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IN THESE TIMES

AMERICAN NARCISSUS



Sarah Lazare
investigates the
lasting impacts of
uranium mining
on Navajo land



LIVORNO, ITALY—Demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine spread through more than 80 Italian cities on September 22—and prevented ships linked to Israel's war effort from docking in Livorno. Italian trade union Unione Sindacale di Base called the strike amid threats by Israel against the Global Sumud Flotilla, a civil initiative to break the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip. Following the unrest, Italy's defense minister, Guido Crosetto, condemned an Israeli drone strike on the flotilla and sent a naval ship to try to assist the trip. (Photo by Laura Lezza/Getty Images)



ON THE COVER

American Narcissus 16

More than mere vanity, Pete Hegseth's self-styled 'secretary of war' persona embodies the far right's gendered political theatrics

BY KIM KELLY



LABOR

They Worked Underground in the Uranium Mines. They've Been Surrounded by Death Ever Since.

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The Secretary of All Wars

Pete Hegseth's MAGA vision for the "Department of War" ultimately makes no distinction between military, social, cultural and religious conflicts

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"Art is a Commons"

An exclusive conversation with aja monet on organizing from a place of love, the legacy of the Maroons and the urgency of art in these times

BY FATIMA JALLOH

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“ No political movement can be healthy unless it has its own press to inform it, educate it and orient it. ”
 —IN THESE TIMES FOUNDER JAMES WEINSTEIN

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Illustration by Molly Crabapple
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RESIST

DEIR AL BALAH, GAZA—Palestinian children and others in the Nuseirat refugee camp celebrate news of a cease-fire agreement on October 9 that could mean the beginning of the end of the genocide in Gaza. The reports were also met with trepidation. For example, in Chicago's southwest suburbs—home to the largest Palestinian American population in the country, known as “Little Palestine”—dozens gathered at a rally both celebratory and cautious. Speakers there said they had little faith in any deal, pointing to earlier broken agreements. (Photo by Moiz Salhi/Anadolu via Getty Images)

AS "IMPERATIVE" NOW AS IT WAS IN 1983.

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Bernard Sanders, Mayor, Burlington, Vermont

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ARTICLE

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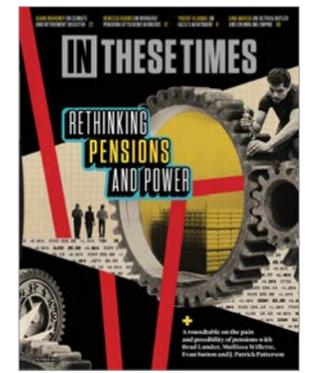
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IN CONVERSATION



BIGGER AGENDAS

Our pension is shot where I'm at (Ohio). They're guaranteeing just over \$20 a month for 2,000 hours worked, so a 30-year career will get you a pension of less than \$700 a month. Iron workers, masons and laborers all have pensions in critical status as well, but ours is the worst. Hopefully they can get it sorted, but I'm not counting on our pension for my retirement.

— SHUT-UP-AND-SQUAT via Reddit

Although the article only touches upon it, this illustrates another reason why control of the White House is so critical for labor ("Pensions Can Be Labor's Weapon," September). The president doesn't just dictate control of the National Labor Relations Board and the interpretation and execution of federal labor law; the president's administration also controls the regulatory application of employee benefits law.

When the White House changes control, the question of the extent that pension fund trustees can consider environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors when investing gets batted back and forth as predictably as a Ping-Pong match. The Trump II administration predictably withdrew Biden administration ESG rules to

prepare its own, just as the Biden administration had done to Trump I rules.

And don't forget that "the unions" alone can't simply review the law and regulation and then decide what to do with pension investments. These pension funds, by law, are governed 50-50 by union and employer trustees. When all the arguing is done (and in light of the constant presence of fiduciary liability), this is one reason pension investments are often run small- conservatively.

—WOOWO0293 via Reddit

PICK YOUR BATTLES

Wild how our retirement savings can work against

everything we believe in ("Financing Our Own Destruction," September). Makes you think about Dylan Warren's point that markets aren't neutral—they're a battleground. Love that unions are leading the charge to change this.

—KIYASI DURDU Peachtree City, Ga.

STEP IT UP

Peaceful protest is not just a constitutional right, but a constitutional duty ("Even When They Gas Us," online). None is safe from 47's attacks on peaceful protesters until all are safe.

—JERRI MYERS via Facebook

US POSTAL SERVICE STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT & CIRCULATION

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MICHAEL NIGRO/PACIFIC PRESS/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES

On the Trail with Zohran

NEW YORK CITY—The day New York City Mayor Eric Adams dropped out of the mayoral race was a beautiful Sunday with the kind of bright and just-warm-enough weather that makes anywhere feel like a nice place to be. At noon on September 28, deep in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn, a knot of two dozen mostly young people stood by a table in a playground under the dappled shade of London plane trees. They were being instructed on how to do voter canvassing—and hoping to usher in the future.

A group of reporters loitered on the park's edge, there because the candidate of the future was on his way. Zohran Mamdani, the democratic socialist state assembly member, has built a comfortable double-digit lead in the polls over Andrew Cuomo, the turgid former governor whom Mamdani already whipped in the June primary. After Adams—the bizarre and scandal-wracked current mayor—gave up on his doomed reelection effort, the city's moneyed establishment was forced to grimly rally around Cuomo, whose power always rested on intimidation more than love or respect. Now the establishment finds itself stuck with a candidate who no longer

inspires fear, while Mamdani has inspired more love in the city than anyone since “pizza rat” went viral a decade ago.

At 12:30 p.m., Mamdani hopped out of a Chevy Suburban and strode briskly up Madison Street to give a pep talk to this small segment of his army of volunteers. As he did, angry urban bees harassed the surrounding reporters; one fled the scene in tears after being stung. It was a reminder that New York is a city of small territorial kingdoms, all fiercely guarded.

Part of Mamdani's charisma stems from his genuine embrace—rather than loathing—of the city's inherently chaotic nature. Unlike his opponents, he seems to actually like the city he aspires to lead. He told a story about going to a Wu-Tang Clan concert in Brooklyn this summer, after his primary win made him newly famous, and being asked to pose for pictures in the audience. One man called Mamdani in for a selfie but then, just in time for the photo, extended his middle finger. “To me, that's also New York City,” Mamdani said, smiling at the memory. “New Yorkers deserve a mayor that they can see, that they can speak to, that they can even shout at.”

If he wins, Mamdani will certainly get his wish. The press gaggle in the park was a small taste of the shouting he stands to receive if he emerges victorious in the November 4 general election. Fox 5 challenged him on public safety; the *New York Post* tried to get him to

Above: Zohran Mamdani speaks to volunteers at his Bedford-Stuyvesant canvass launch on September 28.

“disavow” the positive statement from the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) about the late Assata Shakur; a local reporter asked if he was betraying his activist bona fides by not calling for a more rapid closure of the Rikers Island jail. Mamdani has already driven local Republicans to cartoonish, head-spinning levels of rage, and it is likely he will piss off at least a portion of his DSA base as soon as he begins to do the actual business of governing. The tabloids will call him a crazy communist and some socialists will call him a sellout and certain constituents will flip him off at rap concerts. That's also New York City! You've got to love it if you want to lead it.

There will also be pressure from Washington, D.C., where President Donald Trump is vowing to cut off the city's federal funds if Mamdani wins. Mamdani said a National Guard deployment to New York should be considered an “inevitability.”

“That is Donald Trump's politics,” Mamdani said. “That is his agenda, to seek to create this crisis in cities across the country.” He pointed to Chicago's resistance to the federal incursion as a model of what can be done. “It has nothing to do with the question of crime ... If there is a real focus on meeting the needs of working people, then they should begin by overturning the legislation that they just passed which will throw those same working people off their health insurance.”

The famous quote from former New York City Mayor John Lindsay, that the post is the “second-toughest job in America,” may be underselling the situation. Mamdani will be expected to deal with potholes and police, snow removal and garbage collection,

and an aspiring dictator in the nation's capital determined to crush him, all while a nationwide movement of leftists places their hopes and dreams on his shoulders. Mamdani's unexpected rise is—not to put too much pressure on him—perhaps the *only* non-depressing political story of 2025. The triumphant culmination of that story will depend on whether his 75,000 volunteers are more powerful than \$50 million in desperate super PAC spending by panicked rich people.

As Mamdani's canvassers fanned out, they were walking in the footsteps of Shirley Chisholm, who had risen from that very district to become, in 1972, the first Black woman to run for the presidential nomination on a major ticket. As kids kicked soccer balls and an old man sang along with a speaker blasting Barry White, it was easy to believe our future would indeed be bright. Wu-Tang once said “cash rules everything around me”; Mamdani was out to prove that wrong.

It felt like New York City was, once again, ready to give America something new.

HAMILTON NOLAN is a labor writer for *In These Times*.

Zoning for the Future in Northwest Arkansas

FAYETTEVILLE, ARK.—If this were the first city council meeting someone attended in Fayetteville, the construction proposal for The Hub would likely seem like a good prospect: seven stories of sleek new

THIS MONTH IN LATE CAPITALISM

THE “NEXT SCARLETT JOHANSSON OR NATALIE

Portman” might just be Tilly Norwood—according to the founder of the production studio that generated the digital character using artificial intelligence software. After the bot's appearance generated some interest from talent agents, the Screen Actors Guild deemed it necessary to issue a statement: “To be clear, ‘Tilly Norwood’ is not an actor.” The fact that anyone's unclear on that point means dark times ahead.



WHO WANTS TO LIVE FOREVER? VLADIMIR

Putin and Xi Jinping, apparently. The pair of 72-year-olds were caught on a hot mic in September discussing via translators how “humans may [soon] live to 150” and “continuously transplanted” organs means “the longer you live, the younger you become,” possibly to the point of “immortality,” which all sounds like it should've been a subplot on *True Blood*.

ELON MUSK WAS BRIEFLY STRIPPED OF HIS

title “richest man in the world” after Oracle's Larry Ellison saw his company's stock soar and then land on a net worth of \$383 billion. What led to the windfall? An announcement that Oracle would be moving deeper into ... AI. The takeaway? Simulating human intelligence is now more valuable than the real thing.

A THIRD OF THE INTERNET IS JUST BOT TRAFFIC,

according to new research from Cloudflare. That fact gives some credence to “dead internet theory,” the idea that the internet is now (or will eventually become) mostly automated slop, rather than a human-centered information superhighway. Don't worry, though; the algorithms still need living, breathing beings online so they have consumers to manipulate.





housing, in a city with desperate need for more of it, with 37 of its 312 apartments reserved as income-controlled “workforce units.” As the council members and a standing-room-only crowd listened on August 5, the representative from Chicago-based housing developer Core Spaces presented a plan that seemed almost ideal for the Northwest Arkansas college town.

For the past several years, Fayetteville—with a growing population of 100,000—has been slowly awakening to the fact it’s no longer as sleepy as it once was, and it’s grappling with what sort of place it wants to become. With Walmart and Tyson Foods headquartered nearby, nearly unchecked growth at the University of Arkansas (which leapt from 21,000 students to nearly 34,000 over the past 15 years), plus eight consecutive years of landing on *U.S. News & World Report’s* top 10 “Best Places to Live” list, Fayetteville stands at the center of a rapid population boom across Northwest Arkansas. But the influx of new people and money has forced the city to weigh growth against the well-being of current residents.

In August, Core Spaces was appealing a previous denial of its request to rezone the property its Hub

development would be built on, offering a new proposal that promised to, as Core Spaces’ representative put it at the council meeting, “set a standard for responsible and balanced student focused development,” protect affordable housing and mitigate the displacement of non-student residents. Current lessees living at the proposed site of the Hub would be offered \$10,000 to relocate and, in some cases, have priority on the new apartments.

But when the semantics were stripped away, the proposal amounted to yet another student-housing complex catering to largely wealthy, out-of-state students—one of nearly 20 such private dorms built in the past 15 years—that required the demolition of two affordable apartment complexes and a historic home in one of the most desirable (and last affordable) areas of the city.

As the public comment period suggested, with 18 of 23 people speaking against the rezoning, this meeting wasn’t the beginning of the debate, but another installment in a drawn-out fight over the past year—which has included the creation of a housing crisis task force, a slew of city code proposals, a cap on short-term rentals and untold comments across social media.

“The University of Arkansas burdened the city of Fayetteville with housing students that they over-recruited,” said one resident, noting the school failed to “work with the city on a timeline to house these overly recruited students.”

“Inconvenience is when your DoorDash shows up late or your pizza is cold,” said another. “It’s not being asked to find a new place to live in one of the most challenging rental markets in the country.”

“Core Spaces does not come to Fayetteville with a beaming national reputation,” said a third, citing the firm’s D-minus rating from the Better Business Bureau and a 2023 *Vice* article about a tenant union that had formed in California to fight the “Google of student housing.”

