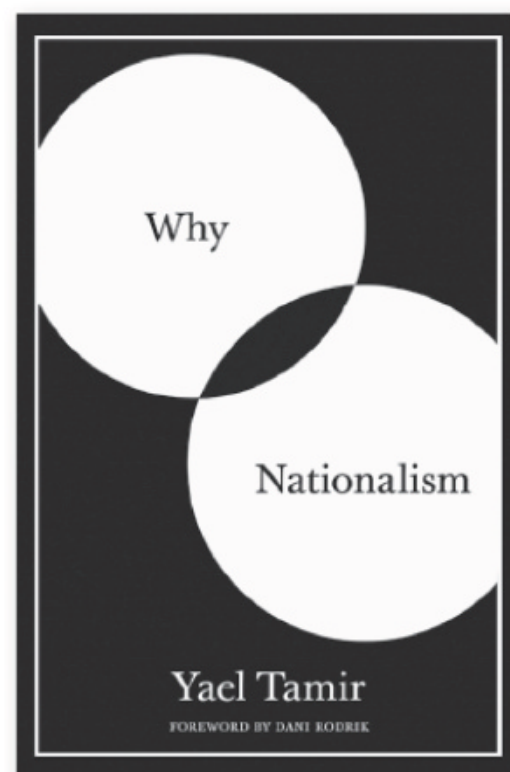
And while Lange delves into highly personal memories on the album, he doesn't offer every detail of them to his listeners. When he released "Running," one of the early singles, he said that it contains "buried sentiments and personal histories. Most of it is just for me and some for you." His choice to keep a few things to himself is a larger statement of the album as an act of self-care. Even in the process of sharing music, Lange reserves some space and privacy just for himself.

Like the daughter in the Kincaid story, Lange is guided by his upbringing in an immigrant family. He flips between English and Spanish, something he's done on previous records, to reflect his bicultural identity. The subtle melody of "País Nublado" resembles a lulling bossa nova, and it carries Lange along as he reflects on those who came before him. He promises in Spanish that there will be time to explore a "country of clouds," and then, in English, he pledges, "We'll take our time / Knowing that we'll be here long after you." The song is almost like a call-and-response to and from his ancestors, and to future generations.

Lange's masterful use of distortion and sound warping is particularly effective on an album interested in fragments of memory and hazy vagaries. The song "Fantasma Vaga," which means "Wandering Ghost," starts with wobbling loops and crackling synth noise that give the recording a haunted feeling. However, midway through, the track breaks into a lush arrangement that includes intricate keyboard melodies and soothing vocals from the Colombian electronic artist Ela Minus (she's one of several friends and artists who make an appearance on the album; the credits also include Sufjan Stevens and Xenia Rubinos). Throughout the album, Steinway baby-grand pianos and classical guitars appear alongside Moog and Organelle synths, making *This Is How You Smile* a tight-knit tapestry of analog and digital sounds. The combination helps bring out the emotional current and warmth of Lange's recollections.

As the album draws to a close, Lange reminisces one last time about bursts of unbridled happiness and offers a way to bring that energy into the future: "Take care of people today, hold their hand / Call them up if you wanna say, / 'Hey, I miss the way we used to hug / We used to dance a tiny bit,'" he recommends on "Two Lucky." He sits in the past just a little longer as he muses, "Just kids with luck, we lasted so long / We knew nothing about this shit."

A tiny interlude called "My Name Is for My Friends" closes the album. It's built on samples that include celebratory cheers from a wedding and ambient noise from an "Abolish ICE" demonstration, the two scenarios merging jubilation and resistance into one. In the album's credits, Lange reveals that the track also includes the sound of "a man staring up at the sky." That might be the best image to end the project with: a person deep in thought, wistfully reliving memories that become a source of strength. ■



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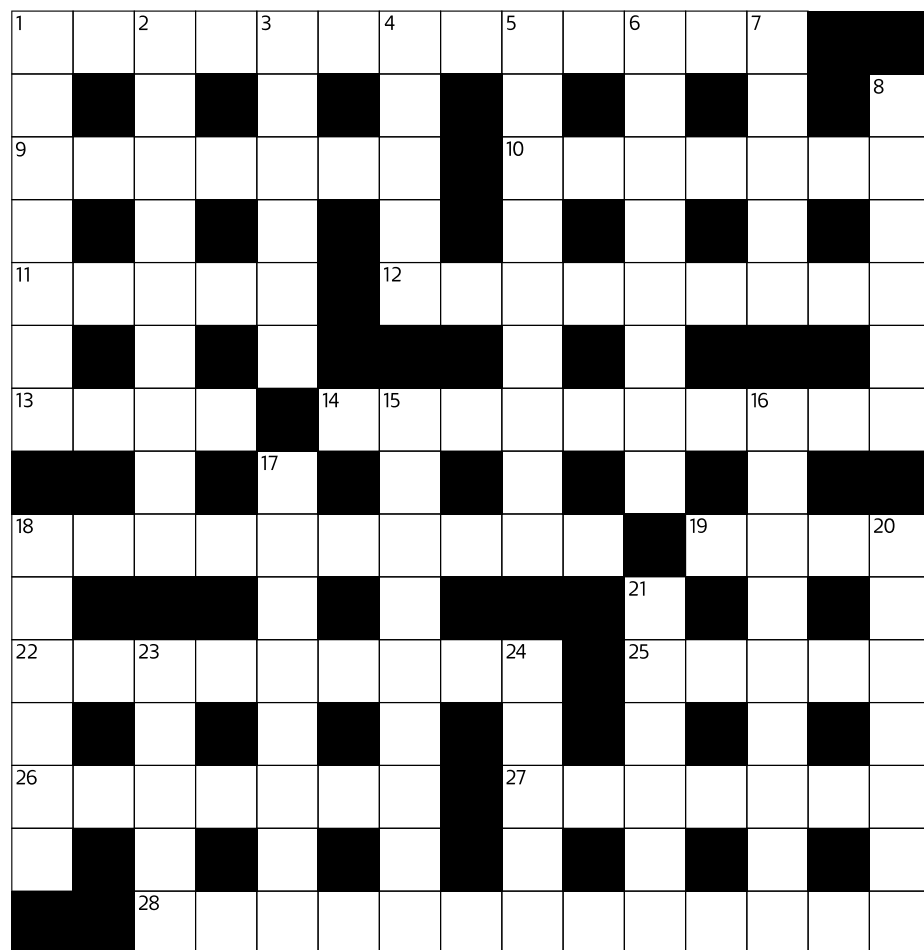
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JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO



