

The Public Eye



Project 2025 • County Capture • Review: *The Age of Insurrection* • When the Sheriff Is Above the Law • Q&A: Innocent Until Proven Muslim
Countering the Ideology of "Violent Care" • Practicing Emergent Strategies to Fight the Right and Resist Fascism
Q&A: Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies



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Welcome, readers, to a new issue of *The Public Eye*!

As we relaunch PRA's flagship quarterly after a two-year hiatus, allow me to introduce myself as the magazine's new editor, Kitana Ananda. Whether in scholarly, media, community-based, or nonprofit settings, I've worked at the intersections of racial, gender, economic, and im/migrant justice—most recently, as a Health Not Prisons Collective editorial consultant and *Nonprofit Quarterly's* Race + Power editor—to shift public narratives toward building a world liberated from violence. I'm thrilled to bring this commitment and experience to PRA's expanded editorial team, to support social justice changemakers and movements fighting the resurgent Right.

In keeping with its signature role in PRA's vision and mission, *The Public Eye* will continue to publish original reporting, well-researched analysis, and critical commentary that goes beyond the standard thinking and reporting on the U.S. and Global Right. With the magazine's return, subscribers will once again receive four print issues per year. There will also be some changes. Along with redesigning the print magazine for a new and improved reader experience, we'll introduce new article formats, in print and online, as we continue to share the latest research on the Right in engaging and accessible ways.

The Public Eye returns to a world in violent conflict in 2024, the biggest election year in history: This year, at least 64 countries and the European Union—representing half the world's population—will hold national elections amid a global antidemocratic turn. Among those countries are the U.S. (formally the modern world's oldest, continuous democracy) and India (the world's largest), where voters will face a stark choice between democratic and autocratic leadership.

With the theme, "Democracy Under Attack—And How We Fight Back," this Fall 2023/Winter 2024 double issue of *The Public Eye* examines antidemocratic forces on the Right and pro-democracy efforts to counter them. This issue investigates reactionary attempts to undermine democracy within and beyond the state, but it doesn't stop there. Our contributors also share insights from movements that are anticipating and contending with threats from the Right while building a more inclusive and just multiracial feminist democracy.

In our first article, "Project 2025" (p. 4), Peter Montgomery investigates an "unprecedented collaboration" among former Trump officials and the Right's legal and political infrastructure that seeks to aggressively "take the reins of government" under an all-powerful president. Montgomery's analysis of Project 2025's comprehensive leadership mandate to achieve long-time right-wing policy goals—from corporate deregulation to anti-immigrant crackdowns, and the Religious Right's anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ priorities—unveils an authoritarian agenda that could dismantle what's left of U.S. democracy.

Even as U.S. democracy is under significant threat at the federal and state levels, the Far Right's turn toward local organizing and governance cannot be overlooked. This issue's features dive deep into recent attempts to turn liberal democracy against itself.

Our first feature considers how, despite a deep mistrust of the federal government, some far-right militias have actively sought to control local levers of power. In "County Capture" (p. 9), Carolyn Gallaher and Priya Dixit examine county resolutions to formally recognize militias in several central and southside Virginia counties. Combining insights from scholarship with reporting based on original research, Gallaher and Dixit argue that militias' "county capture" undermines democracy from within while preparing to serve a far-right administration as pro-state paramilitaries.

In a review of investigative journalist David Neiwert's latest book, *The Age of Insurrection* (p. 14), Shane Burley captures the stakes of organized attacks on democratic government, politics, and culture. Observing that Neiwert's detailed reporting on the Trump presidency and the Far Right in the lead up to January 6th begins and ends with that day's events, Burley realizes that the author shows us that the event is not over, and we're still living in the title's Age of Insurrection.

In our next feature, "When the Sheriff Is Above the Law" (p. 17), Raina Lipsitz reports on local sheriffs' and government officials' ties to a small but active Far Right

in one Western New York county. As Lipsitz tries to understand Erie County's "dubious distinction" of being home to an unusually high number of January 6th insurrectionists, she finds that it embodies several contradictions facing U.S. localities today: Democrats outnumber Republicans significantly, but as the county—home to Buffalo, the state's second largest city—becomes increasingly metropolitan and multiracial, far-right groups are mobilizing rural and suburban White conservatives who view themselves as an embattled minority. Against this backdrop, Lipsitz connects a lack of accountability for law enforcement violations and right-wing sheriffs' belief in their "ultimate authority" to growing authoritarianism in the U.S.

Today's threats to U.S. democracy are not singular or without precedent—one only need look at the start of the 21st century and the continual War on Terror to see where White supremacist authority without accountability leads. In the first of this issue's two author Q&As, PRA Research Analyst Habiba Farh spoke with organizer and scholar Dr. Maha Hilal about her recent book, *Innocent Until Proven Muslim* (p. 23), which critically assesses this war's ongoing legacy of injustice and makes a powerful argument for narrative interventions to end it.

Our next article, "Countering the Ideology of 'Violent Care'" (p. 25), by feminist movement historian, critic, and poet Angela Hume, draws on the author's research with lay abortion care providers and clinic defenders in the San Francisco Bay Area's radical feminist networks of the 1970s to 2000s. In discussing how activists maintained and defended abortion access in local communities subjected to the structural violence of the New Right—a harbinger of today's Far Right—Hume derives lessons for those fighting today's anti-abortion movement and its ideology of "violent care."

How can organizers effectively resist and challenge racial capitalism and right-wing forces under today's social and economic conditions? In an edited excerpt from her recent book, *Practicing New Worlds*, Andrea J. Ritchie's article, "Practicing Emergent Strategies to Fight the Right and Resist Fascism" (p. 29), offers a clear-eyed assessment of the challenges organizers face while offering a portal to building the just world we need now. Ritchie makes the case for "visionary organizing" using emergent strategies to create, shift, and change complex systems through small-scale interactions and networks.

In an author Q&A with PRA (p. 33), Ritchie discusses organizing in the face of right-wing violence and what she's learned from abolitionist organizers. Just as her book considers how emergent strategies are already "at work in movements and organizations around the globe ... shaping how we are building futures without violence" (*Practicing New Worlds*, p. 93), Ritchie considers how movements of the past and contemporary global organizing for Palestinian liberation reflect principles of emergence.

Our bold cover illustration beautifully captures the vital role of generations of struggle and collective care in the multiracial feminist democracy that people across the country are fighting for—and building now. In "The Art of Activism" (back cover), artist Zoe Newton—also PRA's communications coordinator—reflects on how they interpreted this issue's theme and art's role in resistance.

Between issues of *The Public Eye*, PRA publishes regularly online at politicalresearch.org and religiondispatches.org. We hope you'll visit us often.

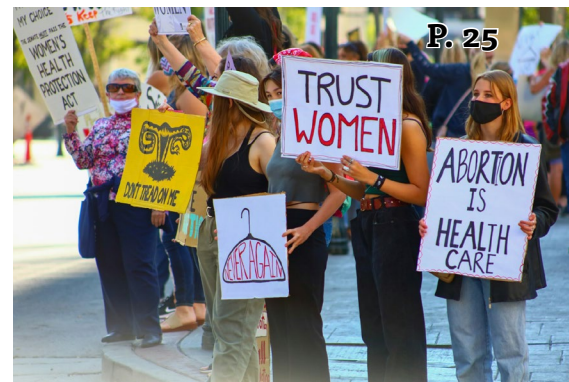
Kitana Ananda
Editor



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BY PETER MONTGOMERY

Project 2025

How Trump Loyalists and Right-Wing Leaders Are Paving a Fast Road to Fascism



Speakers at a rally against Project 2025 outside the Heritage Foundation offices in Washington D.C. on January 27, 2024. (Credit: Elvert Barnes/Flickr.com)

Former president Donald Trump, nursing personal grievances against “deep state” officials and White House staff who thwarted his plans to stay in power after his 2020 defeat, has made it clear that his second term would be far more dangerous to American democracy than his first.

The presumptive GOP nominee’s 2024 campaign-trail bombast—including promising to be a dictator on “day one,” to “close the border,” and “drill, drill, drill”¹—is reminiscent of his 2016 campaign’s authoritarian rhetoric. He has also adopted the rhetoric of fascists in

denouncing his political opponents as “vermin”² and immigrants as “poisoning the blood of our country.”³ At right-wing events and on the campaign trail, he rallies his followers with promises of revenge against elites who ruined their shared dreams of a second Trump term. “I am your warrior. I am your justice,” he thunders. “I am your retribution.”⁴ He has vowed to “obliterate the deep state,”⁵ throw off “the sick political class that hates our country,” and “come down hard” on media outlets critical of him.⁶ In the words of Ruth Ben-Ghiat, an NYU professor and author of a book about strongmen in modern history,⁷

“He wants to convert American democracy into some kind of autocracy.”⁸

Project 2025, an unprecedented collaboration⁹ among former Trump officials and the Right’s legal and political infrastructure, would enable Trump to make good on his threats, were he to return to power. This should be a cause for alarm. While some commentators dismissed his 2016 campaign statements as hyperbole,¹⁰ as President, Trump willingly cast the Constitution aside and mobilized his followers to political violence to keep him in power after losing the 2020 election.

A PLAN TO “TAKE THE REINS OF GOVERNMENT”

Project 2025 was launched in 2022 by the Heritage Foundation,¹¹ a longtime marketer of conservative ideology that moved sharply into the MAGA camp in the Trump era.¹² That June, Heritage announced¹³ it had recruited nearly two dozen organizations to “position the movement to take the reins of government”¹⁴ under the next president, following a presumed Republican victory. By the end of 2023, the Project 2025 advisory board¹⁵ had grown to nearly 90 groups¹⁶ representing Trump loyalists, book banners, Christian nationalists, anti-abortion activists, opponents of LGBTQ rights, vote suppressors, and anti-regulation corporate interests. Participating groups include longtime powerhouses like the corporate-funded American Legislative Exchange Council and the Religious Right legal giant Alliance Defending Freedom. They are accompanied by new-

“Right-wing movement leaders’ detailed plan, backed by a multimillion-dollar war chest, would enable Trump to wield virtually unchecked power over the executive branch of the federal government.”

er advocacy groups created by former Trump administration officials, including the Center for Renewing America and Stephen Miller’s America First Legal, which alone took in \$44 million in 2022.¹⁷

Project 2025 builds on a tradition started when Heritage presented then president-elect Ronald Reagan with its “Mandate for Leadership” policy wish list.¹⁸ Heritage does not describe Project 2025 as a Trump-specific project, saying it is preparing for “the next conservative administration.”¹⁹ The breadth of coalition partners who have signed on reflects the influential role that Heritage plays;

it also indicates a movement-level, ideological shift away from a libertarian mistrust of government power and toward an authoritarian view of government power being used ruthlessly—whether as a righteous force wielded to advance a “biblical worldview” or turned against an “administrative state” supposedly captured by a radical Marxist left. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who endorsed Trump after suspending his own presidential campaign just before the New Hampshire primary,²⁰ has made an aggressive use of government power his administration’s hallmark. Trump’s authoritarian and anti-deep state rhetoric has also been embraced by GOP presidential contenders like Vivek Ramaswamy,²¹ who also endorsed Trump after dropping his bid,²² and Nikki Haley, who has vowed to “clean house” and “get rid of the deep state.”²³

To be clear, right-wing movement leaders’ detailed plan, backed by a multimillion-dollar war chest, would enable Trump to wield virtually unchecked power over the executive branch of the federal government and allow him to use it as a weapon against personal enemies, political opponents, and the media. But it doesn’t require that Trump be the one leading the attack.

