HISTORY NEOLIBERALISM THE '90S DECEMBER 26, 2022/JANUARY 2, 2023

Trumpism Was Born in the '90s

Clintonian centrism allowed the radical right to incubate.

By Jeet Heer

DECEMBER 12, 2022

Illustration by Tim Robinson.

If decades have distinct personalities, they also have shadow selves: covert and latent tendencies that are only barely visible at the time but serve as harbingers of change to come.

The stereotypical view of the 1950s is of suburban placidity presided over by the grinning golfer Dwight Eisenhower. There's some truth to this image, but even at its most bland, the decade saw the sprouting of many seeds that would flourish in the years to come: the Beat writers forging a counterculture that rejected middle-class conformism, the

organizers of the Montgomery bus boycott raising the curtain on a new era of civil rights activism. Not to mention the Senate vote to censure Joseph McCarthy and the wave of campus enthusiasm that greeted the Cuban Revolution.

In popular memory, the 1990s were another supposedly nonpolitical decade. The Cold War wrapped up in 1989, which allowed Francis Fukuyama to proclaim the "End of History" in a much-discussed article that became a 1992 best-selling book. The age of ideological competition, Fukuyama and other sages assured us, was over. Liberal democracy had triumphed, and there was no alternative. The Washington consensus of neoliberalism was now the only path for humanity. Henceforth, politics would be a technocratic contest between the center-left (Bill Clinton) and the center-right (George H.W. Bush, Bob Dole). Clinton, the master triangulator who repeatedly outwitted Republicans by selectively adopting their policies, was the king of this centrist utopia, presiding over a stock market boom, a new push for the globalization of trade, and a renewal of American hegemony under the banner of liberal humanitarianism and the "responsibility to protect."

The Making of a Congressional Con Man

The very fact that the major domestic political crisis of Clinton's presidency was an impeachment over extramarital fellatio speaks to the fundamentally trivial politics of the decade. (There's no need to credit the transparent GOP talking point that Clinton was impeached over a violation of the rule of law.) If *Seinfeld*, the quintessential 1990s TV program, was "about nothing," then the Clinton era offered a politics about nothing much.

In his book *The Nineties*, the culture critic Chuck Klosterman neatly articulates this view of the era. "It was perhaps the last period in American history when personal and political engagement was still viewed as optional," he argues. "Many of the polarizing issues that dominate contemporary discourse were already in play, but ensconced as thought experiments in academic circles."

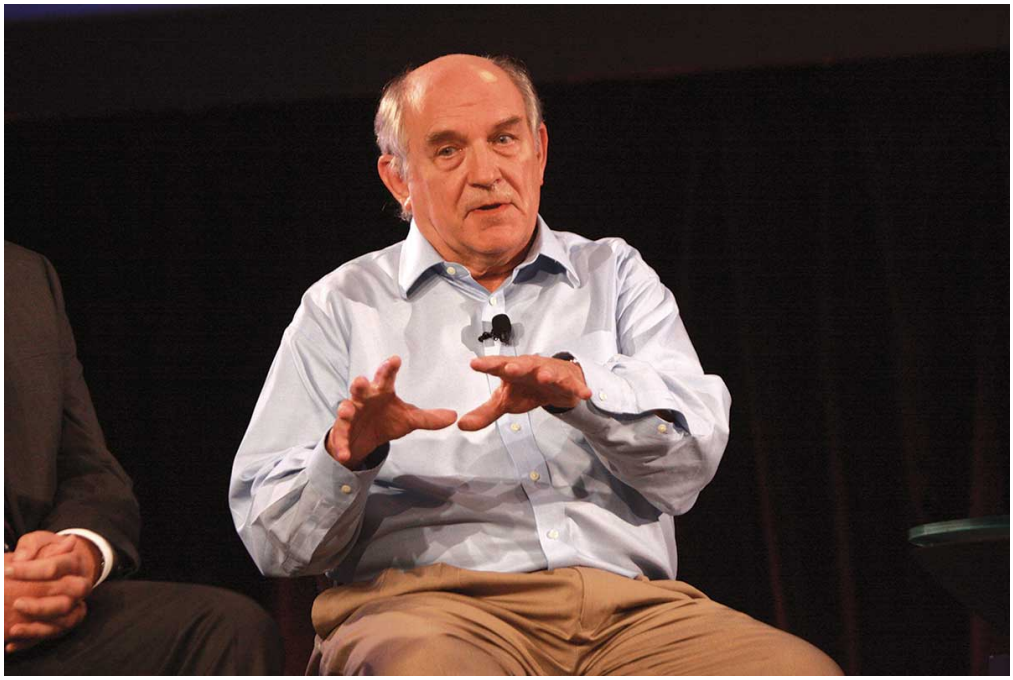
Klosterman's proviso is an effective rebuke to his own argument. The centrist consensus might have been dominant, but it met with major challenges from the left, the center, and the right well beyond the precincts of academia (where, to be sure, figures like Judith Butler were preparing