While student housing has become a hot-button issue in Fayetteville—with the college student population forecast to peak in 2026—the bigger-picture issue is that the city was caught flat-footed in figuring out how to handle its own growth.

Before May, for example, the city’s code didn’t distinguish between student-housing complexes and multifamily development, creating a loophole for out-of-state developers to build “multifamily housing” properties that are, in reality, high-end, privately owned student dormitories. Legally, the city could do little to stop them, since the developers were following the city’s own rules.

Earlier this year, speaking about another controversial student-housing proposal, council member Scott Berna said, “I’d vote no on this in a heartbeat if I could, but I don’t feel like I can.”

Above: New student housing like the building rendered here in downtown Fayetteville, Ark. caters to wealthier, transient out-of-staters as the affordable housing crisis continues to escalate.

IMAGE VIA CORE SPACES

Before the city closed that loophole in the spring—giving Fayetteville’s planning commission added discretion to approve or deny student-housing projects before they move into development—the project Berna spoke against came up for consideration: a seven-story, 185-unit building proposed by the Indiana-based development corporation Trinitas Ventures. After Fayetteville’s planning commission denied the proposal, Trinitas filed a lawsuit against the city, which is currently working its way through the courts.

Similar fights have unfolded in college towns across the country. In Tuscaloosa, Ala., in 2014, Trinitas forced through a 266-unit project as

the city tightened its zoning laws “to curb the recent unchecked growth of student housing apartment complexes,” as the *Tuscaloosa News* reported. Likewise, in Oxford, Ohio, and Ann Arbor, Mich., lawsuits filed by Trinitas over the past decade have forced the cities to allow new private dorm construction.

Whether it’s bad-cop lawsuits from Trinitas or good-cop inducements from Core Spaces, it’s hard not to see growing desperation from developers as they search for new places to build.

At a national industry conference in 2024, the CEO of Trinitas and the managing development director for Core Spaces spoke on a panel, warning about the proliferation of

new regulations and permitting processes that could slow construction. “A lot of council members and planning staff [have] become savvy,” said Jonathan Kubow, of Core Spaces, “because they have seen more student housing and know what to look for.”

Back in Fayetteville, the city council seemed to prove this point, voting 5-1 to uphold the denial of Core Spaces’ proposal—perhaps not just becoming savvy to developers’ tactics but also more honest with themselves about the city they want to be.

JORDAN P. HICKEY is a Northwest Arkansas-based freelance journalist with work in the *Washington Post*, *Investigate Midwest*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Southern Foodways Alliance* and other outlets.

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

ALL THE NEWS THAT WAS FIT TO PRINT—AND WHAT GOT PRINTED INSTEAD

- Top-Left (HYPED/TRIVIAL):** Reports that the Rapture was scheduled for September 23 were greatly exaggerated.
- Top-Right (HYPED/VITAL):** Major medical groups all say Tylenol is safe during pregnancy despite President Trump’s claim it causes autism.
- Bottom-Left (IGNORED/TRIVIAL):** Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum announced state-made “wellness chocolate” bars, which sounds a *choco-lot* better than other health food.
- Bottom-Right (IGNORED/VITAL):** A Texas judge sentenced an anti-genocide protester to six months in jail rather than take the jury’s recommendation of a fine and community supervision.

Other items in the grid:

- Top-Right (HYPED/VITAL):** The Israeli military began a ground invasion of Gaza City the same day a UN commission finally called out the genocide.
- Bottom-Left (IGNORED/TRIVIAL):** Homeland Security co-opted Pokemon for a racist recruitment video, and Nintendo fans want the company to sue.
- Bottom-Right (IGNORED/VITAL):** Former al-Qaeda affiliate and Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa met with former CIA director David Petraeus for diplomacy talks.
- Bottom-Left (IGNORED/TRIVIAL):** The Searchlight Institute, a new Democratic think tank, suggests Dems downplay climate change and LGBTQ rights, which sounds like what a Republican think tank would suggest.

THE DIG

DISCUSSING THE POLITICS OF
CLASS WARFARE



WITH
**DANIEL
DENVIR**

A PODCAST FROM
JACOBIN MAGAZINE

LISTEN AT THEDIGRADIO.COM

VIEWPOINT

SHANE BURLEY

Charlie Kirk and the Free Speech Hoax

AS PEOPLE TRIP ALL OVER THEMSELVES TO denounce political violence, a singular characterization has permeated all mainstream perspectives regarding Charlie Kirk: that he was killed for having an opinion.

It's the same from *The Free Press* to podcasts like *The Fifth Column*. According to reactionary centrist Bari Weiss (and new editor-in-chief of CBS News), on X: "Whether you agree with him or not is completely, utterly, totally beside the point. We won't do it. Je suis Charlie." According to liberal columnist Ezra Klein in the *New York Times*, "Kirk was practicing politics in exactly the right way."

But the Right's response to the murder of Charlie Kirk—which is, of course, unequivocally horrible—reveals just how disingenuous its advocacy of free speech really is.

Turning Point USA was founded in 2012 as a 501(c)3 non-profit, and it immediately plugged into the Tea Party movement. In 2019, it expanded into Turning Point Action, a 501(c)4 that funneled students into electoral organizing and voter drives (and it was fined for violating donor disclosure rules). Its 2024 "Chase the Vote" campaign brought field organizers into purple states to push for Trump and right-wing candidates. At the end of the fiscal year that concluded in June 2024, Turning Point had a revenue of around \$85 million dollars, largely from confidential donors. All the while, Kirk was receiving an extravagant salary and leading Turning Point as a sophisticated propaganda machine to shift public opinion more militantly rightward.

The notion that Kirk was simply a person with a conservative viewpoint misunderstands both why Kirk was involved in public debates and why they were successful as political theater. Liberal America holds debate in high regard, and it is exactly this high regard that Kirk was able to exploit. Through Kirk's "debate"-and-switch tactics, GOP leaders, Donald Trump in particular, were able to penetrate the wall most people erect against political propaganda. Those messages then offered a patina of legitimacy through the format's use of liberal college students as strawmen. These were political events designed to push the agenda of right-wing power, and they got results.

When Kirk debated a 20-year-old undergrad, he did so with a team training him on how to package disingenuous arguments in pithy talking points to humiliate his opponent in front of millions of people. Kirk formulated his messaging alongside Republican pollsters and lobbyists, negotiating how

his characterization can help those in power to push through their agenda and repackage it to the American public to decommission dissent and manufacture consent: Kirk demanded an investigation into Epstein, until Trump changed his mind. As the Republican Party shifted against LGBTQ issues, so did Kirk, particularly when it came to demonizing trans people. Kirk openly spoke against pro-Palestine events and called for Muslim speakers, such as broadcaster Mehdi Hasan, to be deplatformed.

The connections between the official organs of government and Turning Point's campus outreach are a lot deeper than their presentation indicates. For example, in a 2019 incident, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott supported state legislation to undo a student senate resolution that attempted to bar Turning Point on the Texas State University campus. (The resolution was merely symbolic, since the senate didn't actually possess that authority.) When Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis put massive constraints on college curricula and what professors could say in the classroom, with SB 266 and the "Stop WOKE Act," Turning Point's support did not wane, and it often gave positive reviews of DeSantis' policies.

Kirk also developed a Campus Watch program to train student activists in how to bait professors. One formerly tenured professor I interviewed out of Texas was beset by neo-Nazis and militia members after Turning Point publicized some posts on his personal Facebook page. That campaign eventually lost him his career and sent him to the hospital multiple times for PTSD symptoms.

One graduate student I spoke with in Illinois had Turning Point activists home in on him, which escalated into what he understood as veiled threats against his children.



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FOR THE WIN

SOLAR AND WIND ENERGY PRODUCTION

is now an economically viable alternative to fossil-fuel growth, thanks to a massive Chinese foreign investment of roughly \$227 billion—more than the entire Marshall Plan, in inflation-adjusted dollars. As of 2024, Chinese-made solar and wind appliances have become so inexpensive and available that 90% of wind and solar projects produced power more cheaply than fossil fuels.



TEAMSTERS—1,400-STRONG—WON WAGE

increases at the University of Minnesota after a massive strike rally and threats by the music festival Farm Aid to cancel its 50,000-person concert at the school to honor the picket. According to the union's press statement, the strike was brought on by a supposedly "last, best and final offer" by university administrators that included lower wage increases and a cold December contract expiration date.

NEW MEXICO WILL BE THE FIRST STATE TO

offer free, universal childcare. New Mexicans will be able to enroll starting November 1, regardless of income—a reported savings of \$12,000 per child, per family. New Mexico's governor also announced a plan to build and renovate childcare facilities through a nearly \$13 million low-interest loan fund and is requesting \$20 million more from the legislature in the upcoming session.

UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTERS IN ILLINOIS

will be required to offer abortion pills, a first for the Midwest. Alicia Hurtado, advocacy and communications director at the Chicago Abortion Fund, told *Ms.* magazine the legislation is a "critical step in ensuring that Illinois students can access medication abortion care when they need it—without

leaving campus or facing delays." It's a departure from many of Illinois' neighbors, which have enacted stringent abortion bans.



The Right has long sustained working-class support by playing the victim. From fascist Europe to Cold War America, reactionary movements have framed their aggression as self-defense. Today, this persists in appeals to cultural grievance and racial anxiety, obscuring the immense financial and institutional power behind them.

These were not isolated cases. This shift into what has been called "right-wing cancel culture" was pioneered by Turning Point to silence anyone whose speech it deemed unfit. What's more, Kirk backed Republican crack-downs on protests against genocide, and he supported police use of force against students critical of Israel. Despite this background of right-wing violence, Kirk once claimed "radical left organizations in this country" are the ones "fomenting violence," according to Trump's Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller.

The Right has long sustained working-class support by playing the victim. From fascist Europe to Cold War America, reactionary movements have framed their aggression as self-defense. Today, this persists in appeals to cultural grievance and racial anxiety, obscuring the immense financial and institutional power behind them.

Free expression is a talking point the Right uses when it wants to indict the Left for criticizing bigoted speech, but it has never taken the implications of free speech seriously. To do so means creating a society in which rights are uniform and accessible, where access to the media infrastructure is not only accorded to the wealthy, and where people feel fundamentally safe to be their own unique self. This was never a reality Kirk even had the pretext of supporting, and in his name, Republicans seem bent on destroying any remaining artifact of the quest for a free society. Meanwhile, Trump has capitalized on Kirk's death in a way that shields the Right from criticism by projecting suspicion on dissent.

If anything proves that Kirk's supporters—and the entire Republican Party—are not genuine free speech advocates, it's their reaction over the past couple of months. ■

VIEWPOINT

ALBERTO TOSCANO

The Secretary of All Wars

Pete Hegseth's MAGA vision for the "Department of War" ultimately makes no distinction between military, social, cultural and religious conflicts

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP ON September 5 signed the 200th executive order of his second term, bypassing the congressional approval constitutionally required for a full renaming of the Department of Defense by introducing the "Department of War" as a "secondary" designation. Ever preoccupied with names (remember the "Gulf of America"?), Trump's order aims to advertise "our willingness and availability to wage war to secure what is ours."

At the public signing, Trump presented the 1947 name change as the end of a century and a half of American military victories: "And then we decided to go woke and we changed the name to the Department of Defense." The millions of casualties of U.S. wars since, from Korea and Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan—wars replete with racist justifications for mass murder—would no doubt be surprised to know they were victims of "woke." (Trump seems to have already forgotten his own identification with the fictional Lt. Col. Bill Kilgore in his infamous "Chipocalypse Now" social media post.) His cartoonish and revanchist narrative ignored the fact that the largely euphemistic shift from "war" to "defense" was a global postwar phenomenon, happening in the wake of the Nuremberg Charter's outlawing of "crimes against peace," including "wars of aggression."

The notion that America's military prowess has been sapped by wokeness is core to MAGA ideology. It's why Trumpists cannot talk about armed conflict without tethering it to culture wars. Standing by Trump in the Oval Office, "Secretary of War" Pete Hegseth broke into a cringeworthy but revealing rhyme: "We're going to go on offense, not just on defense. Maximum lethality, not tepid legality. Violent effect, not politically correct."

Having taken the highly unusual move of summoning hundreds of generals to Quantico on September 30—leading to speculation about radical shakeups or even coup preparations—Hegseth railed about the need to put an end to the "Woke Department" he inherited from the Biden administration, with its "toxic ideological garbage." He went on: "No more identity months, DEI offices, dudes in dresses. No more climate change worship, no more division, distraction or gender delusions, no more debris." Critical to this purge, it seems, are grooming, fitness and masculinity. Cutting beards (because



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"we don't have a military full of Nordic pagans"), losing weight ("fat troops are tiring to look at") and enforcing the "highest male standard only" are the mission objectives.

As for strategy? Hegseth kept it simple: "To our enemies, FAFO."

In his 2020 book, *American Crusade: Our Fight to Stay Free*, Hegseth exploited the fact that the language of war easily slips from the material to the figurative, as well as from enemies foreign to domestic, writing: "Arm yourself—metaphorically, intellectually, physically. Our fight is not with guns. Yet."