The project’s associate director Spencer Chretien told Breitbart News that conservatives “need to use the levers of government and not just get the government out of the way.”²⁴ Former Trump aide and Project 2025 strategist Russ Vought is more explicit: “There’s a glove of power needed to beat back the administrative state or deep state, and if you’re not willing to put your hand in that glove you will fail, regardless of how much credibility you have with the base.”²⁵

Vought calls for the abandonment of a democratic norm that has long been embraced on a bipartisan basis that Department of Justice (DOJ) decision-making regarding investigations and prosecutions should be shielded from political pressure by the White House. In his first term, Trump unsuccessfully pressured DOJ officials to investigate his political opponents and back his efforts to stay in power after his 2020 defeat.²⁶ His loyalists want to ensure that any future Trump orders will be carried out unquestioning-

ly. “What we’re trying to do is identify the pockets of independence and seize them,” Vought says.²⁷

Conservative legal advocates have long pushed a “unitary executive theory” of presidential power, which holds that presidents have virtually dictatorial powers over the executive branch of government.²⁸ Whether he understands the theory deeply or not, Trump instinctively embraces its core idea. “I have an Article 2, where I have the right to do whatever I want as president,” he told cheering supporters in 2019.²⁹ Project 2025 even sets the stage for Trump to invoke the Insurrection Act and deploy U.S. military forces against American citizens who protest his actions, as some far-right leaders urged in 2020.³⁰ It would, as University of Oregon scholar Joseph Lowndes has noted, eliminate “barriers that thwarted many of his authoritarian impulses.”³¹

The project excites far-right operative Steve Bannon, who has called Heritage the MAGA movement’s “Revolutionary Guard”³² and has repeatedly hosted Project 2025 director Paul Dans on his War Room podcast. Dans, who calls himself “a full-blooded deplorable,”³³ called plans to purge the civil service a “one-in-a-hundred year deep gut renovation.”³⁴

“This is a war to the knife!” exulted Bannon during one War Room segment with Dans. “This is called power!”³⁵

THE IDEOLOGICAL PURGE AND INSTALLATION OF LOYALISTS

Trump and his supporters believe his first-term agenda was stymied by resistance from career bureaucrats wielding power they shouldn’t have had in the first place. Project 2025 leaders, dead set on ensuring this doesn’t happen again, are making the professional civil service their first target.

Weeks before the 2020 election, Trump signaled his second-term plans with an executive order³⁶ to classify thousands of civil service employees as “Schedule F,” expanding his power to fire and replace them with MAGA loyalists.³⁷ President Biden overturned Trump’s order,³⁸ but supporters of Trump’s second term count on using it to force federal departments and independent agencies to bend to his will.³⁹ And Project 2025’s policy agenda

promotes it as a weapon to be wielded by any likeminded president.⁴⁰

The degree to which Trump and right-wing officials have made attacks on federal bureaucrats an article of faith for the GOP is reflected in how fully Trump's anti-deep state rhetoric was embraced by his Republican primary opponents.⁴¹ In other words, even in the seemingly unlikely scenario that Trump does not become the Republican nominee, other GOP contenders are pledged to wage the war he and Project 2025 are calling for against federal agencies.

Central to Project 2025's strategy for fighting that war is recruiting, vetting, and training thousands of MAGA-minded ideological warriors. In Dans' words, they are "systematically preparing to march into office and bring a new army: aligned, trained, and essentially weaponized conservatives ready to do battle against the deep state."⁴²

The group's database of potential political appointees includes more than 4,000 names, a start on Heritage Foundation president Kevin Roberts' stated goal of 20,000 vetted true believers ready for a Republican transition team to draw on so that they can "begin dismantling the adminis-

trative state from Day 1."⁴³ The vetting process, Axios reported, "drills down more on political philosophy than on experience, education or other credentials."⁴⁴

But for all the talk about devotion to constitutional principles, Trump is still the presumptive nominee, and the vetting process reportedly focuses heavily on personal loyalty. Trump has no interest in hiring lawyers or other staff who are willing to stand up to him.⁴⁵ "Immense, intense attention will be given to the social-media histories of anyone being considered for top jobs," Axios reported. "Those queasy about testing the limits of Trump's power will get flagged and rejected."⁴⁶

Considering the prospects for Trump's "loyalty-first" cabinet, Axios reported that a second-term Trump would "turn to loyalists who share his zeal to punish critics, purge non-believers, and take controversial legal and military action."⁴⁷ One prospect for a high-level national security position is Kash Patel, who has vowed that a Trump administration would target journalists for criminal prosecution.⁴⁸

Another Project 2025 partner, American Moment, is recruiting young foot soldiers to fill low- and mid-level openings.⁴⁹ Dans, for his part, has used his appearances on Bannon's War Room podcast to encourage listeners to enlist in Project 2025, an idea Bannon boosted for those who "want to be in the vanguard of taking down the Leviathan."⁵⁰

THE POLICY ROADMAP FOR A RIGHT-WING STRONGMAN

Project 2025's policy agenda runs more than 900 pages, with prescriptions for every U.S. department and scores of agencies.⁵¹ The plan for a far-right transformation of government, law, and society embraces the anti-feminist, anti-choice, and anti-LGBTQ priorities of the Religious Right,⁵² calling for "government power" to be deployed to "restore the American family."⁵³ It declares that the federal government must protect fertilized eggs from the moment of conception⁵⁴ and calls for criminal action against distributors of abortion medication.⁵⁵ The plan also decrees that religious business owners should be able to ignore nondiscrimination laws that conflict with their religious beliefs.⁵⁶

This new version of Mandate for Leadership reflects the participation of the book-banning Moms for Liberty, whose call for legislation to enshrine "parental rights" also insists that parents have no right to support their trans kids' identity.⁵⁷ The project wraps itself in the flag of freedom while calling for what they define as pornography to be outlawed and for librarians who "purvey" it to be classified as sex offenders.⁵⁸

It turns out that "freedom" for Project 2025 activists is only freedom to live in alignment with their religious worldview: "When the Founders spoke of 'pursuit of Happiness,' what they meant might be understood today as in essence 'pursuit of Blessedness,'" the report declares, adding, "That is, an individual must be free to live as his Creator ordained—to flourish. Our Constitution grants each of us the liberty to do not what we want, but what we ought."⁵⁹

Project 2025's agenda also reflects the MAGA movement's obsession with critical race theory⁶⁰ and its framing of public and private efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion as illegal discrimination against White men. It calls for a prohibition on collecting data on racial classifications and says the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division should use "the full force of federal prosecutorial resources to investigate and prosecute all state and local governments, institutions of higher education, corporations, and any other private employers who are engaged in discrimination in violation of constitutional and legal requirements."⁶¹

And it takes up the fossil fuel industry's campaign against policies to protect the climate, declaring that environmentalism "is not a political cause, but a pseudo-religion meant to baptize liberals' ruthless pursuit of absolute power in the holy water of environmental virtue."⁶² *Philadelphia Inquirer* columnist Will Bunch calls the Project 2025 climate agenda a "blueprint for destroying the planet."⁶³

Although it is separate from the Trump campaign's own published "Agenda 47,"⁶⁴ Project 2025's policy roadmap aligns with its authoritarian plans, which include seizing the endowments of top universities to fund the creation of a massive "American Academy" offering free and

A protestor at a rally against Project 2025 outside the Heritage Foundation offices in Washington D.C. on January 27, 2024. (Credit: Elvert Barnes/Flickr.com)



ideologically pure online education—no “wokeness” allowed.⁶⁵

Trump and former aide Stephen Miller are also pledging aggressive anti-immigrant policies, including massive camps, roundups, and deportations. “Trump will unleash the vast arsenal of federal powers to implement the most spectacular migration crackdown,” Miller told *The New York Times*, adding, “The immigration legal activists won’t know what’s happening.”⁶⁶

THE FAR RIGHT’S FAR-REACHING REVOLUTION

As Project 2025 envisions Trump or another MAGA-minded president maximizing presidential power and dominating the executive branch with an iron fist,

operationally revolutionary—an America First confrontation against anti-conservative institutions; and strategically revolutionary—seizing control of a century of labor on behalf of the American people.”⁷⁴

John McEntee, a former Trump aide and loyalty enforcer⁷⁵ who is involved in Project 2025 planning, says “The president’s plan should be to fundamentally reorient the federal government in a way that hasn’t been done since F.D.R.’s New Deal.”⁷⁶ Project 2025 director Dans also mentioned the New Deal and Great Society social net programs in telling Bannon that the administrative state is “completely unrooted in the Constitution.”⁷⁷

Such comments are reminders that Project 2025 is part of a larger, decades-long effort to reverse more than

ing Project 2025. It may not be needed if Trump’s Supreme Court majority—or one with future nominees even further to the Right—uses its demonstrated willingness to overturn decades of precedent to adopt right-wing theories about presidential power, federalism, and the administrative state.

- A brazen and underreported effort now under way by religious-right groups⁸⁶ to demand that any future conservative Supreme Court nominees be subject to a de facto religious test that would be blatantly unconstitutional if imposed by the government.⁸⁷ Led by the American Family Association’s Center for Judicial Renewal, the coalition is already lobbying Republican presidential candidates⁸⁸ and working to derail potential conservative nominees who fail to meet the group’s “biblical worldview” standard.—⁸⁹ The project’s endorsers include several leaders of groups on Project 2025’s advisory board.

A MOMENT OF TRUTH, A TIME FOR ACTION

The Trump-enhanced right-wing majority on the Supreme Court, which is already blazing a destructive path through Americans’ constitutional rights and legal protections,⁹⁰ is in place to provide air cover for the war on progressive governance. With Project 2025, the religious, political, and legal infrastructure built by the Right over the past 50 years has coalesced around a detailed battle plan to reverse decades of social progress. It is, as University of Pennsylvania Professor Anthea Butler said at a December 2023 town hall meeting sponsored by critics of Project 2025, a “culmination” of the right-wing movement’s work since even before the election of Ronald Reagan.⁹¹ And now poised to take power as never before, the movement’s leaders are counting on the 2024 elections to enable them to “take the reins of government.”

In short, Project 2025 is an opportunistic plan by far-right strategists to take advantage of the MAGA movement’s grassroots energy and Trump’s thirst for vengeance. If Trump is elected, he’ll have right-wing leaders’ blessing to impose his will on federal agencies and use them

“The Trump-enhanced right-wing majority on the Supreme Court, which is already blazing a destructive path through Americans’ constitutional rights and legal protections, is in place to provide air cover for the war on progressive governance.”

its agenda converges with the long-term right-wing goal of diminishing and dismantling the federal government’s ability to address social issues like poverty, education, and access to health care. Project 2025’s policy opus calls for abolishing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and ending “tyrannical” funding of public radio and television;⁶⁷ eliminating the Department of Education⁶⁸ and Consumer Financial Protection Bureau;⁶⁹ dismantling and partially privatizing the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration;⁷⁰ phasing out Title I funding for schools in low-income communities;⁷¹ eliminating Head Start;⁷² and ending Medicare’s ability to negotiate lower prescription drug prices.⁷³

Project 2025 leaders are not shy about the transformative impact they seek. At a September 2023 gathering held by the far-right America First Policy Institute, former Trump adviser and Institute president Brooke Rollins celebrated the “revolutionary” plan: “What we’re doing is ideologically revolutionary—an America First takeover of the administrative state;

a century of progressive change in the United States. Other elements of that broader project include the following:

- The Supreme Court’s capture by the Federalist Society and its allies, who envision a right-wing judiciary declaring the New Deal⁷⁸ and other social safety net programs unconstitutional⁷⁹ and dismantling the administrative state. Overturning *Roe v. Wade*⁸⁰ was one of many “generational wins”⁸¹ sought by the Alliance Defending Freedom, a Project 2025 participant. A dark money network run by the judicial takeover’s architect, activist and Federalist Society co-chair Leonard Leo, was recently given \$1.6 billion to broaden his impact on society at large.⁸²
- The campaign⁸³ to get state legislatures to call an Article V convention⁸⁴ for the purpose of rewriting the U.S. Constitution to restrict the scope and authority of the federal government and “reverse 115 years of progressivism.”⁸⁵ The effort is backed by House Speaker Mike Johnson and many of the groups support-



Former president Donald Trump campaigning at Rochester, New Hampshire, on January 21, 2024. (Credit: Liam Enea/Wikimedia Commons)

to punish former allies, political opponents, and media that report unfavorably on him. A returning President Trump or any president who adopts the Project 2025 agenda would undermine the ability of the federal government to regulate corporate behavior, promote worker safety and shared prosperity, protect the environment, and more. If the vision of Project 2025 is embraced by the next president, endorsed by the right-wing Supreme Court majority, and empowered by potential Republican-majority houses of Congress, Americans could soon find themselves living in a country where states' rights further eclipse civil rights and voting rights, governments strictly enforce "traditional" family structures and gender roles, and corporations are freer to run roughshod over individuals and communities.

That prospect should focus the attention of left-leaning, centrist, and even conservative Americans who do not share the Right's antidemocratic vision.

Progressive strategists must develop

and deliver compelling messaging about the danger that unchecked power in the hands of a right-wing president poses to already eroding freedoms and legal protections. More creative, plain-spoken media and social media products explaining what a successful war on the "deep state" and the dismantling of federal agencies could mean for people, families, and communities are urgently needed.

Individuals can spread the word by sharing information about Project 2025 as it is reported by media and advocacy organizations. "The more you tell people exactly what they will lose, the more they understand what is at stake," Butler told activists in December.⁹²

Funders must back pro-democracy and rights-supporting organizations that are developing both messaging and organizing strategies to counter the right-wing juggernaut.