the ground for a major shift in thinking on gender). On the left, ACT UP used direct action to confront the bipartisan complacency on AIDS, while the environmental and labor protesters who disrupted the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle proved that many people were ready to take to the streets to oppose globalization. In the political center, Ross Perot's presidential runs in 1992 and 1996 opened space for a new politics of discontent that blended conservative concerns about deficit spending with opposition to NAFTA and a free-floating anger at the bipartisan political elite.

But it was on the right that perhaps the most lasting political legacy of the 1990s would be felt. As the Vanderbilt University historian Nicole Hemmer demonstrates in her incisive and convention-challenging *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics*, the decade of Bill Clinton was also the era of Patrick Buchanan. Buchanan ran for president three times in that period, twice competing for the Republican nomination (1992 and 1996) and once as the Reform Party candidate (2000). Although he never came close to winning, Buchanan belongs to the great American tradition of political losers who cast a longer shadow than many winners because they popularized ideas that were taken up later by more successful candidates—a pantheon that includes William Jennings Bryan, Barry Goldwater, and Jesse Jackson.

Even among those candidates who went on to lose big at the ballot box, Buchanan stands out as an odd figure. More a pundit than a politician, Buchanan had been a speechwriter

and adviser to Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, in both capacities serving as a conduit between the administration and the hard right.



The Bell Tolls: Charles Murray, whose rehabilitation of racist pseudoscience in *The Bell Curve* was lauded by *The New Republic*. *(Gage Skidmore)*

Buchananism was the bridge between Reaganism and Trumpism. More than anyone else, Buchanan signaled a change from the optimistic rhetoric of Reagan—whose racism was always carefully pitched in the form of deniable dog whistles—to a nativist and pessimistic message that openly embraced white Christian dominance. Reagan was supposed to be the Moses who led the American right out of the wilderness and into the promised land of political power. But a funny thing happened on the way to the milk and honey: Many on the right found Reagan less pleasing in practice than in theory.

It's true that Reagan brought the right many gifts, including tax cuts for the rich, a massive military buildup for the hawks, and conservative judges to please the religious right. But despite these policy victories, the most passionate voices

on the right felt they were losing the larger battle. A political pragmatist, Reagan never hesitated to trim his sails and compromise when necessary. He opened up negotiations with the Soviet Union after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. Though past victories in civil rights, feminism, and LGBTQ rights were being whittled away under his administration, it was nowhere near fast enough to please his base. On a fundamental level, the dream of the right was a cultural counterrevolution in which the legacy of the 1960s would be wiped out and America would return to the supposed tranquility of the Eisenhower era. But that was never a realistic dream: No matter how many Electoral College votes Reagan won, America kept becoming less white, women kept joining the workforce, African Americans continued to assert their rights as citizens, and more and more gays stepped out of the closet. Now that Reagan has been canonized as a conservative saint, popular memory has forgotten how angry much of the right was at him in the 1990s.

In 1982, Buchanan published a column decrying "the transformation of Ronald Reagan from a pivotal and revolutionary figure in American politics into a traditional, middle-of-the-road pragmatic Republican." Buchanan would of course mute this criticism when he became White House communications director in 1985. But the sentiment never went away, even when it was left unspoken. Nor was Buchanan alone in voicing it. In 1985, Newt Gingrich, then a young congressman, insisted that Reagan's planned meeting with Gorbachev was "the most dangerous summit for the West since Adolf Hitler met with Neville Chamberlain in 1938 in Munich." As the Gipper tiptoed closer to an arms-

control agreement, Howard Phillips, the founder of the Conservative Caucus, denounced him as "a useful idiot for Soviet propaganda." Meanwhile, Hemmer notes, religious-right leaders like the televangelist Pat Robertson expressed "frustration" with Reagan because "on everything from school prayer to abortion, [he] said all the right things but achieved no real change."