His 2024 follow-up, *The War on Warriors: Behind the Betrayal of the Men Who Keep Us Free*, elaborated on the argument that the Left's successes in the culture wars have hamstrung the U.S. ability to fight real wars (with real men). A veteran of the illegal invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, Hegseth constantly links to his self-image as a Christian nationalist soldier fighting "Islamists," and the rise of MAGA is pictured as payback for a betrayal: "Busy killing Islamists in shithole countries—and then betrayed by our leaders—our warriors have every reason to let America's dynasty fade away. Leftists stole a lot from us, but we won't let them take this. Time for round two—we won't miss this war." And unless victory is achieved, American war and American warriors will be doomed: "Make no mistake about it: the Left wants to destroy the one institution standing between them and total control—the United States military. The Left captured the military quickly, and we must reclaim it at a faster pace. We must wage a frontal assault. A swift counterattack, in broad daylight."

Beyond muzzling the media, Hegseth's crusade against the emasculation of the warrior class is focused on two enemies: diversity and legality. The Pentagon has joined the campaign against DEI and "gender ideology" with its own book bans and purges of website content, and it eliminated

the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services. Press Secretary Kingsley Wilson declared on X that the committee was “focused on advancing a divisive feminist agenda that hurts combat readiness.” In *War on Warriors*, sounding the loudest of dog whistles, Hegseth blasted the Biden administration for promoting “woke ‘diverse’ recruits” and sidelining “patriotic, faith-filled, and brave young Americans.” In Hegseth’s vision, the Army could be a “deradicalization machine.” As he declared: “We want those diverse recruits—pumped full of vaccines and even more poisonous ideologies—to be sharing a basic training bunk with sane Americans.” Whereas universities, which Hegseth seems to think are uniformly “Marxist,” are merely places where “underprivileged kids learn how to hobnob with the elites,” he imagines the military as the institution in which “potential Antifa members learn what it really means to use force for just and honorable reasons.”

In Hegseth’s worldview, justice and (“tepid”) legality are not synonymous, and his animus against diversity is only matched by his hostility to the lawyers that curb the violent projection of American power. Before joining Trump’s cabinet, Hegseth had already railed against the judge advocate generals (JAGs, derided by Hegseth as “jagoffs”) meant to provide independent counsel on the legality of military actions. For Hegseth, it’s the fault of lawyers that the United States hasn’t won any wars since World War II, and he has fired top lawyers for the Army, Navy and Air Force, claiming they were “roadblocks to orders that are given by a commander in chief.” Hegseth’s personal attorney, Tim Parlatore, who represented him in a sexual assault case and worked for Trump on the Mar-a-Lago classified documents and January 6 cases, has been tasked with reviewing JAGs, while Hegseth is now trying to redeploy hundreds of them as temporary immigration judges.

The gagging of military lawyers fits tidily with the “Department of War’s” pivot to a hemispheric notion of the “homeland,” which connects sending troops to Los Angeles or “war-ravaged Portland” as backup for Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the extrajudicial killings of alleged drug traffickers off the coast of Venezuela. Hegseth has even mused about the possibility of striking cartels



within Mexican territory. Meanwhile, the spurious idea that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is the head of a *Cártel de los Soles* and allied with the *Tren de Aragua* gang, as well as the baseless notion that Venezuela is a central conduit for fentanyl and other drugs into the United States, are being used to justify a naval buildup in the Caribbean with a clear menace of regime change. Obvious parallels are being made with George H.W. Bush’s 1989 invasion of Panama. A draft bill is going around Congress that would grant Trump powers to order military action in a “drug trafficking war.” Harvard Law School professor and former George W. Bush official Jack Goldsmith has referred to it as “an open-ended war authorization against an untold number of countries, organizations, and persons that the president could deem within its scope.”

Hegseth is profoundly at ease with this expansive and amorphous conception of war. Speaking in Panama City at the Central American Security Conference in April, he linked immigration and drug cartels with the idea that “the era of capitulating to coercion by the Communist Chinese is over,” referencing China’s “growing and adversarial control of strategic land and critical infrastructure.” This belligerent upgrade of the Monroe Doctrine was presented as backed by a restoration of the “warrior ethos” and encapsulated in a slogan: “To put America first, we will put the Americas first.” Apparently, this projection of U.S. military power across the region is “not globalism or interventionism,” but a “golden age of shared national interests.” In a Fox interview after the attack on a speedboat in the Caribbean that killed 11 people, Hegseth elaborated that here is where U.S. power should be projected, not in “far-flung places that had a nebulous connection to our own security in the homeland.”

As historian Greg Grandin told me, what we are witnessing

in this hemispheric pivot is a regional hegemon in a fractured world trying to secure its hinterlands. In his view, the administration’s “war party”—Hegseth, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Drug Enforcement Agency head Terry Cole and Vice President JD Vance—thinks “the key to the region is taking out Maduro, after which Nicaragua and Cuba would fall, after which the more independent-minded center-leftists who sell their soy and copper to China will be easier to handle.” Whether this war party prevails is yet to be seen, though if it does, the consequences will surely be catastrophic.

Meanwhile, Hegseth has succeeded in putting an insidiously indefinite notion of war at the heart of MAGA. While Trump is marketed as the “president of peace” for allegedly ending seven armed conflicts, his secretary of defense is advancing a heady cocktail of the war on woke, the war on drugs, the war on “illegal” immigration and military action (as he once wrote, “Feeding a well-oiled killing machine, now that’s my jam”).

We should not forget that, as someone who described his “planetary purpose” as “destroy[ing] Islamist radicals,” Hegseth’s image of war is ultimately not secular, but a crusade. In his eulogy for Charlie Kirk (“a warrior for country, a warrior for Christ”), Hegseth declared: “This is not a political war, this is not even a cultural war, it is a spiritual war.” A Christian nationalist—or, more aptly, a Christian imperialist—there’s never been any real distinctions for Hegseth between these different meanings; the “well-oiled killing machine” is always infused with “spirit,” with talk of God, civilization, nation, masculinity and homeland, even when what really drives it is the desperate and increasingly violent effort to use military power to shore up waning U.S. economic power, and to deflect from the root causes of its social crises at home. ■

the **BiG** idea

pop•u•lar front

noun

1. a broad political alliance united against fascism or authoritarian rule
2. a big, messy group of people affiliated through common cause

» Has this ever worked?

Kind of famously, yes—at least for a while.

In the 1930s, as fascist movements stomped across Europe, popular fronts emerged to block the spread. In France and Spain, leftists, centrists and anti-fascist liberals joined forces to beat back the far right, sometimes literally.

In the United States, the Communist Party helped bring broad, anti-fascist politics into public life, forming coalitions among Black writers, labor organizers and progressive cultural workers. As historian Bill Mullen writes in *Popular Fronts*, the period saw “an extraordinary rapprochement” between Black and white members of the U.S. Left—not just in protest, but in culture, art and publishing. In Chicago, a “companion front” developed through a radical Black cultural infrastructure with institutions like the *Chicago Defender* and the South Side Community Art Center.

To Mullen, this front was “mutually constitutive,” meaning the cultural and political fed each other. You couldn’t separate the protest from the poetry.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY KAZIMIR ISKANDER

“We share a common interest, survival, and it cannot be pursued in isolation from others simply because their differences make us uncomfortable.”

—AUDRE LORDE

» What’s this got to do with now?

A lot. Democracy is being hollowed out in real time—through voter suppression, surveillance, the criminalization of protest, the scapegoating of migrants, anti-LGBTQ laws, book bans. The far right is openly organizing to take permanent power, not just win elections.

A popular front today wouldn’t mean everyone is suddenly best friends. It means movements stop playing defense in isolation and start fighting together, as if something bigger is at stake. Because it is.

» What would a modern popular front look like?

It’s the Movement for Black Lives linking arms with climate activists and unions, knowing their fights are connected. It’s the People’s Climate Movement bringing together frontline

communities and labor to take on big polluters. It’s housing coalitions in Seattle, Chicago and LA organizing with immigrant rights activists and elected officials for social housing.

It looks like survival. The other side already has a front, known as the Heritage Foundation.

» Isn’t this just “lesser evilism”?

Not if done right. A popular front isn’t about diluting politics, but sharpening priorities. We don’t need to agree on everything, but we do need to agree that authoritarianism, white nationalism and rule-by-billionaire are worth fighting—and we can’t fight alone.

—J. PATRICK PATTERSON



AMERICAN NARCISSUS

BY KIM KELLY

he ancient Greeks told of a proud young hunter called Narcissus, son of a river god and a nymph, famed for his great beauty.

His was a cautionary tale, like Icarus with a sharper jawline, and it was from his story the word “narcissism” sprang. Centuries later, his namesakes—narcissus flowers—still poke their nodding heads out of the soil every spring, and his character flaws remain just as prevalent among the mortals and self-designated demigods who rule over us now.

Pride, cruelty, hubris and ignorance rule the day, but we have no winged Nemesis to restore the cosmic order. Instead, we in the peasantry are consigned to the machinations of a mad king, his scheming courtiers and a cold, preening pretty boy.

Handsome, hollow and obsessed with aesthetics, Pete Hegseth, the current secretary of defense, is a modern-day Narcissus. He is preoccupied with his own image and that of the soldiers he commands; extravagantly unqualified for his position yet extraordinarily self-assured; morally bankrupt, intellectually barren and as empty as a shattered amphora.

That brutal vapidity was on full, glaring display at the end of September, when he unceremoniously summoned hundreds of top generals and admirals to Quantico, Va., without bothering to explain why. As the military leaders and their entourages traveled from their posts around the globe at great taxpayer expense, rumors flew about what Hegseth was planning—more high-level firings? A coup? A particularly powerful photo op? As he strutted on stage at the National Museum of the Marine Corps that day, it quickly became apparent that the meeting was merely an exercise in egoism—and that it truly could have been an email.

As Hegseth railed against “wokeness” and “political correctness,” insulted decorated generals and castigated soldiers for being “fat,” the audience stared back silently, countless medals glinting hard against the drab olive and navy of their dress uniforms. Even those with little affinity or affection for the U.S. military could see how awkward and embarrassing and *weird* it all was, from Hegseth’s insistence on hammering “DEI” and denigrating women (sorry, “females”) in front of a multiracial, multigender

crowd, to his tortuous little jokes that probably would have killed on a frothy Fox News weekend panel but fell agonizingly flat in front of a roomful of battle-hardened veterans.

Hegseth also sneered at “Ivy League faculty lounges” and “the media” for their inability to understand them—“us,” as he styled it. Given his own degrees from Princeton and Harvard, and his network television career, some may have wondered how Hegseth ended up claiming to speak for regular people.

During his speech, Hegseth laid out 10 new directives. They include intensifying physical fitness and grooming standards (as he said, no more “beardos”) that will specifically discriminate against women and Black men; reimplementing hazing and physical punishment for new recruits during boot camp; doing away with military members’ ability to anonymously report harassment or sexual assault; and throwing out the rules of engagement for armed conflicts. He preemptively waved away concerns about racism or sexism, preferring to home in on his ultimate message: War trumps peace.

“Our number one job, of course, is to be strong so that we can prevent war in the first place,” he said. “It’s called peace through strength. And as history teaches us, the only people who actually deserve peace are those who are willing to wage war to defend it. That’s why pacifism is so naive and dangerous.”

The secretary of defense recently lobbied to rechristen his jurisdiction as the “Department of War” to emphasize the department’s forced shift toward a “warrior ethos.” As illustrated by Hegseth in his various books and recent actions, the phrase roughly translates as, “War crimes are fine, no girls allowed.” The man takes obvious, unctuous pleasure in referring to himself as the “secretary of war”—his social media handles updated as the pseudo-change was announced. This all ignores the fact that actually changing the department’s name requires an act of Congress; like so much else about this administration, the new title is nothing but cut-rate window dressing, hastily slapped together to please a petty tyrant.

Speaking of which, President Donald Trump himself decided to horn in on Hegseth’s party and take the headlining slot for himself. The elderly politician tilted unsteadily at his usual windmills before unveiling a genuinely chilling

new thought: that the military should view “dangerous” blue-state cities—like Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco and Chicago—as “training grounds” and concentrate on fighting “the enemy from within.”

That enemy? Any U.S. citizen or resident who falls afoul of the regime’s crackdowns on immigration, free speech, civil rights and human rights, the people the president likes to characterize as “radical left lunatics.”

During Hegseth’s own closing remarks, he had magnanimously promised that “President Trump has your back and so do I.”

You have to wonder how many troops felt the sudden urge to check their six.

How did such a man arrive in such a position? By all accounts, Peter Brian Hegseth had a normal, albeit privileged and politically conservative, upbringing in a leafy suburb of Minneapolis. Raised with a high school basketball coach for a dad and a mother who worked as a high-powered Republican executive business coach, Hegseth played hoops, did well at school and coasted to Princeton on an Army ROTC scholarship. There, his passion for conservative politics and war games blossomed. He took aim at his political opponents, figuratively and literally, railing against progressivism during his term as publisher of the *Princeton Tory* newspaper and representing the Republican team in a heated paintball match with campus Democrats as a member of the Princeton Dueling Society. (He successfully nailed one opponent in the groin.)