ACROSS

- 1 Antique bicycle in famous lane with distant object (5-8)
 9 Old vessel swapping adjacent components with one getting the blame for harbor craft (7)
 10 Look into return of fire pit (7)
 11 Subway ran into European capital halfway (5)
 12 Inside shelter, worth changing direction (9)
 13 Lure of shortened cable (4)
 14 Tuesday Weld's parts frequently repeated: This one is very much like another (10)
 18 Rascal gets into variegated pastels in multilayered document (10)
 19 Missile silo's cover: something to chew over (4)
 22 Boy rested uneasily where seafood can be found (6,3)
 25 and 16 Poet sent back fruit to daughter adopted by icy, ghoulish family relation (5,9)
 26 Rise unsteadily to swallow 59 potions (7)
 27 The Rev. Spooner's claimed the fourth locale in the Middle East (4,3)

- 28 Novice members repeatedly appear to be trouble (13)

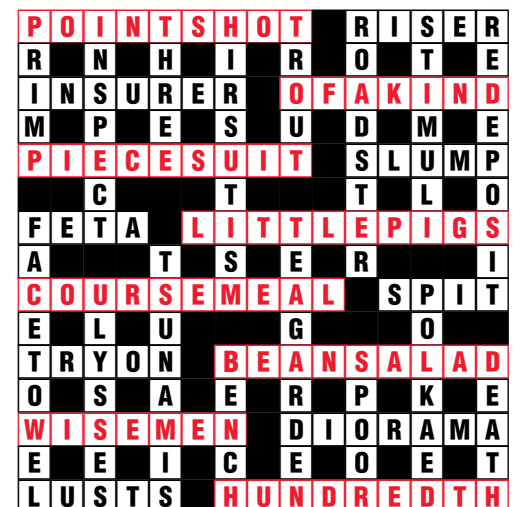
DOWN

- 1 Pick up military shirt in a river... (7)
 2 ...near conclusion of first autumn sunset (9)
 3 Bush's torture lawyer who heard a call for attention (3-3)
 4 When eavesdropping, check off bug in operation... (5)
 5 ...arranging tech to look up piece of spyware (what bugs could give you) (3,6)
 6 By and by, returning Yale student greeting hosts, looking pale (2,1,5)
 7 Complaint, for example, raised about initials on a gravestone (5)
 8 City in 12 deletes article to reach legal agreement (6)
 15 "Sink was hot" (a phrase that often precedes "boy") (9)
 16 See 25
 17 Protagonist in *Memento*, say, misconstrued as cinema (8)
 18 Bird's plunder? Just the opposite! (6)
 20 Where you might find young children rejecting sexually suggestive commercial with energy (3,4)
 21 I relocated to the bottom of no mountain (6)
 23 Genre featuring two outspoken Greek characters (3-2)
 24 Ploy of Pentagon agency, briefly supported by a couple of generals (5)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3496

ACROSS 1 POINTS (anag.) + HOT
 6 RIS + ER (rev.) 9 anag. 10 O(FAKIN')D
 11 PIE + CESUIT (anag.) 12 S + LUMP
 13 F + ETA (rev.) 14 LIT + TLEP (rev.) + I(G)S 17 anag. 19 2 defs. 21 alternate letters
 22 BEANS A LAD 25 W + [s]ISEMEN (rev.) 26 D(IO)RAMA 27 initial letters
 28 HUN(DRED)T + H

DOWN 1 P(RIMP) 2 INS(P)ECT
 3 anag. 4 anag. 5 T(R)OUT
 6 ROA(D)STER 7 S(TIM)ULI (*Luis* anag.)
 8 RED + EP + O'S + IT
 13 F(ACE + TOW)EL[t] 15 TE(A + GARD)EN (*drag* rev.) 16 TSU(NA)M + I (rev.) + S 18 U(LYS)SES (*shy* anag.)
 20 PO(LKAE)D (*kale* anag.) 22 BEN + CH
 23 SPOO + R (rev.) 24 D(EAT)H





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