In 1987, Buchanan declared that "the greatest vacuum in American politics is to the right of Ronald Reagan."

With the dawn of the 1990s—and Reagan's disappearance from the political scene and descent into dementia—the moment had arrived for the far right to launch a new push. Buchanan aimed to fill the vacuum he had identified—a project that also energized figures like Robertson, Gingrich, and a bevy of new right-wing members of Congress such as Helen Chenoweth, who became infamous for palling around with extremist militias. Robertson had already made a name for himself during his 1988 bid for the Republican presidential nomination. He lost to George H.W. Bush but did well enough to scare the GOP elite, which gained a new awareness of how strong the religious right was becoming. Gingrich, elected House minority whip in 1989, was the head of a new cohort of congressional Republicans who rejected what they saw as their party's too easy cooperation with the Democrats. A master of demagogic attacks on real and alleged Democratic Party corruption, Gingrich rode popular anger at the political system to victory in the 1994 midterms and his own elevation to speaker of the House—a political journey that culminated in his push to impeach Clinton (a controversial move that lost the Republicans seats in the 1998 midterms and cost Gingrich the speakership).

What did this politics to the right of Reagan look like? On a theoretical level, it meant breaking with Reaganism on foreign policy, trade, and immigration. Reagan, whose thinking on politics owed much to the "fusionist" conservatism that was being developed in William F. Buckley's *National Review* during the early Cold War, believed that the United States, in order to fight communism, had to be the cornerstone of international alliances like NATO, that it had to push for global trade agreements, and that it should be open to immigration (which would enrich the country with cheap, hard-working labor).

Mass incarceration: Bill Clinton kicked off his presidential bid in March 1992 with a pilgrimage to the Stone Mountain Correctional Facility. *(Greg Gibson / AP Photo)*

The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 proved a boon to those on the right who were already questioning whether prioritizing the Cold War still made sense. Circulating around small magazines like *Chronicles* and tiny think tanks like the Mises Institute, these people called themselves "paleoconservatives" or, sometimes, "paleolibertarians." The major figures among them included

the political theorist Paul Gottfried, the polemical journalist Samuel T. Francis, and the anarcho-capitalist economist Murray Rothbard.

The paleoconservative argument was a simple one: If the Soviet Union was no longer a threat, did the United States really need NATO, free trade, and immigrant labor? In order to achieve the hierarchical white Christian society that the right desired, wouldn't it make sense to have a more unilateral foreign policy free of foreign entanglements, combined with protectionist measures to preserve manufacturing jobs and immigration restrictions to keep America as white as possible?

This new paleoconservative politics—a kind of inward-looking nationalism—eschewed Reagan's sunny talk of America as a shining city upon a hill that attracted immigrants from around the world. In an important 1992 essay, Murray Rothbard hailed Buchanan for giving up the shibboleths of *National Review* fusionism and returning to the truths of the "Old Right" that had flourished in the 1930s and '40s—the isolationist right of the America First movement. "Buchanan's race for the presidency," Rothbard argued, "has changed the face of the Right-wing.... He has created a new radical, or Hard Right, very much like the original Right before *National Review*."

This new hard right would also forgo Reaganite dog whistles in favor of explicit appeals to racism. In a 1989 column titled "Old Klansman, New Republican," Buchanan offered up the erstwhile Klansman David Duke as a potential political model. "Take a look at Duke's portfolio of winning issues; and expropriate those not in conflict with GOP principles,"

he wrote. These issues included lower taxes, the criminality of the "urban underclass," and the threat of "reverse discrimination against white folks."

This racist hard-right politics reflected broader cultural shifts in the 1990s. Figures like Charles Murray, Richard Herrnstein, Peter Brimelow, and Dinesh D'Souza won national audiences for racist arguments, whether framed in terms of pseudoscience (Murray and Herrnstein), nativism (Brimelow), or a contempt for Black culture (D'Souza).