On his watch, the *Tory* tussled angrily with campus women’s rights groups and printed an editorial condemning homosexuality as “abnormal and immoral” and dismissed alcohol-involved sexual assault as, essentially, the drunk woman’s fault. In his own writing, he called for government support of the “traditional family unit” and urged his classmates to give conservatism a chance. Former classmates remember this younger version of Hegseth as intelligent, driven and kind—a person who believed, in Hegseth’s own words, “you can civilly agree or disagree while respecting each other’s differences.” Sometime in between his salad days in the Ivy League cradle and his unexpected ascension at the Department of Defense, though, something took a turn.

After graduation, Hegseth joined the Army National Guard and gravitated toward a slightly less hazardous theater for his civilian job: investment banking. He barely had time to settle into his cushy new gig at Bear Stearns before his unit was sent to Guantanamo Bay, where Hegseth led a platoon of guards overseeing the detainees imprisoned within its walls. Hegseth served as an infantry platoon leader in Iraq before moving on to a civil affairs posting. Shortly after his departure, the squad he had previously led became embroiled in a war crimes investigation.

After returning from Iraq in 2006, he moved to New York City and took a job with a conservative think tank. The charity work he undertook with the astroturf conservative group Vets for Freedom, first as a volunteer and then



eventually as president, ended with his ouster among a snarled mess of unpaid bills and mismanagement in 2011. (Years later he would tell a military magazine that, during that time, he “had no idea what he was doing.”)

In 2012, Hegseth worked as a counterinsurgency instructor in Afghanistan. From there, he drifted over to the Koch-funded Concerned Veterans for America (CVA), mounted a half-hearted Senate run and, like so many troubled thirtysomethings, even went back to school, bringing home a degree in public policy from Harvard in 2013.

Rumors of alcohol abuse and bad behavior followed him. Former coworkers at CVA remember him, allegedly, pursuing female coworkers aggressively and drunkenly yelling, “Kill All Muslims! Kill All Muslims!” at a bar in 2015.

One whistleblower told *The New Yorker* that Hegseth “treated the organization funds like they were a personal expense account—for partying, drinking, and using CVA events as little more than opportunities to ‘hook up’ with women on the road.” (Representatives for Hegseth, in response to questions from *The New Yorker*, said they would not respond to such “outlandish” claims.) When Fox News

Above: Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth speaks to nearly 800 generals, admirals and senior enlisted leaders in Quantico, Va., on September 30, to introduce what’s become known as his “no fatties” policy.

ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES

brought him on as a contributor in 2014, Hegseth positioned himself as an archconservative decorated veteran and military expert, smirking smarmily alongside the channel’s other Republican talking heads. That performance landed him more airtime and ultimately a cohost gig on *Fox & Friends Weekend* in 2017. From this bully pulpit, he caught the president’s eye and firmly hitched himself to the Trump train, serving as both advisor and cheerleader until he ultimately snagged the plum job he enjoys today.

Thus, Hegseth’s rise to the top of the military heap came not as a result of his own (mediocre) military credentials but at the behest of Trump, who was a fan of Hegseth’s work on TV (and Hegseth’s willingness to handwave war crimes) and assumed this polished, macho posturing would translate to real life. That, or Trump just thought Hegseth looked the part—a tough-guy Army hunk hauled straight out of central casting who would happily follow orders without asking any unpleasant questions.

The image Hegseth broadcast as a television host and author of endless “warrior” books was decades in the making; he may have come by his looks honestly, but everything else is a careful construct dating back to his days as an Ivy League striver with a deep-seated disdain for women and a poorly hidden inferiority complex.

Both have only continued to congeal.

The cameras loved Hegseth, though, and he loved them right back. His ongoing obsession with physical appearance rivals that only of his boss, Trump (a cut-rate Tantalus if there ever was one), and his fellow henchman, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (Dolos incarnate). Since the moment of Hegseth’s controversial confirmation (which only squeaked through because of a tie-breaking vote from another weak, desperately image-conscious man, Vice President JD Vance), Hegseth’s every move has been in service to the malignant goal of recreating the American armed forces in his own hyper-curated image. Hegseth genuinely seems to believe he can conjure up a sea of milk-white military Adonises through sheer force of will and repeatedly haranguing the top brass about “wokeness” and their waistlines. If Hegseth has his way, the shock troops of white supremacy will be lethal *and* looksmaxxed, dammit!

The cruelty is the point, of course, but so is the desperate artifice of it all. A deeply vain man with (poorly) tattooed glamour muscles and an architectural swoop in his well-shellacked hair, Hegseth’s primary vision as the nation’s preeminent “warfighter” relies more on sheer vibes than any sort of military strategy. Whatever useful lessons he may have gleaned from his own military service have been crowded out by his perception of himself as a modern-day Crusader, tasked with conquering all enemies of Trumpism and anything else he considers to be the “true faith.” In his 2020 book, *American Crusade*, Hegseth specifically identified leftists and “Islamists” as enemy forces bent on destroying America, a theme he continues to enthusiastically embrace.

The “crusader” thing is literal, by the way; Hegseth is very open about his Christian nationalist beliefs and frequently adds religious references and prayers to his public speeches. At his Quantico appearance, he tossed in a “commander’s prayer” at the end of his rant.

Hegseth’s shoddy tattoo collection includes multiple references to the medieval Christian Crusades (which ultimately failed but left the Holy Land soaked in blood). A Jerusalem cross is inked on his chest, and his bicep sports the Latin phrase *Deus Vult*, “God wills it,” a Crusader’s rallying cry that has since been repurposed by various religious extremist and neo-Nazi movements to emphasize anti-Muslim hatred. While Hegseth has protested that these and his other religious tattoos are merely symbols of his Christian faith, their connections to militant far-right extremism run deep enough that he was flagged as a possible “insider threat” and booted off President Joe Biden’s 2021 inauguration military security detail. In response, Hegseth quit the military entirely, grousing in his book that “I joined the Army to fight extremists in 2001. Twenty years later, that same Army labeled me one.”

While Hegseth has said he was initially inspired to enlist following 9/11, his full-on conversion to religious zealotry came fairly late in the 45-year-old’s life—while he was embroiled in one of his many personal-slash-professional scandals. In 2018, Hegseth was in the midst of divorcing

his second wife and former Vets for Freedom coworker, Samantha Deering, to wed a third, his former Fox News producer, Jennifer Raucher. Previously, he had an affair with Deering while married to his first wife, a high school sweetheart, then racked up a few extra sins by welcoming a child with Raucher while he was still married to Deering. In 2017, two months after his baby with Raucher was born, Hegseth allegedly sexually assaulted a woman at a Republican conference in Monterey, Calif. He denied the survivor's account but ultimately paid her \$50,000 as part of a nondisclosure agreement.

The next year, as his affair with Raucher became public, his own mother, Penelope Hegseth, took him to task for his damaging pattern of behavior. "On behalf of all the women (and I know it's many) you have abused in some way, I say ... get some help and take an honest look at yourself," she wrote in an email published by the *New York Times*. She went on to tell her son that "I have no respect for any man that belittles, lies, cheats, sleeps around and uses women for his own power and ego. You are that man (and have been for years) and as your mother, it pains me and embarrasses me to say that, but it is the sad, sad truth."

Mrs. Hegseth went on to tell the press that she'd sent another email apologizing to her son immediately after, explaining that she'd sent the original in a moment of heightened emotion. By then, Hegseth had started attending a new church with his new wife and began publicly identifying as a man of faith. His mother may have forgiven him his trespasses, but it might have stood to reason that his fellow churchgoers would've had a different reaction to the revelations. Strangely, none of it seemed to make waves at his new church, the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches, which maintains that God should have control over every aspect of society.

Nor did it matter to the church's spectacularly misogynistic, racist, far-right Christian nationalist figurehead, Doug Wilson, who Hegseth views as a type of spiritual mentor. "Women are the kind of people that people come out of," as Wilson once explained, not the kind who lead. Accordingly, there's no place for skirts in Hegseth's dream of a "360-degree holy war." Hegseth has stated that he expects all of his various sons and stepsons (five at last count) to join the military, though he has not mentioned similar plans for his daughter and stepdaughter.

Wilson's patriarchal views on women dovetail handily with Hegseth's behavior toward them. In August 2025, Hegseth approvingly retweeted a video of Wilson expressing his support for repealing the 19th Amendment, and it took several days of public outcry for the Pentagon to have to release a statement clarifying that he did in fact believe women should have the right to vote. In any normal administration, that ideologically suspect blunder would have been cause for a firing, or at least some sort of consequences. This is Trump 2.0, though, and such a thing no longer exists for the chosen few.

The ancient Greeks gave a name to the seething madness of paranoia, which has come to define Hegseth's sham-bolic turn at the wheel. It's obvious that he's in over his head in this position, and it's been unsurprising to read reports of him cracking under the pressure. In an echo of his time with Vets for Freedom and Concerned Veterans for America, Hegseth's tenure as secretary of defense has been pocked with a series of cascading scandals. Two months after his contentious January 24 confirmation, Hegseth was caught leaking real-time attack details, regarding Houthi militants in Yemen, in multiple unsecured Signal chats, one of which included a journalist from *The Atlantic* while the other included his wife, brother and lawyer. He also thought nothing of bringing his wife along to multiple meetings with foreign defense leaders or scoring his podcaster brother a job at the Pentagon.

The negative response from congressional leaders, who launched an inquiry into the Signal fiasco, left Hegseth rattled and defensive, but Trump wasn't fazed. "Pete's doing a great job," Trump commented breezily. "Ask the Houthis how he's doing."

Hegseth seems to have found the magic formula for being telegenic and "tough" enough to keep Trump happy but not important or ambitious enough to threaten the visibly deteriorating president's fragile ego. Since those rocky first few months, Hegseth has managed to skitter along beneath Trump's radar, popping up only when he's certain the man in charge will welcome his presence. (After all, we all saw what happened to Elon Musk.)

While Hegseth is perhaps the most underqualified secretary of defense in the nation's history, when it comes to waging war on one's own physical flaws, he can at least boast of some genuine experience in the church of iron. The still camera-conscious Hegseth is vocal about his workout routine, taking every available opportunity to show off his physical fitness (and has coyly flaunted his toned torso on Instagram).

He's also a veteran of the makeup chair. In an echo of his ancient counterpart—and his own former career as a talking haircut on Fox News—Hegseth even had a glam studio installed in the Pentagon. The media may have had a field day with that one, but it was a savvy move on Hegseth's part. Every hair must be in place, every soundbite crafted for maximum impact, and every talking point must be fully in line with the day's approved version of reality. Failing to look perfectly camera-ready whilst spewing his Trumpian talking points would reveal a crack in his carefully crafted facade. As has become more and more apparent over the past nine months, that's all Hegseth really has to offer.

As vain as the self-styled "secretary of war" undoubtedly is, his hypermasculine gender performance illustrates yet another branch of the far-right political project to which he belongs. Fascism's hardbody aesthetics have long proven irresistible to the insecure and power-hungry, and while the workout programming may change, the

goals remain the same; the subculture-inspired, reactionary gym cults of the late 2010s and early 2020s have given way to neo-Nazi workout clubs. Jordan Peterson is old news when mainstream Republican politicians vie to out-macho one another by challenging union leaders to brawls and posturing with big ol' guns.

The MAGA faithful politely ignore their leader's doughy physique while sharing AI-generated memes of muscular Trump cartoons. The current wave of male far-right influencers jabber ceaselessly about the gospel of self-improvement, swearing that those who hit upon just the right combination of lifting weights, living off red meat, eschewing modern medical science and sucking down branded supplements can achieve true alpha male supremacy.

Hegseth floats comfortably in this morass of toxic masculinity, secure in the knowledge that here, at least, he's winning. In a regime characterized by its members' frantic, bleating masculinity, he is the top dog. He is who tragicomic goons like Kash Patel and Dan Bongino want to be, and he's probably the only member of the Trump administration who can actually fight (even if he still can't do a proper pull-up). The military honors he received may have been lackluster, but those medals shine just as brightly. His every misstep has been either ignored or rewarded. After his doomsday speech at Quantico, an old video of Hegseth hitting himself in the cojones with a skateboard recirculated on social media; it may have felt good to giggle, but it did not change the reality that this man—this terrible, broken man—is in command of the largest military force on Earth and answers only to a fading despot who is all too happy to leave all that boring troop stuff to him.

If pride goeth before a fall, Hegseth will have an awfully long way down to tumble.

So what is to become of a figure as tragic—and dangerous—as this? We've met him before. According to the great poet Ovid, many a youth and many a maiden sought the favor of Narcissus, but Narcissus spurned them all. The beautiful boy was intoxicated by pride, assured of his own superiority over all those who dared approach him, whether it be a blushing village girl or a lonesome forest nymph. It was his cruel dismissal of the latter that sealed his fate (with a little help from Nemesis, the goddess of retribution). "If he should love, deny him what he loves!" the nymph cried before collapsing in grief.