This threat to U.S. democratic governance and a century of progressive gains merits more than our attention; it calls for action to help Americans understand

just how dramatically right-wing reactionaries intend to transform American society, and how to effectively mobilize resistance to their well-funded schemes.

Peter Montgomery is Research Director at People For the American Way and oversees its Right Wing Watch project. His work focuses on threats to democracy and democratic values posed by the religious right and its political allies.

BY CAROLYN GALLAHER AND PRIYA DIXIT

County Capture

The Role of Militias in County Governments in Central and Southside Virginia



A still from a newscast about a Bedford County Militia muster call from 2021. (Credit: WFXR News on YouTube.com)

If democracy is a ground-up experience in the United States, then county government is the bedrock upon which it stands. Counties and municipalities are where most people interface with democratic government. It's where they vote in elections, attend schools, visit the library, and call 911 for help with emergencies. When they have disputes with neighbors, county courts resolve them.

Much like their federal and state peers, however, U.S. county governments are facing threats from far-right activists. Sometimes the threat is violent. When far-right groups converged on Charlottesville, Virginia, for the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally, a White supremacist drove his car into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing a White woman named Heather Heyer,¹ while a gang of White rally-goers assaulted a Black man, DeAndre Harris, in a parking garage.²

But more often than not, the threat is to the body politic as far-right actors use the levers of democracy against itself. Bedford County, Virginia, is a case in point. In 2020, the county board of supervisors approved a resolution formally recognizing the Bedford County Militia, Inc. Shortly thereafter, the militia publicized its collaboration with the county's sheriff, Mike Miller, on its webpage.³ The news that her sheriff was working with an armed militia alarmed Donna St. Clair, a member of the Bedford Democratic Committee, so when the group invited Miller to speak to the committee, she asked him to identify the group's commander. According to St. Clair, Miller demurred, saying he would leave it to the commander "to identify herself."⁴ "Everyone was appalled," St. Clair recalled. "What sort of armed group gets protected status like that?"⁵

To understand militias' potential to

undermine county-level democracy from within, we've looked at Bedford and three other Virginia counties whose boards of supervisors considered resolutions to formally recognize militias: Campbell, Franklin, and Halifax. These resolutions are part of a process we call county capture—a form of democratic erosion pared down to scale, at the nation's smallest but arguably most important level of democracy. As we discovered, these resolutions are part of a larger far-right plan to take control of county governments and put them on a war footing—as guerillas when Democrats are in control, and as pro-state paramilitaries when MAGA Republicans are in charge. Neither position is good for democracy.

DEMOCRATIC EROSION

Democratic erosion is a process by which a variety of actors, from elected of-

ficials to outside activists, use legal means to chip away at core parts of democratic governance, including free and fair elections, individual rights, formal checks and balances, and impartial justice.

The concept of democratic erosion (or democratic backsliding⁶) emerged in the 1960s amid decolonization in Africa and Asia, as newly independent nations tried to establish and stabilize democratic governance in the face of multiple challenges.⁷ The term was revived in the early 2000s as post-communist democracies in Eastern Europe and Central Asia began to falter.⁸

The concept is useful in capturing the ephemeral nature of democracy since World War II. Between 1945 and 2002, 96 new states⁹ were formed, and most faced numerous destabilizing forces, including the 1970s OPEC oil embargo, superpower intervention during the Cold War, and IMF-imposed austerity projects in the early 1990s. Not surprisingly, many of these new democracies morphed into autocracies.

Most recently, scholars have used the concept of democratic erosion to explain political trends in established democracies,¹⁰ particularly after Donald Trump began trampling democratic norms in the world's oldest continuous democracy.¹¹ In the last few months in office alone, Trump invited a far-right street gang, the Proud Boys, to “stand back and stand by”¹² when asked to condemn the group at a presidential debate; pressured Vice President Mike Pence to not certify the 2020 electoral college vote;¹³ and waited three hours before calling off supporters who violently stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.¹⁴

While Trump's efforts undermined electoral politics, democratic erosion can also target individual rights, minority groups, and checks against what the French political philosopher Tocque-

ville called the “tyranny of the majority.” These erosions can occur even in places that continue to have free and fair elections. This combination—of elections *and* declining rights—is referred to as illiberal democracy.¹⁵

Most organizations that track democratic erosion measure it at the national level,¹⁶ but democratic erosion can happen to states or counties and can exist even when the federal government remains democratic. Political scientists call this phenomenon subnational authoritarianism.¹⁷ In the U.S.—an established democracy moving toward authoritarianism—militias play a central role in the erosion.

MILITIAS AND DEMOCRATIC EROSION IN THE U.S.

Militias—armed groups that style themselves as local guardians¹⁸—have always been part of the United States. The Carolina Regulators, Whiskey Rebels, and the Ku Klux Klan all justified their actions as a defense of local traditions and mores.¹⁹ And while their goals varied—fighting colonial administrators, preventing abusive taxation, and defending White supremacy—all resorted to extra-legal violence.

The contemporary U.S. militia movement began in the late-20th century and was defined by its vigorous opposition to the federal government.²⁰ Some scholars cite the 1980s farm crisis as the start of the movement's contemporary iteration.²¹ Others point to bungled federal sieges in

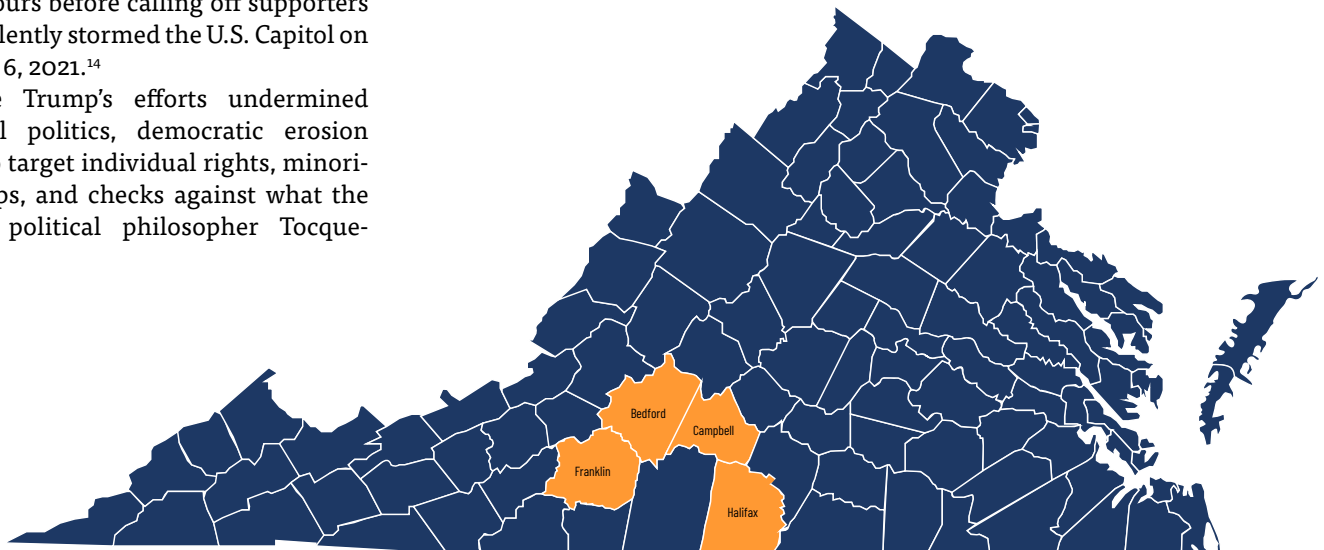
Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas.²² Whatever the trigger, these nascent militias believed the federal government had been corrupted by so-called global forces and was preparing to confiscate citizens' guns. Unsurprisingly, militias took a dim view of federal police forces like the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, referring to them as “jack-booted thugs.”²³

The contemporary militia movement also embraces a conspiratorial world view. In the 1990s, the movement warned of a “new world order”;²⁴ today it echoes Trump's “deep state” narrative. Both conspiracies cast members of the U.S. government as internal traitors working with global elites to undermine the country.²⁵

Key to the movement's growth is a tendency to support existing social hierarchies that favor its largely White, male base. Some militias accept openly racist members²⁶ and others have been willing to appear alongside White nationalist groups at protests like Unite the Right.²⁷ Some have also supported anti-LGBTQ legislation²⁸ and participated in attacks on abortion clinics.²⁹

The contemporary militia movement has been willing to use violence, mostly against people and places associated with the federal government. The 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma City is the most recognizable attack, but militias have engaged in numerous other crimes since, including threatening Bureau of Land Management

The counties in Virginia that have considered resolutions to formally recognize militias. (Credit: PRA)



(BLM) agents in the 1990s,³⁰ occupying the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon in 2016,³¹ and plotting to kidnap the governor of Michigan in 2020.³²

Until recently the threat posed by militias seemed akin to that posed by guerilla groups in places like El Salvador and Northern Ireland—similarly seeking to undermine the federal government, but smaller in scale and organization.

By 2017, however, U.S. militias started to behave less like guerillas and more like pro-state paramilitaries.³³ Despite continued talk of the new world order and “deep state,” many militias made peace with federal power in Trump’s hands,³⁴ even welcoming federal policing against their common enemies. In 2017, Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes offered to coordinate security *with* the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in advance of an Alt Right “free speech” rally expected to attract anti-fascist counter-protestors.³⁵ The Oath Keepers continued to support Trump into the 2020 election season, serving as security guards at his rallies³⁶ and on security details for high-flyers in his orbit, like Roger Stone³⁷ and Ali Alexander.³⁸

The “western chauvinist”³⁹ Proud Boys also supported Trump, showing up at protests after George Floyd’s murder in the summer of 2020, ready to fight Trump’s purported enemies.⁴⁰ When asked to disavow the group in a presidential debate that September, Trump instead told them to “stand back and stand by.”⁴¹ Within hours of the debate, the Proud Boys were sharing a logo with the phrase on social media.⁴² According to Jeremy Bertino, a former Proud Boy then active in the group, membership requests also surged following Trump’s remarks.⁴³

Although many of the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers who participated in the failed January 6th insurrection were ultimately found guilty of seditious conspiracy or other felonies,⁴⁴ the Far Right endures. And, though some adherents will fall away, those who remain are likely to become more extreme.⁴⁵ They may go underground for a time, refocusing their efforts on local action.⁴⁶

While many contemporary militias cut their teeth on defending “local sovereignty” from a presumably tyrannical

federal government, their current efforts to seek formal recognition from county boards of supervisors and establish relationships with county sheriffs suggests they now hope to gain direct access to local levers of power. Indeed, the Bedford County Militia Inc.’s webpage prominently highlights their connections with local law enforcement in matters of public safety and emergency services.⁴⁷ Given militias’ support for Trump and potential militant convergence across the Far Right, Virginia’s militias could intimidate Democratic voters, harass election workers, and muster (that is, summon their troops) to guarantee Trump’s return to power if the 2024 election’s final vote tally doesn’t go his way.

COUNTY CAPTURE IN VIRGINIA

Bedford, Campbell, Franklin, and Halifax counties are in Central and Southside Virginia.⁴⁸ Demographically, they are older, more rural, and less wealthy than the state as a whole. Except for Halifax, they are also Whiter.⁴⁹

In 2020, all four counties debated resolutions formally recognizing militias operating within their boundaries. The resolutions had varying success. In Franklin County, the local militia lobbied the board of supervisors for recognition in 2019, but the board didn’t bring a resolution to the floor for more than two years, instead letting residents debate the issue during public comment sessions. In February 2022, Franklin supervisors finally passed a more general resolution “commend[ing] and laud[ing] citizens for their spirit of volunteerism” without mentioning the militia by name.⁵⁰ Although militia members and supporters made the case for recognition by describing themselves as volunteers, they were angry the resolution didn’t name them specifically. One member complained to the press that several supervisors had offered their support for the group in private.⁵¹

In Halifax, a supervisor introduced the resolution at its September 2020 board meeting, but the board tabled it⁵² and voted to remove it from consideration that November.⁵³ Campbell and Bedford passed their resolutions in March and May of 2020, respectively.