It would be tempting to place the blame for this new racism, nativism, and hostility toward the poor solely on the right. But putative liberals and centrists eagerly joined in. One of the main lessons of Hemmer's book is that the reigning centrist consensus helped to elevate the radical right. *The New Republic* infamously gave its imprimatur to Murray and Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve*—which claimed that there were racial differences in intelligence—by excerpting it (albeit with some critical accompanying essays). Bill Clinton himself praised Murray's previous book, *Losing Ground*, which wasn't explicitly racist but was a vicious attack on the welfare state and the supposed low moral culture of the poor. "He did the country a great service," Clinton said. In 1992, as Hemmer notes, Clinton "openly courted white voters with his own anti-Black dog whistles, criticizing civil rights leader Jesse Jackson at a conference for his Rainbow Coalition and traveling to a correctional facility near Stone Mountain, Ga., to deliver his tough-on-crime message in front of a phalanx of incarcerated men, nearly all of whom were Black." Stone Mountain, of course, is the birthplace of the second Ku Klux Klan. Buchanan also made a pilgrimage to Stone Mountain that year.

Clinton's praise of Murray and his trip to Stone Mountain were just two of the many ways he signaled that, as a centrist politician, he was willing to make overtures to right-wing voters. Clinton's centrism was overdetermined, rooted partly in his slippery personal character (like a chameleon, he was quick to change his color to suit his environment) and partly in the historical juncture. The Democrats, chastened by having lost the last three presidential elections, were eager to placate an electorate they imagined as profoundly conservative. Labor unions, the historical bastion of economic liberalism inside the Democratic Party, had been battered by deindustrialization and by Reagan's repressive policies. This left the Democrats looking for new sources of financial support in corporate America and among socially liberal but economically conservative suburban voters. After Clinton's election, the Democrats got swamped in the 1994 midterms, and the GOP, under the incendiary congressional leadership of Gingrich, swept the House of Representatives. With the fire-breathing right in control of Congress, Clinton calculated that his political survival depended on triangulation: If he presented himself as the moderate alternative to both liberal Democrats and right-wing Republicans, he could regain control of the political conversation. Clinton's triangulation strategy worked—but at the cost of further emboldening the right.

The reigning political dynamic of the 1990s was that, as Clinton moved the Democratic Party to the center, the space for Buchananite ideas to take hold in the GOP expanded. This was particularly evident with respect to immigration, as Buchanan became a pioneer in calling for a border fence.

In Hemmer's account of the 1996 presidential campaign, GOP nominee Bob Dole "found his move to the center repeatedly blocked by Bill Clinton, who kept shifting to the right. In 1996, Republicans in Congress struck a number of deals with the administration, not only piling up victories for Clinton as he ran for reelection but boxing Dole in. The 1996 immigration bill made that clear: Clinton's willingness to take a hard line on undocumented migrants meant that Dole, to differentiate himself, grabbed onto an amendment barring undocumented children from attending public schools." Clinton also pushed a welfare reform program that imposed new requirements on recipients and dramatically curtailed benefits, fulfilling a campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it"; a free-trade program that bolstered corporate power; and a crime bill that escalated mass incarceration. With Democrats like Clinton in power, there was hardly a need for the Republicans to push conservative policies.

Clinton wasn't the only centrist who inadvertently fueled the far right; the mainstream media also played a role. Pat Buchanan, like Pat Robertson and Ross Perot, belonged to a new species of presidential candidate: media stars with no political experience. Buchanan was a national figure because of his role as cohost of CNN's *Crossfire* and his appearances on *The McLaughlin Group*; Robertson was the host of the long-running *700 Club*; and Perot rocketed to fame thanks to his appearances on Larry King's CNN talk show. Other rabble-rousers and provocateurs, such as Laura Ingraham and Ann Coulter, were also elevated once cable news became a 24/7 fixture after the Gulf War in 1991. And Fox News,

which only started in 1996, wasn't the main driver of this change. Rather, CNN, MSNBC, and Comedy Central were the real innovators in fusing entertainment with politics.

Buchanan's manifest bigotry was long tolerated because he was good television and, for his colleagues in the elite media, a charming companion. As *Washington Post* columnist David Broder, the very Nestor of centrist conventional wisdom, noted in 1995, "He has been 'Pat' to so many of us who have known him since he was a traveling valet and speechwriter for Richard Nixon in 1966—the combative but personally congenial guy who was writing columns, or doing TV or flacking for Nixon or Agnew or Reagan—that it's hard to imagine him as president." For this reason, Broder concluded, the media treated Buchanan "lightly."