But Narcissus loved only Narcissus. When he came upon a clear forest pool, he caught sight of his reflection—and was immediately smitten. Entranced by his own beauty, he refused to move; enraptured by his own reflection, he reached out to kiss its rosy cheeks, to caress its pale neck, but each time, the boy he saw disappeared. Maddened by love and grief, Narcissus wasted away, watching his beloved specter's beauty fade alongside his own.

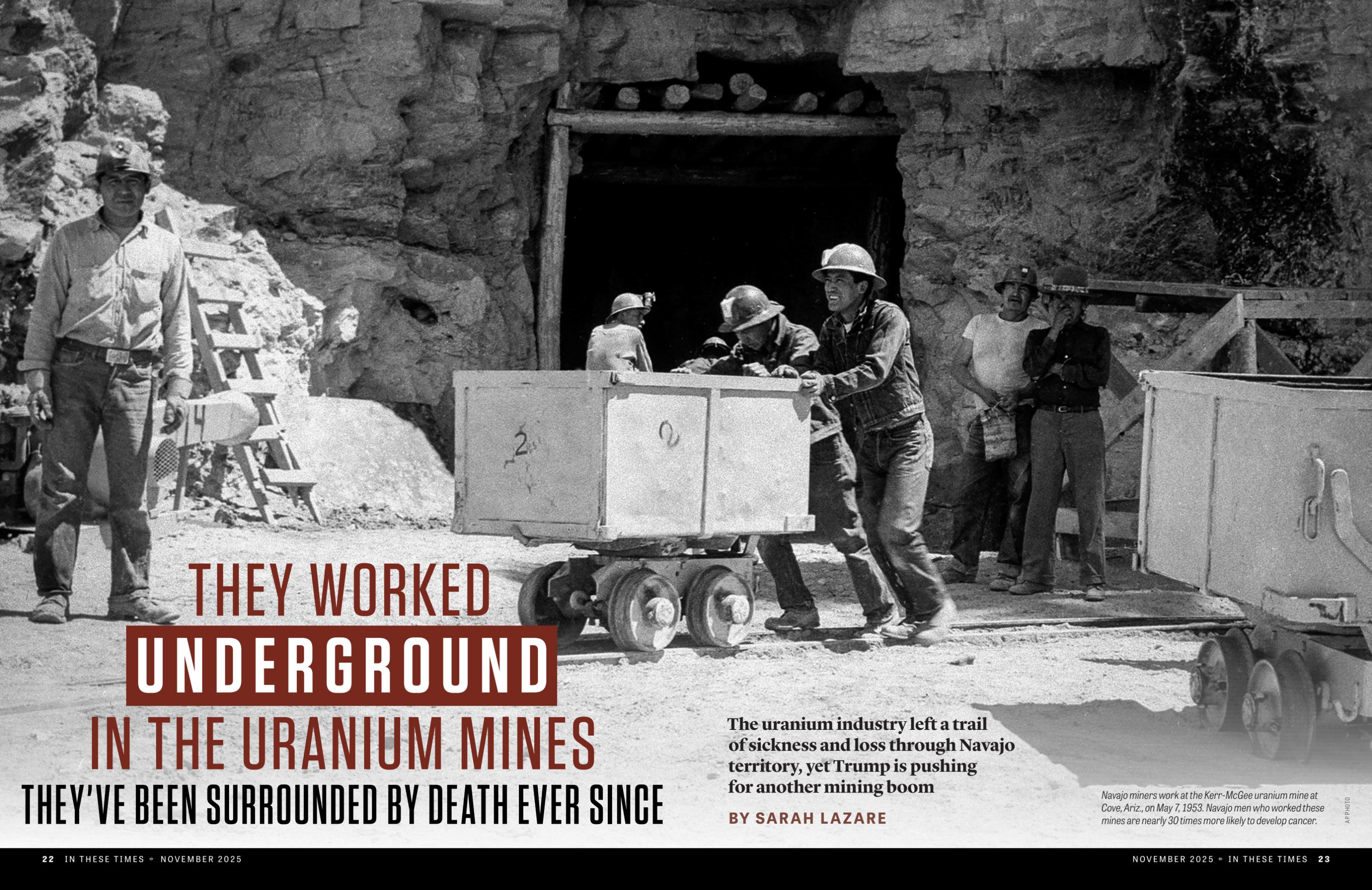
In the end, Narcissus died alone, leaving behind only a small golden and white flower as his epitaph.

WHILE HEGSETH IS PERHAPS THE MOST UNDERQUALIFIED SECRETARY OF DEFENSE IN THE NATION'S HISTORY, WHEN IT COMES TO WAGING WAR ON ONE'S OWN PHYSICAL FLAWS, HE CAN AT LEAST BOAST OF SOME GENUINE EXPERIENCE IN THE CHURCH OF IRON.

Pete Hegseth loves only Pete Hegseth. But unlike his mythic counterpart, he does not wither beside a pond, transfixed by his own gaze. He does not collapse harmlessly into a flower, no. This star-spangled Narcissus is restless, ambitious and drunk on power. He does not simply admire his reflection; he weaponizes it. Fueled by ego and unbothered by those he deems beneath him, he charges forward intent on grasping his fascist vision of perfection by the throat. It seems certain that he will not achieve this dream, nor even come close to it, without leaving a trail of scorched earth and blood in his miserable wake.

Where Narcissus left a flower, Hegseth will leave something far less delicate. ■

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THEY WORKED
UNDERGROUND
IN THE URANIUM MINES
THEY'VE BEEN SURROUNDED BY DEATH EVER SINCE

The uranium industry left a trail of sickness and loss through Navajo territory, yet Trump is pushing for another mining boom

BY SARAH LAZARE

Navajo miners work at the Kerr-McGee uranium mine at Cove, Ariz., on May 7, 1953. Navajo men who worked these mines are nearly 30 times more likely to develop cancer.

AP PHOTO

LESLIE BEGAY SETS ASIDE THE LAST FEW BITES of his BLT. It's something he does every meal as an offering for the person who gave him his lungs, he explains at a family-run diner in Gallup, N.M. Every morning and evening, Begay prays for the person whose organ donation, four years ago, saved his life. He doesn't know their identity. Sometimes, he talks to the lungs, telling them "we need to rest" when he gets tired. Begay's nickname for his new lungs is "Skittles," like the candy, he says with a laugh.

"I feel so lucky," Begay says from across the booth. His wife, Nora Begay, sits next to him. He is the only person he knows who got a double lung transplant. When his friends, coworkers and family members got sick, they died.

Leslie Begay was a uranium miner at the Church Rock 1 mine, then owned by Kerr-McGee, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Like so many Navajo miners, their family members and others who live by the mines, Begay has been surrounded by premature death ever since. The U.S. uranium mining industry was built disproportionately on or near Navajo lands, at the behest of a federal government eager to quickly get materials for nuclear weapons. When the uranium market switched to supply the nuclear energy industry, companies continued on the same trajectory, with Begay's employer deliberately targeting Navajo workers to fill a labor shortage, as revealed by corporate documents. Navajo communities were not informed of how dangerous this work was, and it has left a trail of loss—for those who worked the mines and mills, and for those who drank poisoned water and breathed poisoned air.

When the uranium market dried up, companies simply abandoned the mines, a phenomenon so common there's a term for it: AUM, or "abandoned uranium mine." Now, the mines stand as toxic monuments to America's nuclear weapons and energy programs. People are still dying, and the abandoned mines are still not remediated. Yet the United States is pushing ahead with a \$1.7 trillion plan to expand and "modernize" nuclear weapons, and the Trump administration is trying to restart uranium mining in New Mexico—near Navajo territory.

"They moved heaven and earth to get what they wanted when they needed it," Stephen Etsitty, executive director of the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency, tells me. "But they will not move heaven and earth to clean up the mess they left behind."

That uranium miners have suffered staggering rates of cancer and lung disease is not in dispute. One study, comparing Navajo men living in New Mexico and Arizona from 1969 to 1993, found that working



in uranium mines made Navajo men 28.6 times more likely to develop cancer. Exposure to uranium causes a host of other issues, too, including kidney impairment and cardiovascular problems.

Cancer can take 10 or 20 years to develop, as can lung disease, a timeline that companies can use to undersell the perilous nature of the work or skimp on safety measures. Leslie Begay didn't know that uranium mining can cause dire health problems until he was diagnosed with interstitial lung disease himself, in 2015. That was decades after his eight-year stint underground; his job was to dig holes in the earth, place dynamite inside and blow

them up. He draws a picture on a napkin to show me how the ore was extracted, moved around on pulleys and placed on trains. While underground, he often wore a T-shirt and jeans and sometimes a rain coat, but no protective equipment of any kind, he recalls. He was covered in dust, breathed it in and wore it like a second skin during his workday.

"You blast all that dirt, debris, everything, and the air is all dust," Begay says. "By the time you come out, you have dirt all over your body."

Above: Two Navajo workers mine uranium found in the rocky outcrops of Monument Valley on the Navajo Nation reservation in Arizona in May 1951. Vanadium and uranium mining began in the area in 1942.

THE URANIUM INDUSTRY EXISTS WHERE AND how it does because of the federal government's unprecedented push for uranium mining. From World War II to 1971, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) was the only uranium buyer in the United States, and it used the ore entirely for nuclear weapons. The real mining boom began in 1948, when the AEC said it would purchase any ore that was mined—at a guaranteed high price. Hundreds of mines opened in Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado, many in or adjacent to the territory of the Navajo Nation (whose government had only been officially established in 1923, presiding over just a fraction of the original Navajo homeland).

The federal government knew the dangers of uranium mining. One study, published in 1879, documented the deadly long-term effects of uranium mining on the border of Germany and what is now the Czech Republic; researchers discovered that 75% of the miners died from lung cancer. Yet, the AEC did not inform workers of the risks, and it declined to push for any health and safety regulations on radon, the radioactive gas created when uranium decays. States failed to enforce sufficient regulations of their own.

At the same time, the AEC conducted epidemiological studies on the miners, without their fully informed consent. Starting in 1950, the Public Health Service (PHS) began following miners—white and Navajo—to monitor their uranium exposure levels and watch for cancer and other health problems. To gain access from mine owners, the researchers agreed that PHS would not inform miners of the hazardous conditions; they simply told the miners they were studying workers' health and said little else.

A report produced in 1995 by the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, established by President Bill Clinton, acknowledged the federal government committed an ethical breach. "Had miners been told the true purpose of the study then, even in advance of any warnings connected with the progress of the research, it is possible the miners could have used this information to advocate for their interests," the report states.

EVERY MINER I TALKED WITH, DURING A LATE-JULY visit to Gallup and nearby Church Rock, told me they were never informed of the dangers, even though they were working in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One of them is Edith Hood, who worked at the Church Rock 1 uranium mine once owned by Kerr-McGee—the same one as Begay—from 1976 to 1982. She was a probe technician, which involved going underground and climbing built-in ladders to use "a portable instrument to measure the ore and see how much it reads," she says. She says she would breathe in the dust. "They didn't tell us that it was not good. We just went there and started working."



the Environmental Protection Agency says it has a plan for that, with help from the 2014 Tronox settlement. (Tronox, a chemical company spun off from Kerr-McGee, agreed to fund environmental cleanup as part of a bankruptcy reorganization.) That plan is still years away: The waste is to be moved from the mine (later owned by Kerr-McGee subsidiary Quivira Mining, whose oil and gas assets were then acquired by Anadarko Petroleum) to the Red Rocks Landfill in nearby Thoreau. That plan hinges on various permits from the state of New Mexico.

There are 523 abandoned uranium mines on Navajo land, and not a single one has been fully remediated, according to the EPA's own count. According to Chris Shuey—a senior program director and environmental health scientist at the Southwest Research and Information Center in Albuquerque—there are fewer than 10 sites where the EPA is inching closer to a full cleanup.

About 100 yards away from the mound, the Red Water Pond Road Community Association is hosting its annual gathering inside a large tent, reinforced with wooden pillars. A banner stretches across, reading, “Protect Mother Earth and Our Communities.” The organization is made up of Navajo people who live in, or recently lived in, this area, and every year, for 46 years, its members have gathered to demand a cleanup. The convening starts at about 75 people but grows throughout the day, a mix of former uranium miners, families, environmental justice and anti-nuclear advocates and community members. The children draw on coloring books that instruct them on how to avoid playing in toxic mine sites.

Inside the tent, I meet Peterson Bell, 69, breathing with the help of an oxygen tank. He points at the Kerr-McGee mound behind us and says he can't remember exactly which dates, but he worked there in the 1970s and 1980s, laboring underground: “At the beginning, it seemed like things would be alright. But it's not good for you.”