The 2019 Virginia General Assembly election explains the timing of these resolutions. The results, which put Democrats in charge of both houses for the first time in 25 years, sent shock waves through the state’s Republican establishment.⁵⁴ When Bedford’s Board of Supervisors met to discuss their resolution in April 2020, for example, Republican Supervisor Tommy Scott said the resolution was necessary because “Richmond is trying to take away our Second Amendment rights.”⁵⁵

Although nothing we found in the four counties’ meeting minutes indicates formal, external coordination behind the resolutions, the timing and sequence of their introduction suggests militias may have been informally working (or at least harmonizing their efforts) with the Virginia Citizens Defense League (VCDL), a gun rights group⁵⁶ the Southern Poverty Law Center describes as to the right of the National Rifle Association.⁵⁷ Indeed, the militia resolutions followed closely on the heels of two efforts pushed by VCDL shortly after the 2019 election.

In a two-and-a-half-month period just after the 2019 election, for example, a wave of local governments—including 91 of Virginia’s 133 counties and 16 of its cities⁵⁸—passed Second Amendment Sanctuary resolutions. Bedford, Campbell, Franklin, and Halifax counties were among them. According to local news interviews with VCDL’s president, the group coordinated with gun owners across the state to get sanctuary resolutions introduced and passed.⁵⁹

The speed of passing these resolutions suggests VCDL also had inside help in many counties. According to Bedford board minutes from a December 2019 meeting that drew nearly 1,000 residents,⁶⁰ the sheriff supported the resolution when it was brought to the floor.⁶¹ A local resident who was there, and who requested anonymity to avoid reprisal, recalled that the sheriff “indicated that he will let the militia do what they have to do...he wouldn’t take orders from the governor to curtail [them].”⁶²

The VCDL also organized a gun rally planned to coincide with the General Assembly’s annual “Lobby Day,” a long-standing January event described by the *Washington Post* as “a day devoted to am-

“Today’s militias also represent a new kind of threat. Instead of menacing state and federal governments, some militias are now willing to work with them.”

ateur arm-twisting.”⁶³ Although VCDL insisted the gun rally was not a protest, the group announced militias would provide “security,”⁶⁴ and other far-right groups soon “latched on” to the Lobby Day gun rally.⁶⁵ White nationalists described the event on social media as “the “boogaloo”—far-right slang for civil war.”⁶⁶ In the weeks leading up to the event, far-right chatter was so intense that then-governor Ralph Northam declared a state of emergency.⁶⁷

Militia resolutions came shortly after Lobby Day. Although the VCDL does not publicly acknowledge spearheading these resolutions, it’s likely they were involved because of timing and similar tactics. The resolutions—declaring, in virtually identical language, official recognition of armed, self-proclaimed militia groups—were introduced in at least seven⁶⁸ Virginia counties and one city shortly before or just after the VCDL’s Second Amendment Sanctuary Resolution push was complete. Like the Second Amendment Sanctuary resolutions, the wording of the proposed militia recognitions was virtually identical. The two campaigns varied only in their level of success. Unlike VCDL’s Sanctuary resolutions, of the seven counties and one city that considered militia resolutions, only four passed them.

The militia resolutions’ language followed two patterns common in communications by militias and sovereign citizen groups:⁶⁹ excessive reference to legal statutes,⁷⁰ and taking those references out of context or conflating them with other, unrelated legal documents. On the whole, these resolutions are like countless U.S. militia and sovereign citizen communiqués before them: formal yet convoluted, and casting today’s militias as following a patriotic tradition going back to the Revolution to establish their right to muster and train during peacetime.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the county resolutions do not rest on firm legal footing. Several justify militias’ existence by pointing repeatedly to Article 1, Section

13 of the Virginia Constitution. But as Mary McCord, executive director of the Georgetown Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection (ICAP), explains, Section 13 lays out strict parameters for militias’ operation—that they are subordinate to civil power and should not exist during peacetime.⁷¹ Likewise, Virginia’s anti-paramilitary law prohibits actions some of these militias are already undertaking,⁷² including exercising law enforcement functions and operating outside state authority. Indeed, the governor is the only state official who can call up an unorganized militia.

When we asked McCord why counties were recognizing militias despite Virginia law, she described the resolutions as “purely performative.” County officials were playing to their base after the General Assembly turned blue. Nonetheless, ICAP spent considerable time trying to educate county officials grappling with pressure from militias for formal recognition. In letters sent to supervisors in the counties considering resolutions, ICAP explained the legal parameters around militia activity in great detail, emphasizing that Virginia law prohibits such activity in lieu of a formal muster by the governor or president.⁷³

Local news outlets indicate supervisors read ICAP’s letter.⁷⁴ John Sharp, then-chair of Bedford’s board, told a reporter McCord was a “leftist” who should “stay the hell in Georgetown.”⁷⁵ Jeff Helgeson, a city council member in neighboring Lynchburg, also weighed in, saying McCord was “coming to the aid of vandals.”⁷⁶ But other supervisors appear to have taken the memo more seriously. At Halifax County’s September 2020 board meeting, where the resolution was first discussed, Supervisor William Bryant Claiborne explained his reticence to support it by pointing to Kenosha, Wisconsin, where Kyle Rittenhouse answered a militia muster call and ended up shooting three protestors at a Black Lives Matter protest, killing two. Kenosha, the supervisor noted, was now at risk of facing lawsuits.⁷⁷

TOOTHLESS TIGERS OR TROJAN HORSES?

State politicians have shown little appetite to rein in militias, or hold counties to account for recognizing them, and it’s not hard to see why. Their ability to enforce the law requires the assistance of local officials who often support militias. In short, militias have become legal in a de facto sense.

But what kind of threat do militias pose today? In many ways, the threat is the same as it was in the early 1990s when the contemporary militia movement first burst onto the scene. Then, as now, militia-inspired county resolutions threatened federal and state governments by flouting their laws. The county stamp of approval also gave militias license to harass federal agents and ordinary citizens who disagreed with them. As militia expert William Chaloupka observed nearly 30 years ago, by their very existence, militias challenge “one of the most basic activities of sovereign government: namely, its prerogative to monopolize the use of force.”⁷⁸

But today’s militias also represent a new kind of threat. Instead of menacing state and federal governments, some militias are now willing to work *with* them. One of the most remarkable things in the Bedford and Campbell County militia resolutions is that they explicitly provide avenues for county militias to cooperate with *federal* power—something that would have been unthinkable in the Waco era—including being “called or ordered out for lawful purposes by the President of the United States.”⁷⁹

However, it’s abundantly clear that militia cooperation with federal authorities is not a bipartisan endeavor. The Campbell County Militia made this point clear in May 2022 after Bob Good, a MAGA-aligned Republican who believes the 2020 election was stolen from Trump,⁸⁰ won re-nomination as the GOP candidate for Virginia’s 5th Congressional District. When Good publicly accepted his nomination, the *Cardinal News* reported that he was “flanked by armed members of the Campbell County Mili-

tia” as he called Democrats “the party of death.”⁸¹

While it may be tempting to dismiss the small, rural Campbell County, or the marginal figure of Congressman Good, that would be unwise. After Good won reelection in November 2022, the Campbell County Militia took a victory lap, noting on its webpage that its members had gone “door to door” and some had “served as poll watchers and election officers.”⁸² Given the militia’s close alignment with the Republican Party’s MAGA wing, it’s possible the group could illegally self-muster on Trump’s behalf if the Democratic nominee wins the 2024 election.

Even barring this worst-case scenario, militias are a different force to be reckoned with today than they were 30 years ago. By vacillating between guerilla and paramilitary postures, or anti- and pro-state stances, militias have become empowered as independent forces to be

“The sheriff’s decision to cooperate with the county’s militia could prove a double-edged sword.”

reckoned with by opponents and supporters alike.

A racial justice protest in nearby Lynchburg several nights after George Floyd was murdered shows why. As the protest was getting underway, a nearby restaurant owner encouraged county militias to help him counter the protestors. Militias arrived and took up positions on the roof and along the building’s perimeter. The arrival of heavily armed White men at a largely Black protest, however, added fuel to the fire. A Black protestor told a local reporter: “aiming those rifles and firearms, it kind of made the situation escalate a lot. That’s where the violence took place.”⁸³

Although the Lynchburg Police chief told reporters he did not muster the militia, its unlawful policing undermined community trust in his force. Indeed, a day after the protest, local militias posted

on Facebook that they had offered to help LPD but would cease policing protests after “conversations” with the department.⁸⁴ Whether the department’s conversations occurred out of sympathy for militia ideology, or caution in convincing a heavily armed opponent to stand down, the announcement felt like a slap in the face to some residents. One Black protestor told the media that “people felt like they was being looked down upon, and no one cared because they had [militia] guns pointed right at their face.”⁸⁵ Others wondered why the department tear-gassed and arrested Black protesters—charging 15 with crimes—but appear to have negotiated with White militias engaged in unlawful policing.

Militias can create problems even when they are engaged in putatively apolitical activities. After participating in hot-button counterprotests in 2020 and early 2021, militias in Bedford and Campbell counties changed course. After a tornado ripped through Bedford in 2022, for example, the militia rebranded as a civic-minded group, using Facebook⁸⁶ to tout its work helping the sheriff with cleanup.⁸⁷

According to Donna St. Clair, the militia’s cooperation with the sheriff continues today, as the sheriff calls on militia members to “chop up trees that fall over in windstorms, get cats, things like that.”⁸⁸ St. Clair also worries that the group’s anonymity, supported by the sheriff, may allow members to hide criminal backgrounds from the public even as they take up public-facing roles. When she asked Sheriff Miller about this, the answer was troubling. “I asked if he would hire a deputy with no background check,” St. Clair told us. “He said of course not. I then asked why it was okay for our armed militia to be anonymous. We could have convicted felons, substance abusers, who knows? He had no answer.”⁸⁹

Sheriff Miller did not respond to our request for comment. We also contacted county attorney Patrick Skelley, who told us he had no personal knowledge of cooperation between the sheriff and the militia,⁹⁰ but suggested we ask the sheriff’s office.

The sheriff’s decision to cooperate with the county’s militia could prove a

double-edged sword. If the group splits into factions, Miller could find himself in the midst of a violent power struggle he cannot contain. The board of supervisors would also have to decide which faction would retain formal recognition. As St. Clair put it, “I told the sheriff he has a tiger by the tail.”⁹¹

Paramilitaries the world over routinely abuse their connections to formal power to settle personal scores, rent-seek, and abuse vulnerable people. If Trump wins the GOP nomination (and ultimately the presidency), Bedford and Campbell counties’ militias could settle personal and political scores with abandon.

Virginians may continue to vote in elections, but in counties with militias, democracy hangs in the balance.

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Carolyn Gallaher is a professor at American University. She has written about rightwing paramilitaries in the U.S. and Northern Ireland. Her first book, On the Fault Line: Race, Class and the American Patriot Movement (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), looked at the rise of the Patriot movement in Kentucky after the Oklahoma City bombing. Her second book, After the Peace: Loyalist Paramilitaries in Postaccord Northern Ireland (Cornell, 2007), examined why loyalist paramilitaries took nearly 10 years after the 1998 peace agreement to decommission their weapons and stand down their fighters.

BY SHANE BURLEY

Review: *The Age of Insurrection*



Protesters outside the Capitol on January 6, 2021. (Credit: Tyler Merbler/Flickr.com)

“As far as I’m concerned, I’m done with this,” investigative reporter David Neiwert told us, followed by a tremendous sigh, as if setting down an enormous weight that someone else would be obliged to pick up. “Next, I’m writing a book about whales.”

We were at the International Conference on Hate Studies,¹ a biennial gathering of scholars, researchers, journalists, and fellow travelers who spend our time tracking fascists. There to speak on understanding and countering hate in the Northwest, Neiwert was a veteran in this crowd: his three decades of reporting on the Far Right includes several books on the subject, making him one of the beat’s key journalists.

In hand Neiwert had a preview copy of his latest book. His longest to date at

over 500 pages, *The Age of Insurrection: The Radical Right’s Assault on American Democracy*² (Melville House, 2023) is the result of a career spent dredging the swamp of the American Far Right—and with it, nights attending militia meetings, days muddling through White nationalist demonstrations, and countless hours scouring fascist message boards. Through these efforts, Neiwert has built the most incisive, compelling, and accurate look at the Trump movement’s fringes through the former president’s rise and controversial final months.