Two decades later, another charismatic TV personality would take up Buchanan's politics and be similarly treated with indulgence by the mainstream media because he was good for ratings and hard to imagine as president.

In a 2015 *Washington Post* interview, Buchanan anointed Donald Trump as his political heir. "On building a fence to secure the border with Mexico, an end to trade deals like NAFTA, GATT, and [most favored nation status] for China, and staying out of unwise and unnecessary wars," he noted, "these are the issues I ran on in 1992 and 1996 in the Republican primaries and as Reform Party candidate in 2000."

This was no idle boast on Buchanan's part: The embrace of globalism by the bipartisan centrist elite had created the space for Trump. "What Trump has today," he continued, "is

conclusive evidence to prove that what some of us warned about in the 1990s has come to pass. From 2000 to 2010, the U.S. lost 55,000 factories and 6 million manufacturing jobs."

Buchanan laid the groundwork for Trump, not just in making trade an issue but also in terms of the racist demagoguery and the fusion of TV celebrity with politics. In forging this new politics, both Buchanan and Trump profited from the bipartisan centrist elite turning its back on American workers. That's the true legacy of the 1990s.

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COMMENTS (9)

POVERTY VOTING RIGHTS DEMOCRACY

Poor People Have the Power to Transform America

As the threat of yet more political turmoil and escalating violence looms, isn't it time to break through the isolation with a new sense of collective power?

By Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis

TODAY 5:00 AM

Demonstrators march outside the US Capitol during the Poor People's Campaign rally at the National Mall in Washington on Saturday, June 23, 2018. *(Jose Luis Magana / AP Photo)*

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This article originally appeared at TomDispatch.com. To stay on top of important articles like these, sign up to receive the latest updates from TomDispatch.com.*

Last week, I was in Washington, D.C.'s Union Station. The weather had turned cold and I couldn't help noticing what an inhospitable place it had become for the city's homeless and dispossessed. Once upon a time, anyone was allowed to be in the train station at any hour. Now, there were signs everywhere announcing that you needed a ticket to be there. Other warning signs indicated that you could only sit for 30 minutes at a time at the food-court tables, while barriers had been placed where benches used to be to make it that much harder to congregate, no less sit down.

With winter descending on the capital, all this struck me as particularly cruel when it came to those unfortunate enough to be unhoused. That sense of cruelty was heightened by the knowledge that legions of policy-makers, politicians, and

lobbyists—with the power to pass legislation that could curtail evictions, protect tenants, and expand affordable housing—travel through Union Station regularly.

When I left D.C., I headed for my hometown, New York City, where Penn Station has been made similarly unwelcome to the homeless. Entrances are closed; police are everywhere; and the new Moynihan terminal, modern and gleaming, was designed without public seating to ward off unwanted visitors. Worse yet, after a summer spent destroying homeless encampments and cutting funding for homeless services, New York Mayor Eric Adams recently announced that the city would soon begin involuntarily institutionalizing homeless people. Rather than address a growing mental health crisis among the most marginalized in his city with expanded resources and far greater access to health care, housing, and other services, Adams has chosen the path of further punishment for the poor.

It's a bitter wonder that our political capital and our financial capital have taken such a hard line on homelessness and poverty in the richest country on the planet. And this is happening in a nation in which 8 to 10 million people lack a home entirely or live on the brink; a nation that reached record-high rents this year (with three-quarters of our largest cities experiencing double-digit growth in prices); that spends more on health care with generally worse outcomes than any other advanced economy; and that continues to chisel away at public housing, privatize health care, and close hospitals, while real-estate agencies, financial speculators, and pharmaceutical companies enrich themselves in striking ways.

Walking around Union Station, I also couldn't help thinking about the administration's decision to end the recent rail strike by stripping workers of their right to collective bargaining and denying them more than a day of paid sick leave a year. The president claimed that breaking the strike was necessary to protect the economy from disaster. Yet little attention was given to the sky-high profits of the railroad companies, which doubled during the pandemic. The price tag for more paid sick leave for union workers was estimated at about $321 million annually. Compare that to the $7 billion railroad companies made during the 90 days they opposed the strike and the more than $200 million rail CEOs raked in last year. In the shadow of such figures, how could paid sick leave during an ongoing pandemic be anything but a basic necessity for front-line workers?