Among this crowd, Hood stands out as a clear leader. It seems that nearly everyone pays their respects to her with an embrace or a closely huddled conversation. Her second bout of cancer, she says, “drew me to where I'm working harder on” demanding a cleanup. To do that, she must contend with a little-known disaster that took place about a half-mile away: the largest accidental release of radioactive waste in U.S. history.

Above: Edith Hood, now a leader in the Red Water Pond Road Community Association, worked underground in the uranium mines from 1976 to 1982. Right: Signs warn of health risks outside the gates of an abandoned uranium mine in the community of Red Water Pond, N.M., on Jan. 13, 2020.

ABOVE PHOTO BY SARAH LAZARE; RIGHT PHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

EVERY YEAR, DURING ITS ANNUAL commemoration, members of the Red Water Pond Road Community Association walk to the site to commemorate the uranium tailings spill of July 16, 1979. This year, Larry J. King stands in the middle of the road, leaning on his cane with his left hand and gesturing with his right. On one side of him is what remains of the United Nuclear Corporation mill that processed uranium ore from the nearby mine where he started working, fresh out of high school, in 1975. Now, the mill looks much like the jagged canyons that surround it, though there is still a small, yellow hut that used to be an ore weighing station and rusted stairs climbing toward the entrance. “Water was piped under this road toward the arroyo,” says King, pointing down at the pavement. On the other side of the road, not too far from where we stand, is the place where the dam breached.

About 70 people crowd around King as he speaks, some holding banners that say “Keep uranium in the ground” and “Uranium legacy remembrance and action day.”

On that July day in 1979, a disposal pond from the United Nuclear mill site, which sits right next to the Navajo reservation, had a dam failure. The spill released three times as much radiation as the partial meltdown at Three Mile Island three-and-a-half months earlier but received far less media attention. At least 93 million gallons of radioactive liquid and 1,100 tons of radioactive sludge went into the Puerco River and traveled downstream, cutting through the

Navajo Nation grazing lands, close to the city of Gallup, and reaching all the way to Sanders, Ariz. By the time the waste was done traveling, it had left “contaminated residue over a distance of close to 100 miles,” then-Rep. Morris K. Udall (D-Ariz.) said at an Oct. 22, 1979, hearing in the U.S. House.

That the dam was compromised was no secret. United Nuclear was aware of cracks as early as 1977, but it did not report these to state regulatory agencies, which the Army Corps of Engineers determined shortly after the spill. King tells the crowd he personally saw the cracks before the catastrophic failure.

King still speaks with anger about being sent to this site without a full understanding of the dangerous, long-term risks. “We were not told about how it can affect workers, the human body, if you are not protected,” he says, as listeners squint into the bright sun. “I started when I was 18.”

United Nuclear's Northeast Church Rock mine, where King worked, was developed under contract with the Atomic Energy Commission for military purposes. By the time the spill happened, the uranium was used for commercial purposes. From 1967 until it closed in 1982, the mine was the second-highest-producing mine in the Navajo Nation, accounting for 3.5 million tons of ore.

More than a year after the spill, in 1980, Congress established the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act, known as the federal Superfund program. The program is supposed to bring “potentially responsible parties” together for environmental cleanup, and United Nuclear, now a wholly owned subsidiary



of GE, has contributed funds. In this case, the EPA plan would move about 1.4 million tons of “contaminated soil to the nearby UNC [United Nuclear] Mill Site.”

But the people I spoke with don't like the idea of storing waste at a site already tied to a catastrophe. They want the waste off their land.

Regardless, even an imperfect cleanup plan hasn't been implemented. I didn't see any bulldozers or signs of imminent movement. The site looks like a place where a child could easily wander and play, or a tourist could unwittingly climb. About four miles away, on the drive out, I see someone who looks high-school-aged long-distance running on the shoulder of the road. Their route could have gone right past the site.

EVERYONE IN THIS COMMUNITY HAS A STORY of death: an uncle, a beloved aunt, a friend dying young. Jennifer Nez is running the registration booth for the Red Water Pond Road Community Association event, and she answers my many questions with a warm, patient smile. She tells me her family home is just 500 feet past the nearby road, nestled between two mines, though her mother was relocated in September 2024 to Navajo housing in Iyanbito because of the dangers of radiation. Nez had been living in Phoenix but moved to Iyanbito to be closer to her mother, who is in need of help.

“Most of my family in this area—my uncles and my aunties—they all worked in the mine,” Nez says. “A lot of people that have lived here or worked in the mines have come down with respiratory issues. It's affected their health. A lot of them have had heart conditions or cardiovascular issues. A lot of people came down with cancer. My auntie that used to work there, she came down with breast cancer.”

Available evidence indicates that proximity to unremediated waste—especially over the long term—poses manifold dangers to public health. One environmental health study, known as the Diné Network for Environmental Health Project, conducted from 2002 to 2012, found that proximity to uranium mine waste significantly increases incidence of kidney and cardiovascular disease. Another Navajo Birth Cohort Study, conducted from 2010 to the present, found that pregnant Navajo women have an alarming level of uranium exposure, with 26% showing levels that exceed the highest 5% of the population in the United States.

In 2003, the Church Rock Chapter of the Navajo Nation started the Church Rock Uranium Monitoring

Above: Larry J. King acts as historian for a crowd gathered at the site of the 1979 United Nuclear uranium tailings spill in Church Rock, N.M., which released more radioactivity than the Three Mile Island accident. Right: Marking the 46th anniversary of the spill, on July 19, community members continue to fight for the long-promised Superfund cleanup.



PHOTOS BY SARAH LAZARE

Project, or CRUMP. Its 2007 report, in collaboration with several institutions (including the Southwest Research and Information Center), found drinking water unfit for human consumption and cooking, with elevated gamma radiation rates along public highways, on Navajo grazing lands and near homes. Davidson Kee James, a traditional Navajo practitioner who lives 10 miles away from the event tent, tells me he stores his own water.

This legacy stems from a mixture of federal weapons development and private industry. There are about 20 abandoned uranium mines in the Church Rock area; of those, 13 produced uranium before 1971, meaning the ore was used for nuclear weapons, explains Chris Shuey, from the Southwest Research and Information Center. Nez shows me a map of mines and reservation land; it's a complex checkerboard, and it seems absurd to differentiate between pollution that's on Navajo territory and just immediately adjacent to it.

Teracita Keyanna serves on the executive committee of the Red Water Pond Road Community Association, and she spends much of the day leading art projects and education activities about the dangers of uranium mining in the kids' tent. She tells me she is against all uranium mining and nuclear weapons, a conviction that was driven home when she traveled to Hiroshima, in 2024, as part of a delegation from this community.

“Where I'm living has always impacted how I thought about nuclear weapons,” Keyanna says. “And it really doesn't matter where they're from; the impact is not just in that one area. The impact is everywhere, wherever transport is happening, wherever mining is happening.”

LESLIE BEGAY'S DAD, A URANIUM MINER, died of cancer. So did his mom, at just 63. While she never worked in the mine, she breathed in the dust.

But Begay says his own medical emergency due to lung disease was the first time he clearly made the connection.

He first went to Fort Defiance Indian Hospital in 2015, at the urging of one of his granddaughters, then a teenager: “She looked at me and said, ‘Papa, are you OK? Is there something wrong with you?’ I said, ‘No, I'm OK.’ And she said, ‘No, you're not,’ and she dragged me to the bathroom.” He was alarmed by what he saw, and he checked himself in.

At 1 a.m. that morning, he was flown to Presbyterian Hospital in Albuquerque, the beginning of a harrowing medical journey. At one point, Begay was told he had a month to live. He faced frustrations at every turn, trying to figure out how he would pay for treatment. At one point, he was told he had to lose weight to become eligible for a lung transplant.

It was after his diagnosis that Nora Begay, his wife, began reading about the link to uranium mining.

She tears up recalling the feelings of helplessness and certainty that he was going to die. He lost his job as a boiler operator at a hospital, and then the family lost their house and cattle because of the medical expenses. (They now live in Coyote Canyon, about 20 miles north of Gallup.)

As it did for Hood, Leslie Begay's diagnosis became a call to action. He joined an effort to win restitution through the renewal and expansion of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, known as RECA. Enacted in 1990, RECA issued one-time payments to individuals who got sick because of uranium mining or testing, reminiscent of the rare payments the U.S. military made to the families of people it deemed it had wrongfully killed in Afghanistan. However, under the original statute, miners, millers and ore transporters were only eligible if they had worked between 1942 and 1971 and had specific illnesses, such as lung cancer, lung disease, renal cancer and pulmonary fibrosis. Miners like Begay were left out.

Begay became part of a team that lobbied Congress for years. Back in 2018, before his double lung transplant, he was on oxygen and couldn't fly. "So me, my son, my grandson and my granddaughter—we did a rental car," Nora Begay recalls. They drove all the way to Washington, D.C., where Leslie Begay grew accustomed to being talked down to and ignored.

But this July, Begay and his colleagues had a shock. After years of advocacy, the federal government renewed and reformed RECA (it expired in June 2024) as part of the so-called One Big Beautiful Bill. Now, RECA has expanded to include uranium workers who worked in 12 states, including New Mexico, through 1990. It also expanded the list of qualifying illnesses. The change means that Begay has a chance at a one-time payment, though he hasn't received anything yet. He's working through the application process.

Begay told me about six times he is grateful to President Donald Trump for signing the bill, even as I asked about the bill's other measures, such as sweeping Medicaid cuts. As Feleecia Guillen, from the Institute for Policy Studies, recently noted, the RECA win "comes with a gut punch." The same GOP budget bill that renews and expands RECA will take health insurance away from more than 3.9 million people in the 16 RECA-eligible states alone, after cuts to Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act. That includes 103,719 people in New Mexico. Guillen estimates that 240 rural hospitals in RECA states could close.

Unlike her husband, Nora Begay says she finds it hard to celebrate Trump's budget bill. The Navajo miners had to pass reform however they could, she says, but she works as a janitor at a clinic, and she is intimately aware of how cuts to Medicaid are going to hurt the communities she serves.

She also worries about how immigrants will be affected by a bill that allocates \$170 billion toward an immigration crackdown. "They're working out there in the field," she says. "That's where we get our vegetables and fruits, and they're hard working people out there. They have family, too."



"I WOULD LIKE TO SEE THE EPA SAY, 'OUR mandate is never do it again,'" says Seth Shelden, general counsel and United Nations liaison for the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017. This sentiment is echoed by signs and banners at the commemoration, reading "*Leetso Dooda*"—"No Uranium" in Navajo.

Yet, the federal government appears to be doing the opposite. On March 20, the Trump administration signed an executive order that invoked wartime authority to increase production of "critical minerals," including uranium. The administration has identified several mines in New Mexico as priorities under the FAST-41 designation, which refers to a federal initiative established 10 years ago to fast-track certain permitting. Among them are sites in or near Navajo territory. They would be the first active uranium mines in the state in more than 50 years.

Above: Nora (left) and Leslie Begay look on from outside a diner in Gallup, N.M. They've lived surrounded by premature death since the 1980s, in connection with working in the uranium mines.

PHOTO BY SARAH LAZARE

The United States is expanding its funding of nuclear weapons—with successive presidential administrations backing a massive investment over the next three decades—which translates to huge annual budget increases. From 2023 to 2024, the United States saw the world's greatest increase in spending on nuclear weapons, putting more money toward nuclear weapons than all of the other nuclear-armed countries combined, according to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. The same GOP budget bill that expands RECA also earmarks \$15 billion for nuclear "modernization."

The United States is barreling ahead, even before the abandoned uranium mines have been cleaned or even the one-time payments for post-1971 miners, like Leslie Begay, have been doled out. Leona Morgan, an indigenous community organizer based in Albuquerque, tells me, "Across the board, folks are saying, 'No new mines, no new weapons, until everything has been cleaned up'—to the community standards, not these poor Band-Aid clean-ups, but actually cleaning the soil and water and putting everything you can in permanent storage with permanent monitoring."

Leslie Begay's energy can be low, which often keeps him

"Across the board, folks are saying, 'No new mines, no new weapons, until everything has been cleaned up'—to the community standards, not these poor Band-Aid clean-ups, but actually cleaning the soil and water and putting everything you can in permanent storage with permanent monitoring."

homebound. But he goes to his grandchildren's baseball games when he can, and he breaks into a laugh when he recounts how his 3-year-old granddaughter always asks him for money by rubbing her thumb over the tip of her index finger. He wears leather, engraved suspenders and a baseball hat that says "Semper Fi," the motto of the U.S. Marine Corps, which he served in during the Vietnam War. Nora Begay has long, dark hair, dons cat-eye glasses and has the habit of touching her husband on the arm when talking about him.

Leslie Begay still thinks of the people he knows who died young. "Lots and lots," he says. "I mean many, many people, good friends. It was always sad news to hear."