I had first met Neiwert when he was promoting his 2017 book, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*,³ a definitive chronicle of the rise of the Patriot, Alt Right, and MAGA

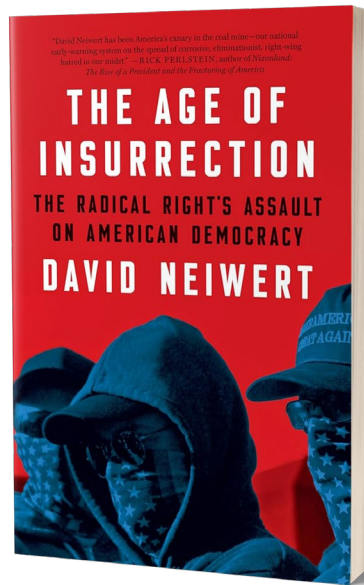
movements that led to Trump’s election. Neiwert’s reporting had a unique quality: no matter how established he was in covering this world, he always found something new, injected a fresh perspective into the coverage, and explained to readers why it mattered to their daily lives.

Neiwert’s new opus, *The Age of Insurrection*, continues in this vein, leading the reader through a complicated and multitudinous world of conspiracy grifters, armed insurgents, and online cultists. The book has a certain breathlessness to it. Covering one of the narrowest time frames in Neiwert’s canon, the book strings together a narrative so overwhelming, with such a broad cast of characters, that it’s surprising he was able to capture it in as few pages as he did.

From the opening page, Neiwert's prose feels like a gunshot: *The Age of Insurrection* starts with the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and never truly leaves it behind. Instead, Neiwert focuses on the years and months leading to January 6. He places the insurrection in context by weaving together chapters on groups like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, the QAnon movement and the online conspiracy world, White nationalism during and after the Alt Right, and, especially, the worldview that these groups have tried to construct from a hodgepodge of rumors, half-truths, and bold-faced lies. The book is rich in detail and delivered through classic nonfiction storytelling, a craft Neiwert has honed for many years. He first tracked this story as a newspaper reporter in Idaho chasing violent militants at Aryan Nations, then across the country at the Southern Poverty Law Center, and more recently, while reporting for *Daily Kos*. *The Age of Insurrection* is the culmination of his feverish journalistic coverage of the Far Right's activities during Trump's presidency.

The book is broken down by activist type and time period, taking readers through the various stages that mobilized subgroups of America's Far Right: Trumpism's turn to seditious conspiracy, followed by QAnon's break with reality, and the return of this unhinged style of politics into the mainstream electoral realm. In doing so, Neiwert examines how the insurrection, which is often discussed in isolation as a singular, if catastrophic, event, was actually the culmination of hundreds of smaller insurrections. As Neiwert observes in the book's "post-script," the Far Right isn't just preparing for war, they are already "at war."⁴ The

home the significance of the violence the U.S. has collectively endured and can leave a reader feeling brutalized: it's been a hard few years for many—especially marginalized communities facing far-right violence, such as homes with trans children and activists fighting po-



The Age of Insurrection. (Credit: Melville House)

lice brutality. But the author never fails to remind us that people put up a fight. Everyday community members refused to accept this slow-moving coup, acting in ways big and small throughout. The "age of insurrection" was also an age of resistance. It still is.

Rather than provide an encyclopedia,

“Neiwert examines how the insurrection, which is often discussed in isolation as a singular, if catastrophic event, was actually the culmination of hundreds of smaller insurrections.”

final third of the book focuses on this culture of insurrection, as cultivated by the Trump years, and its result on January 6, 2021. Neiwert's detailed reporting drills

Neiwert zooms in on a few subjects and regions to share his vantage point with readers. The Pacific Northwest—particularly, Oregon and Washington, where he

resides—is central to Neiwert's account of organized violence on the Far Right. A quick look at the region's past and present illustrates why this focus is warranted. As a center of the Klan in the 1920s and neonazi skinheads in the 1980s, and where Anti-Racist Action and antifa came into their own, the Pacific Northwest is where activists continue to face off in the streets over which political vision will prosper. The region's growing rural Patriot movement and far-right backlash to "blue state" values has also generated a vanguard of militant antifascist resistance. Neiwert's attention turns here to increasing clashes between Proud Boys and other far-right groups and antifascists. Amid teargas fog and street fights at these confrontations, Neiwert and I shuffled between these groups, fending off angry "patriots" asking if we were "antifa," and watching as police turned their attention on the antifascist crowd. *Age of Insurrection* captures the heat and paranoia in the air at those events, which have wafted into the suburbs and exurbs and become the country's general tenor.

Like his books *Alt-America* and *Red Pill, Blue Pill*,⁵ Neiwert discusses how conspiracy theories and misinformation have enabled these movements to capture the political imaginations of those they hope to recruit. Antifa conspiracy theories⁶ are a mainstay of this process of recasting social progress as being piloted by covert malevolence. Neiwert chronicles how a small radical movement became the out-sized boogeyman that justified some of the Far Right's worst excesses in streets and statehouses across the country. Far-right radicals and Patriot stalwarts live in a different world than the rest of us, seeing around every corner "communist subversion" and "queer perversions" that threaten to erode the stable lives they and many other working-class conservatives believed they were promised. In such a heightened state of fear, anything becomes possible, including violence as a seemingly pure, restorative act—thus wiping away the possibility of a "peaceful transfer of power" that supposedly defined the American experiment.

Early in Trump's presidency, in 2017, I heard Neiwert say to a crowd, "I'm not ready to give up on America."⁷ He spoke

“While the violence of January 6 may seem like the real threat to America, it was ancillary developments, and the breakdown of civil relationships and family bonds that made up the bulk of Neiwert’s horror.”

with a kind of optimism then. Readers of his latest treatise might wonder which part of that America is left, whether its democratic values are reclaimable, or if it was always an illusion. The last eight years have shattered any collective belief of forward momentum built into this country’s DNA, whether from the failure to stop a careening Far Right, our inaction on climate change, the Black Lives Matter movement’s magnifying glass on structural and institutional racism, or the January 6 insurrection’s frightening image of our future.

The Age of Insurrection ends suddenly, which makes sense. We started at the conclusion, which became our lens for the entire journey: we know we will end with the doors to the Capitol bursting open and an occupation afoot. As the Trump administration came to an

end, Trumpism went into overdrive. The January 6 insurrection was not a capstone to Trump’s reign, but a manifesto of resistance for what came next: an extralegal assault on U.S. democracy from opponents who deem fraudulent its political legacy. We are now living in the book’s aforementioned *Age of Insurrection*, and the years discussed in the book are simply a prelude. While Neiwert analyzes their impact, he also catalogues them in a narrative framework, acting as our memory by documenting stories that would be unbelievable if they weren’t set on the page. In a certain sense, the book doesn’t end as much as it leaves us in the present, an unwritten sequel that continues the same terrible story we have experienced.

As Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci wrote from an Italian prison, a revolutionary change in society requires a shift in values, identity, and sense of reality from the masses who would have to enact such a revolution.⁸ While the violence of January 6 may seem like the real threat to America, it was ancillary developments, conspiracy theories, disaffection, and the breakdown of civ-

il relationships and family bonds that made up the bulk of Neiwert’s horror as he watched the values that he treasured in America crumble. *Age of Insurrection* plows through all this at a breakneck pace. The book’s concluding abruptness may be its most profound commentary: nothing has ended.

This continuing violence brings us back to the conference. Neiwert’s sense of exhaustion was not new, nor was it uncommon among our peers. In regular meetups over the past ten years, we’ve shared recent scoops, imperiled projects, and “war stories” about this work and its personal cost. But as years went by, and as Trump’s ascent changed the political landscape, fatigue set in. We are tired. Dave’s not the only one.

At post-conference drinks, some of us shared hopeful stories about communities we had been traveling in: mutual aid projects during the pandemic, growing progressive religious groups, the labor movement’s return. Dave smiled wistfully, drinking quietly.

“I appreciate your optimism, but I’m not sure I share it,” he told me as we called it a night. “It’s not necessarily that I think the Right is going to win in the end. It’s just that a lot of people might die along the way.”

Shane Burley is a writer and filmmaker based in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of Why We Fight: Essays on Fascism, Resistance, and Surviving the Apocalypse (AK Press, 2021) and Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It (AK Press, 2017), and the editor of the forthcoming anthology ¡No pasarán!: Antifascist Dispatches from a World in Crisis. His work is featured at places such as NBC News, The Daily Beast, The Independent, Jacobin, Al Jazeera, Haaretz, Tikkun, The Baffler, Bandcamp Daily, Truthout, and the Oregon Historical Quarterly. He is also the editor of a special issue of the Journal of Social Justice on “Antisemitism in the 21st Century.” He is currently working on two books, one on radical approaches to antisemitism and another on the history of antifascism and popular struggle.



Enrique Tarrío at a Proud Boys rally in Virginia in January 2020. (Credit: Anthony Crider/Flickr.com)

BY RAINA LIPSITZ

When the Sheriff Is Above the Law

The Rise of the Far Right in Western New York



Sheriff Tim Howard in 2014. (Credit: Mattdpole1999/Wikimedia Commons)

Erie County, New York, has the dubious distinction of producing an unusually high number of those arrested and charged with crimes related to the January 6th insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.¹ Six months after the attack, in June 2021, the county ranked second among the country's 3,069 counties² for the number of residents arrested and charged for alleged participation in the attack—outstripped only by Ohio's Franklin County.³ By January 2023, as the largest criminal investigation in U.S. history⁴ continued and the number of people charged had nearly doubled,

Erie County still tied for producing the sixth-highest number of arrestees.⁵ Among those arrested were White residents from affluent Buffalo suburbs who later pled guilty⁶ to misdemeanors. Others faced more serious charges. One man from Buffalo's high-income suburb of Amherst was charged with assaulting, resisting, or impeding certain officers—a felony that carries a maximum sentence of eight years in prison—and has since been sentenced to 50 months in prison.⁷

The extent of the county's far-right mobilization surprised many observers. Erie

County encompasses a large swath of Western New York and is reliably “blue”; Democrats significantly outnumber Republicans despite the GOP's modest inroads in recent years.⁸ It's also largely metropolitan—only about 9.4 percent of residents live in rural communities.⁹ But the Right is rising in Western New York in part because conservatives perceive themselves as an embattled minority. Far-right activists in suburban and rural areas, many of whom are current or former law enforcement officers, have driven this rightward shift, and local public officials have enabled it.

Given that respect for law enforcement is a core right-wing demand, it's ironic that Capitol insurrectionists attacked police. It also makes a strange kind of sense. Many right wingers believe that officers of the law are defenders of safety and order who must be obeyed. Yet they also believe that when any public official, including a police officer, seeks to enforce

terparts.¹⁴ Trump banners, American flags, and occasional Confederate flags dot the landscape in less populated areas, while LGBTQ pride flags and signs proclaiming that "Black Lives Matter" and "Immigrants are welcome here" are more common in Buffalo. White, conservative-leaning rural and suburban voters are crucial bases of support for

"New York has the most law enforcement officers who belong to the Oath Keepers of all U.S. states."

a law they deem unconstitutional or certify an election they falsely believe was stolen, that official is a "tyrant" who must be opposed. Local officials have behaved as if their authority, based on their interpretation of the Constitution, is ultimate, and supersedes that of a majority of residents, the governor, and the president—in their minds, sheriffs elected by around 35 percent of the county's registered voters¹⁰ are the ones who most directly represent "the people." Many of these beliefs are rooted in White supremacy and derived¹¹ from Christian theories, including Christian nationalism—the notion that America is a Christian nation that should be led by Christians—and Dominionism—the common-among-conservative-Christians belief that God intended¹² Christians to exercise dominion over society, including political and cultural institutions. The belief that their power comes directly from God encourages officials to abuse it and promote selective vigilantism, undermining democracy in the county and nationwide.

WHITE CONSERVATIVES IN A BLUE COUNTY

Much of Erie County's right-wing sentiment is the local version of national phenomena such as Trump's enduring popularity with his base and the unsubstantiated belief—shared by 69 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents—that he was the 2020 election's true winner.¹³ As in other parts of the country, Erie's rural and suburban residents are more politically conservative than their urban coun-

terparts.¹⁴ Trump banners, American flags, and occasional Confederate flags dot the landscape in less populated areas, while LGBTQ pride flags and signs proclaiming that "Black Lives Matter" and "Immigrants are welcome here" are more common in Buffalo. White, conservative-leaning rural and suburban voters are crucial bases of support for

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Research²¹ published by the University of Chicago in 2021 found that counties with a declining number of non-Hispanic Whites, like Erie,²² were six times likelier²³ to produce a Capitol insurrectionist. Political scientist Robert Pape found²⁴ that counties with the greatest declines in non-Hispanic Whites were the most likely to produce a January 6th participant—a finding that held true even when controlling for population size, distance to Washington, D.C., unemployment rate, and urban or rural location.