THE DEEPER MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

All of this left me thinking about the ongoing debate over American democracy, not to mention the recent Georgia runoff where Senator Raphael Warnock, even as he celebrated his victory over Herschel Walker, pointed to the negative impact of voter suppression on the election. Today, the rise in outright authoritarianism and white Christian nationalism in our body politic poses a genuine danger to the future health and well-being of our society. At the same time, a revived pro-democracy movement has also begun to emerge, committed to fighting for free and fair elections, the rule of law, and the peaceful transfer of power. But let's be honest: If we stop there, we cheapen the noble urge for a truly decent democracy.

It's precisely when our governing ideals are under ever-more-intense attack that you should ask what we mean by invoking democracy. Do we mean an electoral system shaped by the will of the majority? If so, given growing voter suppression tactics, our system is already a far cry from any democratic ideal. Or do we mean more? In fact, shouldn't democracy mean more?

For me, a democratic society means that everyone, including the poor, has a say in how our lives are lived and workplaces organized. It's a society in which the homeless *aren't* criminalized, the health of workers *is* protected, and people *are* treated with dignity by a government of their choice. And I truly believe that, when you strip away the partisan rhetoric and political spin, this is a vision shared by a majority of Americans.

In response to Mayor Adams's encampment sweeps this summer, one homeless man interviewed by *The Guardian* offered this explanation: "Fascism works like that—as soon as there's a tightening of the belt or any sort of shift into harder times, that fascist and oppressive elements within countries will immediately try to attack the most vulnerable." So how do we fight such an emboldened threat and the dangers faced by those at greatest risk among us?

I certainly don't have the full answers to such questions, but a partial solution, I suspect, lies in building a pro-democracy movement attuned not just to elections (and the legal fights that, these days, regularly go with them in Congress and state legislatures), but to the needs and dreams of everyday people. And that would require a willingness to reach into

communities that have all too often been forgotten or abandoned and earnestly follow the leadership of the people who live there.

PERMANENTLY ORGANIZING THE UNORGANIZED

At this time of year, some communities celebrate Las Posadas, reenacting Jesus's birth in the humble city of Bethlehem. Though many of us have been taught to imagine that birth as a moment of tranquility, there is, in fact, great hardship and conflict at the heart of the nativity scene. Indeed, Jesus was born in a time of tremendous violence and injustice. In the days leading up to his birth, a militarized police force had pushed migrant people back to their lands of origin so that the authorities could demand taxes and tributes. The local ruler had sent out spies to ensure that his authority wasn't challenged and, lest anyone dare to do so, had ordered thousands of young Jewish boys murdered. Amid that swirl of state-sanctioned violence, Mary and Joseph were driven from their home, forcing Mary to give birth in a small, dirty manger. Jesus, in other words, was born homeless and undocumented in the land of empire.

During Las Posadas, communities from the Bronx to Los Angeles retell that story, highlighting the gentrification of neighborhoods that's pricing out the poor, unjust immigration policies that are unfairly separating families, and a housing crisis that's left millions in need of—dare I use the word?—stable living quarters during the holidays. Included in the social critique that lurks behind Las Posadas is the belief that everyday people should have the right to determine the course of their own lives, rather than be pawns to the machinations of the wealthy and powerful.

In Texas and New Mexico, the Border Network for Human Rights celebrates Christmas among the thousands of families it's been working with for the past 20 years. Fernando Garcia, its director, has taught me much about organizing among the poor and dispossessed, offering a vision of "permanently organized communities." At the heart of the Border Network's vision is the idea of organizing an enduring network of connected families living in that part of our country. As for its focus, as Garcia explains it, "Whatever issue they feel that they need to tackle is the priority."

Building durable and lasting organized communities, especially among those most impacted by injustice, is something a pro-democracy movement should take seriously indeed. In fact, it's one place where, all too sadly, we lag behind the forces of authoritarianism and white Christian nationalism. In many poor communities, politicized reactionary churches and parachurch organizations are already well practiced in providing not just political and theological messaging and training, but material aid and a sense of belonging to hurting people. Those concerned with justice and inclusion would do well to follow suit. In the coming years, movements dedicated to democracy and our economic flourishing need to invest time and resources in building permanently organized communities to help meet the daily needs of impacted Americans, while offering a sense of what democracy looks like in practice, up close and personal.