For his part, he says over and over he is thrilled to be alive: "It was so wonderful to breathe again. I couldn't believe that I was saved." ■

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Dropkick Murphys' Ken Casey Wants You to Wake the F*ck Up

BY KIM KELLY

KEN CASEY CARRIES HIMSELF like a man who has no interest in looking for a fight but would have no problem finishing one if the need arose. Glancing at his silvered hair and faded tattoos, you might even assume the stocky musician's street-fighting days are over now that he's in his fifties. But you'd be wrong.

Right now, Casey's focused on using everything he's learned to fight fascism by whatever means possible. As far as he's concerned, "There is no neutral. If you're neutral, you're on the wrong side."

As the kinetic frontman and sole remaining founding member of the Irish American "Celtic punk" band Dropkick Murphys, Casey is more likely to be found speaking to crowds

of rowdy concertgoers in defense of immigrant rights, in support of Ukraine, and criticizing the Trump regime than bloodying his knuckles, but the man could never be accused of going soft. His last publicly documented physical altercation may have been back in 2013—when he famously attacked a neo-Nazi skinhead who waved a Nazi salute while on stage during a packed New York City show—but, as recently as 2022, Casey was online threatening to "SMASH" a neo-Nazi group who used one of the band's songs in a propaganda video (and he later challenged the group to a fight). On the band's most recent tour—in support of their new album, *For the People*—the merch stall featured a T-shirt spelling it out in slime-green and bold white letters: "Dropkick Murphys, Fighting Nazis Since 1996."

Roughly 30 years into a successful career that's taken the group around the world and turned the band into one of punk rock's most enduring, *In These Times* sat down with Casey before a show in Atlantic City, N.J., during Dropkick Murphys' tour with fellow political-punk elders Bad Religion. As Casey tells me, his early days were rife with conflict with the boneheads and neo-Nazis who lurked around the edges of the hardcore punk and Oi! communities where Dropkick Murphys started.

"They would always show up and come after us, not just because of our politics; they were so Nazi that they would be after us for being Catholic!" he reminisces, noting that Denver was a particularly problematic area back then. "[Some of them would] have an Irish flag patch and a swastika. No, no, you can't do that. One of them's got to go."

As much as the band's anti-fascist, anti-racist politics are a crucial pillar of their message, Dropkick Murphys have long used their platform to connect with labor unions. Casey's own connection to labor runs bone-deep, having grown up in a working-class household just south of Boston in the 1970s. Before the band's founding—after a bar bet in 1996—Casey worked as a union laborer specializing in demolition. In 2018, an accident at a building site left him with lasting injuries in his neck that affect his ability to play bass, and he now focuses on vocals during live shows, saving his hands for the studio.

From the band's earliest, Oi!-adjacent days, Dropkick Murphys have always emphasized their message of working-class pride and solidarity, whether on stage or through their charity, the Claddagh Fund, which raises money for nonprofits serving children, veterans and people in recovery from drug or alcohol abuse.

“WE'RE VERY TRIGGERING TO MAGA BECAUSE THEY LOOK AT US LIKE, 'HOW DARE YOU. YOU SHOULD BE WITH US,' AND I SAY, 'SHOULD WE? THE DROPKICKS' MESSAGE HAS BEEN THE SAME FOR 30 YEARS!' ”



"I've always thought of music as a selfish career, so the charitable side is how I made this be something that, as a life's work, you could be proud of," Casey explains. "We needed to have more of a purpose than just music."

Searching for that purpose has seen Casey try on numerous hats—those of a philanthropist, a restaurateur, a returning college student, a boxing promoter, a golfer—while raising three kids and churning out ambitious new albums with his band. *For the People*, which includes special guests like Billy Bragg, brings their electric discography to 13 studio albums. The band has also released two acoustic albums using unreleased Woody Guthrie lyrics provided by the iconic protest singer's daughter, Nora Guthrie. It all kept circling

back to labor, though, and the band's commitment to working-class values did not go unnoticed in quieter corridors; it has endeared them to the labor movement, even those who may otherwise prefer to invite less raucous types to play their events.

More recently, it's also put Casey—a burly, middle-aged, white Boston sports fan—in the odd position of being seen as a potential mouthpiece for a very specific kind of union voter. If Vice President JD Vance was once bizarrely positioned as "the voice of the white working class" by clueless pundits, some Democrats now seem eager to pass that torch to someone who's actually working class. Casey is game to fill that role, if not overly thrilled about it.



“I didn’t set out to necessarily be the voice of saying some of this stuff, but it has to be said, because we got to wake the fuck up,” Casey says with an exasperated shrug.

Casey’s own politics are definitely progressive, but he’s no fire-breathing anarchist. (For that, you’ll have to look a little deeper into punk’s underworld.) He’s worked union jobs, rallied with Democrats and walked picket lines, which one might argue is a pretty standard liberal baseline.

“People will call my politics radical, when my politics are pretty much ‘Look out for one another,’” he says. “I’m not up here trying to tell anyone how to cut their hair, what kind of coffee to drink, but I’m telling you not to be dumb enough to let the one percent, who wouldn’t piss on you if you’re on fire, take away your freedom and your future.”

Casey doesn’t claim to have all the answers, but he’s certainly got some opinions. For one, as ICE devastates communities across the country and the Trump administration continues to target workers and the poor, he wants more high-profile bands to speak up and make it clear where they stand. Punk raged against Reagan and rocked against Bush, but now, with so many established bands choosing to stay on the sidelines, Casey is left wondering where all the real punks have gone.

“Every single show we played in the old days was like, ‘Nazis are coming, we’re fighting Nazis tonight,’” he recalls.

“A lot of it’s turned into Boomer punk. A lot of people are like, ‘I’m too old for that,’ or, ‘Well, I care about my taxes.’”

Zooming out, Casey drills down on his primary thesis: Workers need to have one another’s backs because no one else will. In his estimation, neither the broader labor movement nor the Democratic Party are prepared to meet the urgency of this moment, so it’s going to fall on the rest of us to mount a real resistance against Trump’s authoritarian takeover. We’re going to have to get our hands dirty.

“I don’t care if you have a good, well-paying union job and you’re in the middle class now—if you see a worker being dragged out of his kitchen and taken off to another country, you should be ready to go be there for that worker too,” he says. “My opinion is that every politician that’s lucky enough to be an elected official right now should be chaining themselves to the doors of the Capitol. And if you’re not ready to do that, then you should let someone else take your place and step back. America is sleepwalking into authoritarianism, and if there’s anybody out there that is a member of a labor union that is safe and doesn’t think this applies to you, he’s coming for you. They’re coming for you.”

After we parted ways, I thought about everything Casey said. Thick Massachusetts accent aside, he reminded me of men like my dad, who worked hard and did their best and still got kicked when they were down by a system that saw them as nothing more than beasts of burden. A punk rock band was Casey’s ticket out; most men like him aren’t so lucky, and he knows it. That may be why he seems so hell-bent on paying it forward any way he can, reminding people who feel left behind that they’re someone, too, and their neighbors need them.

“People like you and I were never meant to achieve our dreams,” he howled into the microphone during a performance of the song “Longshot,” glinting with sweat. “We’re conditioned to settle for something, something much less than it seems ...”

It’s time to stop settling. “The working class is going to have to look at itself as a whole and say, ‘Our divisions in race, politics, religion, sectors of the workforce—all that will have to be laid aside,’” he says. “It’s a ‘workers of the world, unite’ situation. We’re all in it together against the billionaire class, and it’s going to take that in the fight to win.” ■

KIM KELLY is a freelance journalist based in Philadelphia. She is a labor writer for *In These Times*, a labor columnist at *Teen Vogue* and *Fast Company*, and author of *Fight Like Hell: The Untold History of American Labor*.

PHOTO BY RIDER GARBARINO

“ART IS A COMMONS”

An exclusive conversation with aja monet on organizing from a place of love, the legacy of the Maroons and the urgency of art in these times

BY FATIMA JALLOH

AS CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND artists face targeted funding cuts by the Trump administration, aja monet urges us to recognize the artists we admire as working-class people. After all, as she notes, “Langston Hughes was a busboy. We all had to find a way to make a living.”

This ethos of working-class solidarity emanates throughout monet’s latest poetry collection, *Florida Water* (Haymarket Books). It unearths the balance between poet, lover and community organizer while reflecting on Florida’s “fractured history of racial prejudice, marooned peoples and the unruly forces of nature.”

Born in Brooklyn, schooled in Chicago, migrated to South Florida and now based in Los Angeles, monet is more than a poet; she is a “word musician of Caribbean and American dissent.” A Grammy-nominated artist and the artistic creative director for the global activist movement V-Day, she leads with the belief that everyone deserves the right to create.

In my conversation with monet, she reminds us that, while socioeconomic factors assign metrics and values to our gifts, art itself is not a luxury—but a commons.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

PHOTO BY DANIEL N. JOHNSON



FATIMA JALLOH: Survival is at the top of everyone's mind right now. How does a poet survive? How do you maintain the balance between your job as an artistic director, and your work as a poet and organizer?

AJA MONET: We're at a time where a lot of funding for cultural institutions is being cut. I think it's waking people up to the fact that the privilege of the society we've created and have had to exist in—a kind of NGO model—is not sustainable. And so there's a lot of questions arising for artists and cultural workers. Who are we beyond the foundation model? What are we creating? What are the material needs and immaterial needs of our people? How are we servicing those needs?

There is the saying: I want my bread and my roses too. I move from the place of knowing that poetry, art and culture are needs, they are a commons, they are something that people should have access to. For me, it's more about what spaces and organizations we are creating to chronicle and archive our narratives, our objectives and what we want to see in our communities. That doesn't have to be just the literary journal or the traditional publishing house. There are so many ways that we show up in the world, and a poet is a way of being an artist, is a way of being, of moving through the world.

There's this narrative that we're supposed to be making money off of our art and our passions. I think that's misleading, disingenuous, and makes for poor art and depressed artists. Capitalism has made each of us into tiny enterprises, and by virtue of that, it produces a competitive culture and climate that doesn't allow for sincere, genuine exchange beyond the transactional-ness of a capitalist system. Capitalism is founded on slavery, exploitation and colonialism, and those things didn't change. The plantations became the corporations. And so we're in this place now where artists have to know their value beyond what they can get out of it financially.

I'm a Floridian myself. I see a lot more people, like Doechii, laying claim to the state, talking about the swamps, the alligators. But also, we have the forces of nature, hurricanes, everything in the water. How did you reach eco-poetics as a subgenre in your book, *Florida Water*?

AM: I didn't even know that was a real term, but I continue to exist and co-create, collaborate, organize and show up to the issues that concern me. I don't know how you can be a living, breathing, existing person at this time and not be concerned with what is happening to the planet. How are we accessing water, clean air and nutrient-rich soil? Politics is completely wrapped up in the distribution of resources. If we don't have a planet, there's no politics to fight over.

Being in Florida, it's kind of ground zero for a lot of the

issues we see washing up on our shores around climate justice—or, rather, climate injustice. You see people by South Beach with water up to their thighs trying to walk to the grocery store. That's not normal. If you are breathing, this is your cause, this is your concern. But I like that title, "eco-poetics." I'm running with that.

I didn't make that up, but it's a really good term.

I wanted to talk about your poem, "is love a commons?" It reads like a nontraditional heartbreak poem, but styled for organizing spaces. How do you write about love in a time like this?

AM: If you're not doing it from love, then what are you doing it from? When I do an action or I'm canvassing or show up to a community organizing meeting, am I acting from a place of love or fear? What is my guiding principle? What is the oil that I'm using to fuel the engine?

We have to be very militant, diligent and strategic about how we prioritize love, how we protect love, how we nurture love, how we cultivate love and harvest our love for each other. I mean, that's the ultimate crop—the ultimate quench of thirst. There's no amount of success or liberation without love.

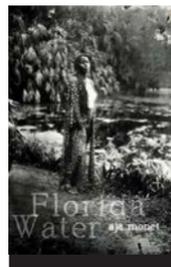
There's different ways that we inflict harm and pain upon each other—that we do the work of the system, the colonial, capitalist power structure—when we internalize it and become agents of fear, hatred, animosity and greed. Love is abundance. It's not a thing that moves from lack; it moves from a place of capacity of possibility. If you don't feel safe enough to love or be loved, then something's got to give.

Oh, you can be the mightiest of men, but if you don't love the person that you go home to at night, and you're not nurturing the community that has to hold you and sustain you, then clearly something will come astray. It will ripple down into the work.

You're the granddaughter of a union worker, a family that fled from Cuba, mingled with Jamaican heritage, generations of a dispersed diaspora. Can you speak more on the Maroons that you touch on in *Florida Water*?

AM: As people who are the great grandchildren of the horrific, genocidal, greedy transatlantic slave trade, it does not mean we did not resist. It does not mean that we did not fight and try to change and shift the conditions. What becomes of the child who learns their origin story is slavery? What kind of imagination is poured into that child, what kind of visions and dreams are expanded or limited because of that origin story?

For me, it was really liberating to live in Florida and learn there were African people who not only were not slaves, but who fought back and had a very different relationship to this



FLORIDA WATER
aja monet



DOUGLAS MASON/GETTY IMAGES

land and this country. Because of the dignity of their own humanity, they fled and created ecosystems and communities where there were differing languages, differing values, differing perspectives, and they sustained each other and survived. It was the spirit of resistance, the spirit of rebellion. That narrative is so profound.