SEX, RACE, AND SCHOOL BOARDS

Against this backdrop of racial anxiety and grievance, some locals are clearly inspired by national anti-immigrant and White supremacist movements—particularly their campaigns to end public health mandates and restrict what children learn in school. Jackie Best, who founded an Erie County chapter²⁵ of Moms for Liberty, began speaking out²⁶ against Covid restrictions at Hamburg school board meetings in 2021; in 2022, she and two allies ran and lost a school board race. Per its website, Moms for Liberty is "dedicated to fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government." It is best known as the far-right organization behind the recent proliferation of school book bans.²⁷

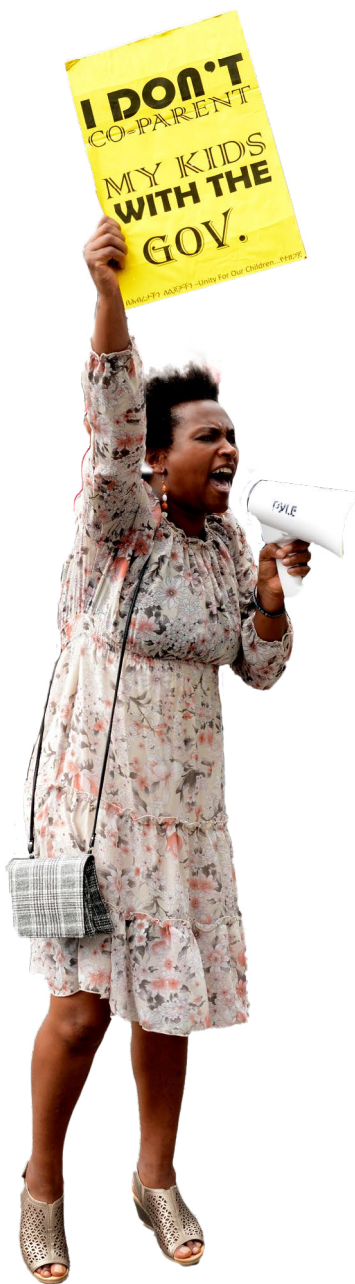
Best is not the only one to base a school board run on opposition to public safety measures and eagerness to ban books. In 2022, 8 of 26 candidates running in Erie and Niagara counties and backed by a group called Western New York Students First, which was formed during the pandemic to fight Covid restrictions, won their school board races.²⁸ The Constitutional Coalition of New York State—a Far Right anti-government group²⁹ based in Erie County's Cheektowaga—supported many of the same candidates as Western New York Students First and claimed 22 wins in school board races across the region.³⁰

Organizations like Moms for Liberty claim they defend "liberty" and "parents' rights"; to them, this means restricting what kids learn about race, racism, and sexuality. According to the pro-freedom-of-expression organization PEN

America, 41 percent of the 2021–22 school year’s banned books explicitly address LGBTQ+ themes or have protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are LGBTQ+; 40 percent have protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color; and 21 percent directly address issues of race and racism.³¹

While denying that her group is anti-LGBTQ+, Best has expressed concerns that “gender ideology” and “critical race theory” are being taught in schools.³²

A protestor at a protest organized by Moms for Liberty against LGBTQ inclusion at the Board of Education in Maryland on June 27, 2023. (Credit: Stephen Melkisetian)



These efforts, like many on the Right, have surfaced amid increasing anxieties around race, sexuality, and gender fueled by demographic shifts. The Brookings Institution’s research found³³ that Moms for Liberty is most active in suburban areas, and a disproportionate share of chapters “are in areas where the white population has been declining”³⁴—just as the University of Chicago research on January 6 insurrectionists found.

FAR-RIGHT MILITIAS GARNER LOCAL OFFICIALS’ SUPPORT

Several far-right militia groups have also established a presence in Erie County. Though small, these groups have powerful local allies. New York has the most law enforcement officers who belong to the Oath Keepers of all U.S. states.³⁵ Six Oath Keepers were convicted of seditious conspiracy for their role in the Capitol insurrection. Erie County’s sheriff from 2005 to 2021, Tim Howard, spoke in uniform³⁶ to supporters of then-president Trump at a 2017 rally in Buffalo; at an earlier rally, he spoke beneath³⁷ an Oath Keepers sign. Some participants in the 2017 rally carried flags and signs bearing Confederate and Nazi imagery, while others held White supremacist recruitment pamphlets. After leaving office, Howard became the town supervisor of Wales, a 99 percent White, 3,000-person Erie County town. When journalist Cloee Cooper and I interviewed him in 2022, he described his relationship with the Oath Keepers as casual and indirect.³⁸

Howard’s far-right ties extend beyond his appearances at right-wing rallies. During his tenure as sheriff, he was also associated with the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, or CSPOA. The CSPOA asserts³⁹ that sheriffs are counties’ ultimate authority figures and defenders of citizens’ constitutional rights, arguing that sheriffs’ law enforcement powers supersede⁴⁰ those of any agent, officer, elected official or employee from any level of government, up to and including the president of the United States. These views are derived from Christian resistance theories like the doctrine of the lesser magistrate,⁴¹ which holds that when a ruler becomes a tyrant, he

is no longer a legitimate ruler—confering on his subordinates not just the right to resist, but the obligation to do so.⁴² Howard told me that although he had once attended a CSPOA meeting in Las Vegas, he didn’t agree with everything the group stood for and was not a member.⁴³

Howard faced plenty of criticism while he was sheriff; aside from the rallies, 32 people died⁴⁴ after being detained in county jails he supervised.⁴⁵ But he experienced no lasting consequences and left the office voluntarily, in part by maintaining plausible deniability about his far-right ties: he never confessed to knowing exactly what the Oath Keepers or the CSPOA stood for; claimed he didn’t agree with everything they said; and never officially joined as a member.

HOW AND WHY THE FAR RIGHT CLAIMS NEUTRALITY

While a small but vocal group of avowed White supremacists call Western New York home, most area conservatives are eager to avoid appearing openly racist.⁴⁶ This is partly because the American Left, while not as politically powerful or violent as the Right, has gained social power in recent decades. Local right-wing activists would rather portray themselves as independent-minded, educated, professional, nonpartisan, and even, to some extent, pro-diversity, allowing them to deny that their politics are a reflection or expression of racial hostility and White supremacist beliefs. This extends to those affiliated with the Far Right: When Cooper and I spoke with Howard in 2022, he stressed that there were “quite a few” Black sheriffs nationwide and suggested we contact one of them: Trump super-fan and former Milwaukee county sheriff David Clarke.⁴⁷ Even in communications initially thought to be private, such as leaked emails sent by area law enforcement officers who had joined or aspired to join a far-right militia group called the Oath Keepers, Erie County conservatives appear to be more concerned with self-identifying as patriots and “strong supporters of the Constitution” than as White Christians.⁴⁸

When the Far Right and official allies

like Howard deny that a group is White supremacist in nature or origin, using misleadingly vague, neutral, or ambiguous terms to describe its goals and beliefs, that denial serves a dual purpose: it complicates efforts to hold officials accountable by obscuring their views and involvement and makes the groups more palatable. From a recruitment perspective, abstract concepts like “liberty” and “community” are more compelling to a broader swath of Americans than specific-but-repellent-to-many terms like “White nationalism.”

When we spoke, Howard talked around questions about what should happen when people violate laws they consider unjust—for example, should local business owners have stayed open in defiance of state-imposed Covid restrictions? Despite his evident right-wing sympathies, Howard sought to portray himself as an independent thinker. Throughout our conversation, he returned repeatedly to the issue of Second Amendment rights, which he presented as non-partisan. Asked about the history of sheriffs siding with local authorities against the U.S. federal government in defense of White business and property owners, Howard said he does not believe that “White privilege,” as he understands the term, exists.⁴⁹

Claiming to value diversity provides far-right actors and their allies a cover of neutrality amid allegations of racism. Take, for instance, statements by Charles Pellien, a former police and corrections officer with longstanding local right-wing ties and founder of the New York Watchmen, a local militia⁵⁰ affiliated with the broader militia movement.⁵¹ During a 2020 appearance on “Edge of the Falls,” a local podcast, Pellien boasted that his group was “created by guys with Master’s degrees” and is not just “some ragtag bunch of guys...that don’t know what we’re doing.”⁵² He also noted that “Professionalism and image is a big thing for us” and complained that critics were calling his group “a White supremacist group, a bunch of racists,” despite the fact that it had “some diversity.”⁵³ Pellien has also insisted that his group is not anti-government. “We’re pro-government. We’re pro-police. We back the blue,” he told the *Buffalo News* in 2020,

“As part of their effort to project authority and legitimacy, the New York Watchmen have courted and claimed law enforcement officials as members.”

adding that “Ethnic supremacy is absolutely not tolerated.”⁵⁴

Local and federal government officials have promoted the Watchmen. Clad in a Watchmen T-shirt during a 2020 Facebook Live video shot outside of his former home in East Aurora, Erie County, Michael Caputo, then Trump’s Dept. of Health and Human Services Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, urged those “in Buffalo or anywhere in New York” to “look up the New York Watchmen.”⁵⁵ Like Howard, Caputo would later deny being a Watchmen member and any knowledge of the group’s activities.⁵⁶ Other officials openly embraced the group. After a 2020 confrontation in Buffalo between protesters seeking to end pandemic-related restrictions and demonstrators calling attention to Covid deaths, then Erie County Comptroller Stefan Mychajliw thanked the New York Watchmen and the Buffalo Police Department, saying he was “grateful for their protection.”⁵⁷ By thanking the police and the Watchmen, he implied that he needed protection from violent left-wing radicals. His comments also established a link in the minds of county residents between the police and the Watchmen—one that does not officially exist.

Through such endorsements, officials like Caputo and Mychajliw give far-right groups like the Watchmen the stamp of professionalism they crave and enable them to project authority they don’t officially have and share in the glory and prestige commonly attributed to law enforcement. This type of support from public officials helps to legitimize far-right groups, insulate them from consequences, and intimidate their opponents.⁵⁸

IMPUNITY AND FAR-RIGHT THREATS OF FORCE

Expecting and experiencing the ability to act with impunity—as many law enforcement officers and their right-wing associates do—fosters neither good judgment nor restraint. According to a 2020

report by a fellow at the Brennan Center for Justice’s Liberty and National Security Program, the government’s response to known connections between law enforcement officers and far-right groups has been “strikingly insufficient,” and few officers have been held to account.⁵⁹

As part of their effort to project authority and legitimacy, the New York Watchmen have courted and claimed law enforcement officials as members. “We take the military guys and former police officers and we’ve got special forces veterans,”⁶⁰ Pellien said on the “Edge of the Falls” podcast. Without being explicit, what they say indicates that they see conservative White men as heroic defenders of America and its values—and Black Lives Matter activists, students, Democrats, and “antifa” as the enemy. “Black Lives Matter” and “rioters” are mentioned as if they are one and the same; “antifa” is invoked as a bogeyman but never defined.⁶¹

On the podcast, Pellien portrayed his group as nonpartisan through equivocation. After disparaging antifa and Black Lives Matter—an organization the show’s host implied was on “the opposite side”⁶²—Pellien claimed he would defend the latter’s First Amendment rights to protest. He also went further. “It’s not ‘us against them,’ it’s good against bad, good against evil,” he added, suggesting that he sees White male conservatives like himself and his comrades as defenders of goodness and Black Lives Matter activists as allies of evil.⁶³ Howard, the former sheriff, echoed this Manichean worldview when we spoke. He questioned what makes us do “good things” and “bad things,” arguing that we should focus on “what can we do as a country to encourage more of whatever it is that makes us comply with the law, or comply with what is good, and refrain from doing what is bad.”⁶⁴

While professing to be pro-police, Pellien and many of his associates are willing to defy the police when they be-

lieve it's necessary. When an "Edge of the Falls" host asked him about police being told to "stand down" during a confrontation with Black Lives Matter protesters, Pellien replied, "They were told to do absolutely nothing, and then they told us that we needed to go home and do absolutely nothing, and we refused to do that. That's why we're here."⁶⁵

County officials who avoid endorsing far-right groups by rejecting extremism "on both sides" nevertheless reveal their perspective by implying there is a Far Left in the U.S. as organized and violent as the Far Right. When I asked current Erie County Sheriff John Garcia if it was appropriate for Howard to appear in uniform under an Oath Keepers sign, he replied obliquely, "You're not going to find me there...I'm against it 100 percent," adding that "there's right-wing extremists and left-wing extremists and there's no room for...any kind of people that hate others or violence towards others."⁶⁶