As the threat of yet more political turmoil and escalating violence looms, isn't it time to break through the isolation that so many people feel with a new sense of collective power? Which brings me to a larger point: In order to build

a pro-democracy movement capable of contending with the influence of authoritarianism and bad theology, we need to leave progressive bubbles and silos and commit ourselves to organizing the unorganized—and following their lead.

The newly launched Union of Southern Service Workers (USSW) offers a helpful template. The USSW emerged from the Fight for $15 movement and a long history of Southern organizing. Calling for "community unionism," it intends to link labor struggles to community life, while supporting workers as they fight for justice.

AWAKENING THE SLEEPING GIANT

Before the Covid-19 pandemic first began spreading across the fissures of racism and poverty in our society, not to speak of the current crisis of inflation and impending recession, there were already 140 million Americans who were either poor or a $400 emergency away from poverty. Those numbers have only grown. Some poor people are already politically active, but many aren't—not because the poor don't care but because politics-as-usual doesn't speak to the daily stresses of their lives.

There is, in other words, a sleeping giant out there that, when awakened, could shift the political and moral calculus of the nation. Were that mass of poor, impacted people to begin to believe that democracy could mean something real and positive in their lives, watch out. Should that happen—and, as Frederick Doug lass once said, "Who would be free themselves must strike the first blow"—you could end up with a pro-democracy movement that would be unstoppable.

Almost five years ago, I helped launch the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival alongside Bishop William J. Barber II, president of Repairers of the Breach, as well as my colleagues at the Kairos Center, and thousands of directly impacted people, community organizers, and religious leaders. Our core theory of change, drawn from our study of history, is that the most transformative movements in our national storybook have always relied on generations of poor, deeply impacted people coming together to help lead a national change for the better.

Part of our analysis is that poor people nationwide could become a transformative voting bloc if only politics were more relevant in their lives. In 2021, the Poor People's Campaign released a report on the impact of poor voters in the 2020 elections. It showed that, contrary to popular belief, poor and low-income people made up a remarkably sizable percentage of the electorate (and, surprisingly enough, an even larger percentage in battleground states). Looking at racial demographics among such voters, the report found that turnout was significant, whatever their race. Given the total vote share for Joe Biden and down-ballot Democrats that year, the data even challenged the notion that poor white voters were a crucial part of Donald Trump's base.

Today, our electoral system has become gridlocked and increasingly gerrymandered to empower minoritarian rule at the expense of the will of the majority. Thanks to that, it can often feel as if the country is evenly split on issues ranging from health care, housing, and jobs to abortion and environmental protection. But nonpartisan polls continue to

reaffirm that the majority of the country supports more economic, racial, and gender justice. Results from ballot measures in the midterm elections reflect a similar reality, whether people in various states were voting to protect the right to abortion, passing higher minimum wage laws, or expanding Medicaid.

And contrary to what too many of our politicians and the media that support them claim, this country can indeed afford such widely popular and deeply needed ballot measures and policies. In fact, as Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz wrote in his award-winning *The Price of Inequality*, the question is not whether we can afford housing, health care, paid sick leave, living wages, immigrant rights, and more; it's whether we can afford not to—especially since failing to address the people's needs weakens our democracy.

In fact, right before the midterms and the beginning of the holiday season, retired professor of humanities Jack Metzgar wrote at Inequality.org: "Because the wealth of the wealthy confers both economic and political power, we cannot adequately defend democracy if we go on allowing our economic oligarchy a completely free lunch.... Next time you hear a politician say 'we' can't afford something that clearly needs doing, just stop a moment and think—about what a wealth tax on a very small proportion of Americans could accomplish."

Indeed, it can be done! *¡Si, se puede!* After all, isn't this the true story of Christmas? So, this season, when you listen to Handel's Messiah, attend to the words about lifting from the

bottom up: “Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain.”

As 2022 comes to a close, this is where I draw hope and inspiration.

Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis The Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis is codirector of the Kairos Center, cofounder of the Poverty Initiative, national codirector of the Poor People’s Campaign, and author of *Always with Us?: What Jesus Really Said about the Poor*. She is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church, and has spent the past two decades working with grassroots organizations across the United States.

COMMENTS (0)