We talk about the Underground Railroad and this limited notion that the North is the beacon of freedom, but what Florida means to me is there is a story that must be told about the Southern Star, that there was a place we fled to

Above: aja monet performs during The Newport Jazz Festival 2024 in the Fort Adams State Park on August 02, 2024 in Newport, Rhode Island.

that was South. We started a poetry festival in Florida called the Maroon Poetry Festival. I wrote about it in the foreword of *Freedom Dreams* by Robin DG Kelley, and it became reflective of some of the poems in *Florida Water*. It was a huge beacon of inspiration for me as an organizer, not just the narrative for the sake of telling the narrative, but as a strategy for how we look at Florida and our organizing. We had to see ourselves in this political imagination of maroonage. We are part of this legacy of the Maroons. You know, it is a verb. What does it look like to maroon in this time?

You describe yourself as a documentarian, a scribe of the time. How do you transform the things you witness into your own art?

AM: It's the ability to see, the ability to bear witness, to be with people, and to recognize that you can surrender to that witness, that we come from a continuum. If you think the poem is good, imagine what it took to get to the place to write the poem. That's the joy of being a poet, the person you had to become to get to the poem.

That's a beautiful way to put it.

There's a certain guilt that I feel choosing poetry as something that I want to put a lot of time and effort into. I feel that writing, at least a little bit, can be self-serving and maybe self-preserving. What would you say to the guilty poet who chooses poetry?

AM: Phillis Wheatley could only write so many poems until some chains got liberated. There's degrees to what role

we play, and you show up in the way that you can. Don't ever just get so carried away in your isolation that you slide into individualism. It's about knowing that when you're in solitude, who are your people? Who do you answer to? Who loves you? Who do you check in on? Those are more concerns than you working on a poem when the world is on fire. As long as you're doing what you need to be doing, I don't think guilt for doing what you are called to do is serving anybody. ■

FATIMA JALLOH is a poet and journalist from Jacksonville, Fla., currently based in Chicago. They are a former editorial intern for *In These Times*, with an education in Journalism, Black Studies and Poetry from Northwestern University.

REST IN POWER ASSATA SHAKUR

IT IS OUR DUTY TO FIGHT
FOR OUR FREEDOM

IT IS OUR DUTY TO WIN

WE MUST LOVE AND
SUPPORT EACH OTHER

WE HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE
BUT OUR CHAINS



THIS CHANT CAN BE HEARD AT ACTIONS around the globe, but many protesters are unaware of its origin: It was first penned by freedom fighter Assata Shakur from prison in 1973 and later published in her 1987 book *Assata: An Autobiography*. Born in New York in 1947, Shakur was a former member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army. She died on September 25 at the age of 78, after a long life of fighting against the root causes of capitalism, white supremacy and other injustices. Two years into a controversial life sentence related to a New Jersey shooting, in 1979, Shakur

escaped from prison; since 1984, she lived in exile in Cuba after being granted political asylum. In 1998, Shakur wrote an open letter to Pope John Paul II that remains as pertinent as ever, concluding:

Most of the people who live on this planet are still not free. I ask only that you continue to work and pray to end oppression and political repression. It is my heartfelt belief that all the people on this earth deserve justice: social justice, political justice, and economic justice. I believe it is the only way we will ever achieve peace and prosperity on this earth.

—SHERELL BARBEE
PRINT EDITOR

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Labor Solidarity Defends Against Deportations

In 1978, amid deportations of undocumented workers in East Los Angeles, one raid at the Sbicca shoe factory went differently: Lawyers brought in by the AFL-CIO, which had been organizing at the factory, were able to halt many of the deportations on Fourth Amendment grounds. Larry Remer, for *In These Times*, detailed how the raids impacted Mexican-American communities and

how, in the Sbicca case, labor solidarity helped in their defense. The events described sound awfully familiar. Nationally, immigration sweeps are still a common form of union-busting. And the labor movement is still one of the strongest allies for undocumented immigrants, helping organize anti-ICE responses in L.A., Chicago and other cities.



IN 1978, LARRY REMER WROTE: With a population of more than one million, the mini-metropolis of East L.A. serves as cultural capital to the Chicano population of the southwestern United States. East L.A. has its own indigenous newspapers and radio stations, its own political power structure and its own burgeoning art and theater scene. Were it a separate political entity, East L.A. would be the third largest Spanish-speaking city in North America.

But, in all things economic and political, East L.A.'s Chicanos are in an inferior position. Tens if not hundreds of thousands enter illegally, many of whom are attracted to East L.A., where they form an economic underclass of “undocumented” workers and a large pool of exploitable, cheap labor.

Last spring a force of 40 armed immigration officers surrounded the [Sbicca shoe] factory and demanded that all employees produce their immigration documents. In the sweep, “undocumented” workers were arrested and taken to the L.A. INS office to be fingerprinted, photographed, and put on a bus for Mexico.

But the Sbicca raid turned out differently. For several weeks, the Retail Clerks Union, AFL-CIO, had been organizing at the shoe factory. As often happens, La Migra had been called by the Sbicca management to rid the shop of unwanted union agitators. But this time, before the workers had been put on the bus, one of the union’s organizers brought in Peter Schey, an attorney with the Legal Aid Foundation.

Together with other lawyers from the ACLU, the

People’s College of Law and the Los Angeles Center for Law and Justice, Schey went to court. Their contention was that the Fourth Amendment rights of the workers had been violated when—before they were arrested—La Migra failed to advise them they were entitled to an attorney.

The court order was granted and INS was ordered to stop the buses. Of those arrested, 65 decided to fight deportation.

The attorneys for the “Sbicca 65” attempted a new strategy. They instructed their clients to invoke the Fifth Amendment. This forced immigration officials to ask representatives of the U.S. State Department to travel to the workers’ hometowns and search for their birth certificates to prove that these people were born in Mexico and therefore not legally in the United States.

Thus far, nearly half the Sbicca cases have been dismissed for lack of evidence. Moreover, the hearing process has forced immigration officials to bring their other activities in L.A. to a halt.

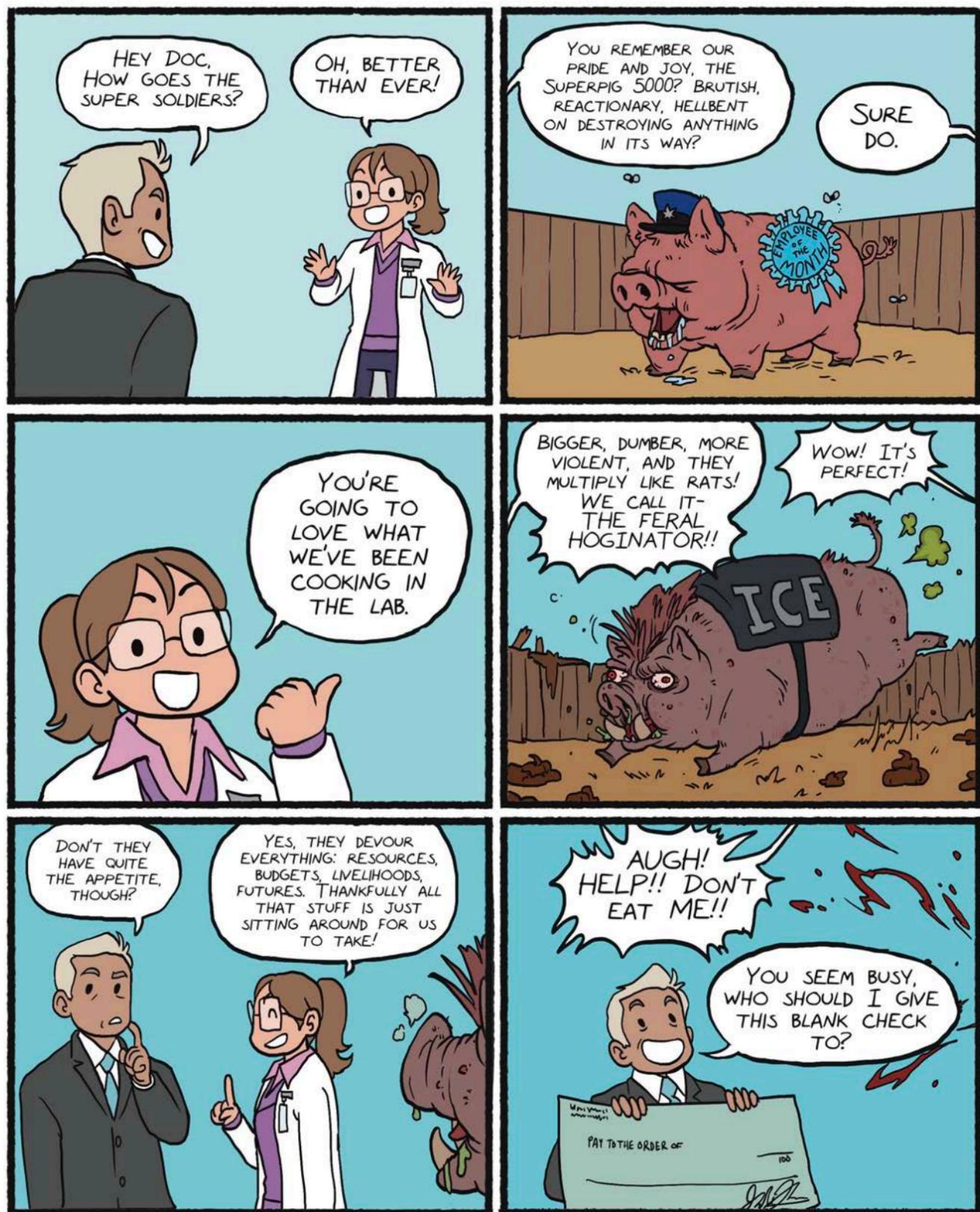
Notes Mark Rosenbaum of the ACLU, “I can’t understand why nobody realized this before. These are people, not cattle.”

However, the most significant development in the Sbicca case has been the emergence of organized labor as a force on behalf of “undocumented” workers.

“After Sbicca,” [organizer Christina] Ramirez continues, “things have changed a lot. We’re advising workers that they don’t even have to talk to immigration. It makes them feel more secure and they’re not afraid to get involved. Also, the number of raids has decreased and we’ve been more successful. Just this week 125 workers at Motif Apparel went on strike. All of them are ‘undocumented.’ And they went back today—with a victory.”

Visit InTheseTimes.com to read the full article.

KENDRA WELLS



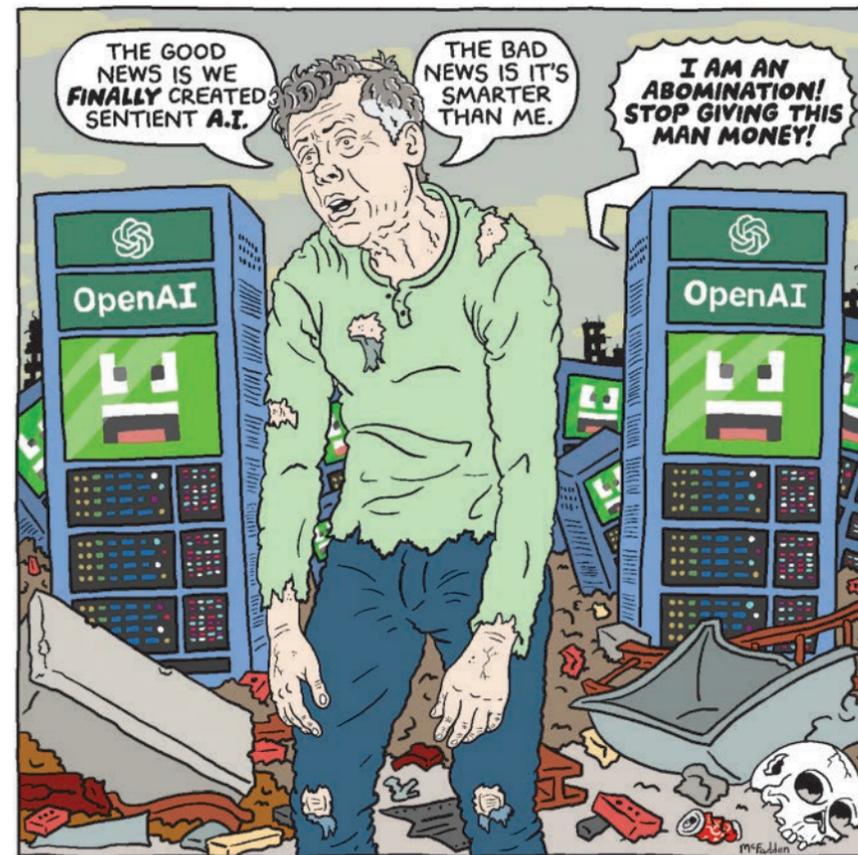
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