Unlike Garcia, who sees the Right and the Left as equally prone to having "ex-

tremists," Pellien sees it as his duty to stand up to what he perceives as a radical and out-of-control Left. He started the New York Watchmen mainly because he was "thoroughly convinced" that if Donald Trump were reelected in 2020, "the Left is not going to accept that,"⁶⁷ making him part of a far-right universe of people and organizations involved in efforts to stop Democrats from purportedly "stealing" the 2020 presidential election.⁶⁸ Groups like the Watchmen, he continued, serve as a necessary counterforce to "these protests and these rioters" (presumably referring to the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings), which are "like a river with no banks...You got to have some dams, you got to have some resistance, and that's what we're going to try to be."⁶⁹

WHY SHERIFFS BELIEVE THEY ARE THE ULTIMATE AUTHORITIES—AND HOW THE FAR RIGHT BENEFITS

Although police officers routinely face no or minimal consequences for violating the law and/or departmental policies,

they are still theoretically accountable to bosses and state and municipal authorities.⁷⁰ As Howard explained, "The police chiefs answer to the superintendent; the state police answer to the governor. The town police answer to town supervisors," whereas "The sheriff is the only law enforcement executive that answers directly to the people."⁷¹

In New York State, only the governor can remove an elected sheriff from office, giving sheriffs enormous leeway to act unilaterally with little meaningful oversight and considerable discretion to enforce the laws they like and ignore the ones they don't. This has led several sheriffs, including Howard and, less overtly, Garcia, to insist that their power comes directly from "the people" and is limited only by their interpretation of the Constitution. Presenting sheriffs as the most accountable public officials by virtue of being elected lends authoritarianism a democratic veneer.⁷²

Even when they don't identify publicly as "White Christians" or "Christian na-

Pete Harding holding the Betsy Ross flag and megaphone along with the Watchmen at an anti-lockdown rally in Buffalo, New York, on December 19, 2020. (Credit: Heidi I. Jones)



“Far from being held accountable, deputies were empowered to hurt and humiliate residents who questioned their authority.”

tionalists,” far-right actors’ views draw on Christian nationalist and White supremacist theories and beliefs. As mentioned above, many Christians believe that America is a Christian country that should be led by Christians. And many conservative Christians are guided by Dominionism, or the belief that God intended Christians to rule over society, in part by injecting their version of Christian values into politics and government. Groups like CSPOA derive their views from theories like the aforementioned doctrine of the lesser magistrate. They also rely on the slender legal basis provided by the Supreme Court’s 1997 ruling in *Printz v. United States*,⁷³ which invalidated a section of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act that compelled local law enforcement to enforce the law’s background check requirements, saying that it violated the Tenth Amendment,⁷⁴ and empowered local law enforcement officers to flout laws they deem unconstitutional.

Howard’s apparent belief that he was answerable to no one was reflected in his interactions with various authorities throughout his tenure as sheriff. When the U.S. Department of Justice sued⁷⁵ the sheriff’s office for a host of constitutional violations related to abusive treatment of inmates in 2009, Howard wouldn’t let federal investigators into his jails to monitor conditions.⁷⁶ When county legislators questioned him about body cameras in 2019, he likened those calling for cameras to those who doubted the resurrection of Jesus.⁷⁷ Garcia has been less combative than his predecessor, but no less autocratic; the *Buffalo News* sued him in 2022 to force the release of body camera videos that showed a deputy kicking a restrained inmate in or near his head.⁷⁸

Far from being held accountable, deputies were empowered to hurt and hu-

miliate residents who questioned their authority.⁷⁹ In 2019, when a jury convicted deputy Kenneth Achtyl of reckless assault of a University at Buffalo student who sought information about a friend’s arrest, official misconduct, and falsifying business records,⁸⁰ Howard attended Achtyl’s trial in what Achtyl understood as a show of support.⁸¹ He later maintained that because Achtyl was convicted of misdemeanors and not felonies, he would not automatically be fired. Erie County District Attorney John J. Flynn told me in 2019 that the sheriff’s office “should have fired him,” per New York State’s Public Officers Law.⁸² Achtyl was instead permitted to resign and back-date his resignation letter to make it appear that he’d submitted it before his conviction.⁸³

Tensions between the Erie County sheriff’s office and accountability-seeking regional authorities also reflect a broader trend. In recent years, conflicts over hot-button issues have erupted between the federal government and state or local authorities. Under Trump, Democratic state and city officials began invoking states’ rights and local control—concepts long associated with the Right. After then-president Trump signed an executive order to slash aid to “sanctuary cities,” mayors and councils in cities like Boston, New York, Denver, Los Angeles, and Santa Fe vowed to protect residents from the anti-immigrant federal government.⁸⁴ Others promised to protect women from anti-abortion municipal ordinances. Explaining why he was suing cities and counties that had passed such ordinances, New Mexico Attorney General Raúl Torrez pointed to the state’s constitution, which he says guarantees a woman’s right to choose.⁸⁵

These jurisdictional disputes are less about what the federal Constitution and state constitutions say than whose rights these documents exist to protect—and who has the power to decide. A sheriff could theoretically refuse to arrest an undocumented family because he believes the Constitution protects them from discrimination based on race and national origin. But so-called constitutional sheriffs would be much likelier to, say, refuse to arrest a priest who kept his church open during a

pandemic. Local police officers and sheriffs have railed against and openly defied Covid restrictions,⁸⁶ gun restrictions,⁸⁷ and efforts to safeguard immigrants’ rights⁸⁸ and rein in police brutality.⁸⁹

Public officials like Howard and groups like the CSPOA, Oath Keepers, and Watchmen empower the Far Right and each other by making it clear that (a) law enforcement shares many of their beliefs and exists to protect them and (b) they are willing to defend those who “take matters into their own hands.” When public officials tacitly or overtly endorse the theory that individuals have the duty and the God-given authority to take back their government, somebody—right-wing agitators, insurrectionists, or murderers like the shooter who killed ten Black people in a racist massacre at a Buffalo grocery store in 2022—will heed the call. The Buffalo shooter, who grew up in a 90 percent White town in the Binghamton area, acted alone but was inspired by reading about “great replacement” theory, the racist, far-right belief that Jews and other minorities are seeking to “replace” White people. Given the county’s shifting demographics and high degree of racial segregation, it’s no surprise that far-right theories have flourished in Western and Central New York.

Law enforcement officers who believe they are the ultimate authority *are* the law, for all intents and purposes: there is no higher power to appeal to when a sheriff like Howard leaves office voluntarily after presiding over jails where dozens of people died and immediately gets elected to another office, or when a deputy convicted of crimes is permitted to resign rather than being fired, in defiance of state law. If you believe God has empowered you to stand up for law and order and parental and constitutional rights, it’s easy to believe you’re behaving righteously, regardless of the facts. Western New Yorkers and the entire country are paying a heavy price for this dangerous worldview.

Raina Lipsitz has written about politics and culture for a variety of publications. She is the author of The Rise of a New Left: How Young Radicals Are Shaping the Future of American Politics.

BY HABIBA FARH

Innocent Until Proven Muslim

Author Q&A with Dr. Maha Hilal



Protest against detention at Guantanamo in 2014. (Credit: Witness Against Torture/Flickr.com)

To fight a War on Terror, the state needs terrorists. Indeed, it creates them. As author, researcher, and organizer Dr. Maha Hilal observes, “If you followed the logic of the U.S. government when it comes to post-9/11 detentions, the prevailing wisdom seems to be that if you treat a person like a terrorist, they become one.”¹

In her book, *Innocent Until Proven Muslim: Islamophobia, the War on Terror, and the Muslim Experience Since 9/11* (Broadleaf Books, 2022), Hilal analyzes the narrative and political mechanisms that enable the War on Terror; its institutionalized Islamophobia as entrenched in the state’s laws and policies; and how Muslims internalize, reproduce, challenge, and live with these injustices.

Alongside its domestic impact, Hilal examines the global scope of the War on Terror’s systemic imperial violence and torture in state memos, reports, case studies, and detainees’ stories. The latter includes the stories of men like Omar Khadr, detained at Guantánamo Bay at the age of 15, and Abu Zubaydah, Guantánamo’s “forever prisoner,” who the U.S. has held without charges since 2006.² Their continued detention relies on dehumanizing state narratives that portray Muslims and Arabs as violent, vengeful terrorists—beasts lacking humanity that require subhuman violence

to tame, and in some cases, eradicate. In reaffirming its right to surveil, contain, and brutalize Muslims suspected of being terrorists anywhere in the world, the United States upholds systems of prison imperialism—producing CIA black sites, and more renditions, torture, prisons, and terrorists—at home and abroad.

The decades-long War on Terror and its violence toward Muslims is a bipartisan priority despite its conservative origins. While George W. Bush signed the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) bill, his successors—two Democratic presidents and one Republican—upheld the AUMF. This, Hilal writes, “has allowed the War on Terror’s global military footprint to expand exponentially—rippling out from the initial conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq to touch nearly 40 percent of the entire world.”³ The Bush Doctrine thus remains core to U.S. war making and policies for managing populations at home and across the globe.

PRA spoke with Hilal in early December about the pervasiveness of War on Terror narratives, her visit to Guantánamo, and Muslim humanity.

You introduce your book as a thought project happening in the moment of the George Floyd protests. Can you speak more about why you describe it this way?

There are a lot of reasons why. Number one: the protests were significant. Unfortunately, White Americans don’t understand the gravity of this country’s violence, even though it’s happening in the backdrop, every single day. Around that time, people were talking about the 1033 program,⁴ and how the War on Terror was coming home. I thought that was interesting because the War on Terror *has* been at home. It started at home while it was being launched abroad. So, I wanted people to know that the violence of the War on Terror is continuous and has been here from day one—but also that these multiple systems of violence are occurring at the same time. Anti-Black violence has been part of this country from the beginning. People began to understand; although the War on Terror started after 9/11, they were connecting the dots between these different types of state violence. That’s important because Black people’s struggles in the U.S. have led to many of us having [civil] rights we otherwise wouldn’t have had.

In the book, you write about visiting Guantánamo, which surprised me as a reader. Can you talk more about it?

I’ve been part of this group called Witness Against Torture for many years now. In 2015, we went on a delegation

to Guantánamo City to get as close to the prison as we could, to call for its closure with the men to be transferred out of it. We couldn't get very close because we were approached multiple times by Cuban government officials asking us not to go because it would cause trouble [with the U.S.] for them. It was a delicate place, because we were a group of Americans and didn't want to cause trouble for the Cuban government, because Guantánamo is a U.S. naval base on their land without their consent.⁵ We camped on a big hill where you can kind of see the naval base and prison in the distance. We did all our solidarity activities on that hill. For me, as a Muslim, it was a very powerful experience, but also devastating because you could only get so close. And in my experience, there haven't been many Muslims involved in efforts to close Guantánamo, calling for an end of the torture. For me, it's been a main driver of my work, to see the way Muslims have been so criminalized, demonized, and brutalized in the War on Terror and to know that it is because of an identity I share with the men who are being detained.

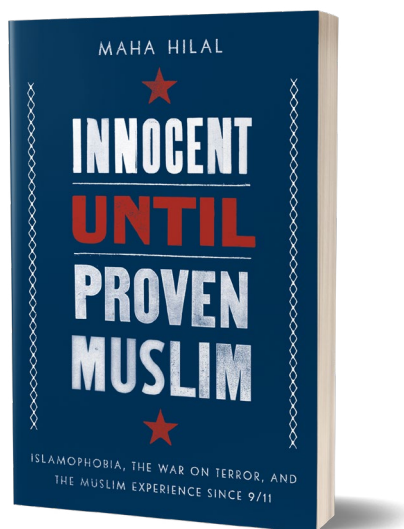
Even in abolition spaces, Guantánamo is excluded; it seems to be this place that mystifies people, or one they don't want to touch. Sometimes it's hard to integrate it into the understanding because people see it as a smaller problem than domestic mass incarceration. It's an unfortunate piece of the puzzle motivated by how they [the detainees] are narratively constructed as terrorists.

Humanity has been a big theme in discussions of the current genocide⁶ in Gaza and the West Bank, and it seems that there is a rupture in the way we are talking about Muslims and Islamophobia. Do you think that the role of humanity in these narratives has changed?

Dehumanization is always there, and the level of violence that's sanctioned toward a group of people depends on the extent to which they've been dehumanized. Muslims have been thoroughly dehumanized in the War on Terror and that's why Guantánamo exists, why it was okay for the Bush Administration

to write memos that the threshold for torture was organ failure and death, and why it's okay to kill hundreds of thousands in Muslim-majority countries with no accountability whatsoever. So, the dehumanization is pervasive, and I think a lot of why it persists is the way the government talks about it.

Even the construction of "Muslim rage"—what is the purpose of that con-



Innocent Until Proven Muslim: Islamophobia, The War on Terror and The Muslim Experience since 9/11. (Broadleaf Books)

struction? We know: it's to construct Muslims as inherently angry and rageful with no explanation for their anger. And because we cannot find a reason, the only solution or intervention is brute force.

You wrote the book twenty years into the War on Terror. What has changed—socially, politically, economically, narratively—since you wrote the book?

Most people seem to think that the War on Terror is over—Biden said this during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, that the war is over.⁷ They don't understand that the War on Terror is much bigger than a visible, active [military] presence in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, so they believe the war is over. This is also an indication of what war

means to Americans domestically. What does it mean for the war to be over? For people in the U.S. versus people in the countries where the U.S. waged violence? It's a problem because here these wars are out of sight and out of mind.

Obama tried to abandon the "War on Terror" phrase, and to a certain extent, Trump didn't use it either, so the language is being manipulated. Many in social justice spaces don't use the term "War on Terror," but I still use it to stress that it's a system we otherwise wouldn't recognize if the umbrella [term] wasn't there; otherwise, the many ways the War on Terror has been—and continues to be—enacted are treated as discrete and unrelated acts and policies.

In many ways, it's normalized violence. As we think about abolishing the War on Terror, I wanted to come up with a taxonomy of its violence because it's so embedded now. This requires understanding the deeply rooted tentacles of normalized surveillance, indefinite detention—whatever it is. How do we de-normalize the War on Terror? How do we de-normalize the ways in which the state has taught us to think about what makes us safe and secure? Much of that "safety" and "security" is on the backs of marginalized communities.

This country needs to fundamentally change its narrative. No matter what happens, the U.S. continues to insist on a mythical narrative about what kind of country this is: that it inflicts violence for good reasons, that we're good people trying to restore order to bring safety and security. This narrative has been extremely durable. It has served to support any policy of violence the U.S. government wants to implement, making it one of the most insidious, problematic parts of this War on Terror.

Habiba Farh is a research analyst at Political Research Associates monitoring legislation and discourses addressing hate crimes, terrorism, and extremism. She has written on intergenerational political repression on historically marginalized communities in the U.S., Arab-American diasporic politics, U.S. foreign policy on the Middle East, and Islamophobia and anti-Arab bigotry in American policy and law.

BY ANGELA HUME

Countering the Ideology of “Violent Care”

Lessons from Bay Area Radical Abortion Defense



A pro-abortion protest in Reno in 2021. (Credit: Manny Becerra/Unsplash.com)

An apparent contradiction sits at the heart of the American anti-abortion movement—and it reveals much about the Far Right. The abortion defenders I write about in my book *Deep Care: The Radical Activists Who Provided Abortions, Defied the Law, and Fought to Keep Clinics Open* (AK Press, 2023) taught me this. For five years, I interviewed dozens of activists—lay abortion care providers and clinic defenders primarily in the San Francisco Bay Area—listening as they discussed their work from the 1970s to the 2000s along with what they learned defending their communities against the Christian

Right. Their work included everything from building abortion clinics, to learning how to perform manual suction abortions and providing them in the community, to defending clinics against militant anti-abortion harassers (“antis”).

Of antis, longtime abortion defender Laura Weide told me simply, “They wanted to hit women.” She recalled holding the clinic defense line in the early 1990s against mobs of White men who would punch and kick them. “They clearly enjoyed hitting women,” she added.¹ These antis were members of Operation Rescue, a national anti-abortion organization that obstructed clinics in the late 1980s

and early 1990s. On any given day, hundreds of its members would blockade a clinic to shut it down.²

The anti-abortion movement claims that it protects women. But as abortion defenders like Weide helped me understand, this far-right movement, and the broader Right, actually harms and exploits women. Grasping this contradiction—and how for the Right it is not a contradiction at all—is essential for resisting this fascistic ideology today.³

THE POLITICS OF ABORTION DEFENSE

Abortion defenders have long understood that the White nationalist Far Right

“I use the paradoxical phrase ‘violent care’ to describe this far-right ideology, which demands the possession and control of White women along with the control and immiseration of poor women of color and queer and trans people, whose reproductive capacity does not directly support the White Christian Right’s nationalist project. Administered in the name of protecting White fetal life, this ‘violent care’ racializes, dehumanizes, exploits, and punishes.”

under neoliberal capitalism polices, uses, and discards women as a strategy of economic and social control—and therefore it must be countered. Their resistance movement began in the early 1970s with “self-help”—activists’ term for gynecology and abortion practiced by laypeople in a group setting. Early on, these activists understood their work to be antithetical to coercive family planning, including U.S. government and International Planned Parenthood Federation programs in Latin America and South Asia for population control and capitalist development.⁴ They advocated for women’s, not states’, control of contraception and abortion.

In the late 1970s and the decade that followed, the New Right—a harbinger of today’s Far Right—waged war on poor women, people of color, and LGBTQ community members.⁵ Starting in the 1970s, the Right merged its antiwelfare and anti-abortion campaigns, culminating with the Hyde Amendment’s withdrawal of Medicaid funding for abortion except when the procedure was necessary to save a pregnant person’s life, punishing poor women of color.⁶ Radical abortion defenders who came of age in the 1980s witnessed Hyde’s impact amid escalating attacks on abortion rights, cuts to impoverished families’ health and social supports, and the denial of funding to care for people with HIV/AIDS.⁷ The Catholic Church, meanwhile, supported Operation Rescue while thwarting the distribution of condoms and clean needles for HIV prevention, harming women, LGBTQ people, and communities of color.⁸ Over the decades, in response to the Right’s punishing denial of support for these communities, abortion defenders also helped shape HIV/AIDS activism and developed harm reduction programs.⁹

Some abortion defenders came of age

in the 1990s, during what Linci Comy, the Oakland Women’s Choice Clinic’s longtime director, described to me as the “active terrorism years of the anti-abortion movement.”¹⁰ During this decade, violent anti-abortion activists threatened abortion seekers and providers around the country, firebombing clinics and murdering seven health care workers.¹¹ To counter this violence, abortion defenders rose up, creating community-based solutions to two interrelated problems: the state’s structural abandonment of women and queer and trans people and the Christian Right’s ideological claim to women’s bodies and lives within the heterosexual “nuclear” family.¹²

HOW THE ANTI-ABORTION MOVEMENT HURTS WOMEN AND LGBTQ PEOPLE

For me, the anti-abortion movement’s contradiction came into stark relief at the “pro-life” Walk for Life West Coast¹³ in downtown San Francisco on January 21, 2023, on what would have been the week-end of the fiftieth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, around seven months after the Supreme Court overturned the federal constitutional right to abortion.¹⁴ I went to the event to join the counter demonstration with people I had interviewed for my book. Our sizable counter demo watched and raged as Walk for Lifers mobbed Civic Center Plaza to hear Rebecca Kiessling, a vocal advocate of no-exception abortion bans,¹⁵ and Shawn Carney, cofounder of 40 Days for Life, an international anti-abortion organization that orchestrates ongoing “vigils” outside of clinics during Lent and other times of the year to “end abortion,” among others with extremist positions.

“Abortion Hurts Women,” signs read, a message that the anti-abortion movement had been pushing for decades.¹⁶ This claim—one that abortion defenders

have long refuted, in some cases citing their own life-saving abortions as evidence to the contrary—has been proven false by research on the long-term effects of unwanted pregnancies on women’s lives. In 2022, the University of California, San Francisco’s landmark Turnaway Study reported that women who were unable to obtain abortions experienced more economic hardship over time than women who were able to obtain abortions. Women who were forced to carry to term were four times more likely to see their household incomes fall below the federal poverty line; they were also more likely to be unable to afford basic needs.¹⁷ The study revealed that the denial of abortion hurts women. Combining this finding with demographic data on abortion seekers suggests that *denial* disproportionately harms women of color, who comprised more than 60 percent of abortion seekers nationally in 2020, and low-income women, who obtained 75 percent of all abortions in 2014.¹⁸

The denial of abortion hurts women, and thus, the anti-abortion movement hurts women. I recalled Laura Weide: “They wanted to hit women.” Another clinic defender named Agnes Sampson (pseudonym) put it to me this way: the antis were about “stomping women into the dirt.”¹⁹ Clinic defenders knew what the misogyny of the Right felt like when unleashed on the body because they had experienced it enacted on their bodies. They had experienced unplanned pregnancies and barriers to abortion access, and many were lesbians, queer-identified, or gender-nonconforming people who had been the targets of queerphobic speech and violence. They understood that the Right’s anti-abortion campaign was—and is—inextricable from its anti-LGBTQ campaign and that both were attempts to eliminate the body auton-

my²⁰ of women and other gender minorities to ensure the hegemony of cis White men. In this context, abortion defenders have long been aware of and in solidarity with reproductive justice, HIV/AIDS, and queer and trans health activism.

Since the *Dobbs* decision, 21 states have banned or further restricted abortion.²¹ In 2023, 86 anti-trans bills were passed in 25 states, limiting the freedom of trans youth and adults in almost all areas of life: school, sports, public bathrooms, health care, the military, the arts.²² Clearly, this war on the body autonomy of feminized people—attacking women and queer and trans people’s right to live in their bodies, sexualities, and genders freely—in the name of care and protection is the linchpin of the Right’s strategy for building its base and consolidating power.

Siân Norris describes this campaign as a “decades-long war of organized misogyny” that views White women as “wombs of the nation” that must be controlled to ensure the reproduction of the “white ethno-state.”²³ We can see the expression of this White supremacist-misogynist ideology in the track record of Alliance

Defending Freedom (ADF), a Christian Right advocacy group that wrote a model bill of the Mississippi law banning abortions after 15 weeks and then helped defend it to the Supreme Court in *Dobbs*.²⁴ In 2022, ADF brought a case to a Texas judge arguing that the FDA should never have approved the abortion pill mifepristone and that it should be banned.²⁵ Today, ADF leads the charge in the legal attacks on trans rights and health. They’ve helped pass laws that restrict teaching about gender in schools and are helping to pass laws that restrict gender-affirming care for trans youth.²⁶

WHITE SUPREMACY’S VIOLENT CARE

After the rally in January 2023, Walk for Life participants lined up to march along Market Street. Our counter demonstration began to relax. But then, a group of large White men wearing ski masks walked defiantly through an apathetic police line and into our counter demo. They unrolled a large banner that read, “150K White Kids Per Year / Abortion Is Genocide.” Their explicitly White supremacist message implied that abortion

must be outlawed to protect the White population’s birth rate—and ultimately, its dominance. Some counter demonstrators, mostly young women and queer and trans people, used their bodies to try to block the sign. Some huddled together in self-defense as the men started lunging at them.

Everything crystallized for me in that moment: men attacking women while claiming to care about them is not a contradiction in the anti-abortion movement’s logic; rather, this logic coopts and redefines care as an activity that encompasses and necessitates violence, including the violence of objectification. The anti-abortion movement’s “care” has never been about protecting the health and autonomy of human lives and communities. Rather, it has been—and is—about maintaining White wealth and power, including the value-generating power of women’s bodies, necessary to reproduce the labor force.²⁷ I use the paradoxical phrase “violent care” to describe this far-right ideology, which demands the possession and control of White women along with the control and immiseration

Still of “CITY LIGHT LIVE! Angela Hume with Brenda Cummings and Jessica Pickney.” Brenda Cummings is discussing her work as an abortion defender. Uploaded by CityLightsBooks on December 8, 2023. (Credit: YouTube.com)



“Abortion defenders’ decades-long movement to ensure abortion access reveals that community-based care at its best is shared, empowering, trauma-informed, equitable, and revolutionary.”

of poor women of color and queer and trans people, whose reproductive capacity does not directly support the White Christian Right’s nationalist project. Administered in the name of protecting White fetal life, this “violent care” racializes, dehumanizes, exploits, and punishes.

Since the late 1960s, the anti-abortion movement has co-opted social justice rhetoric, purporting to be a civil rights movement for the unborn while promoting White supremacist ideology. As Jennifer Holland argues, by simultaneously victimizing and identifying with fetuses, White antis could imagine themselves, too, as victims.²⁸ This victim logic bridges late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century White supremacist claims that legal abortion would mean “race suicide” for White people with twenty-first-century far-right ideological and political campaigns. The latter include “replacement theory,” the conspiracist idea that liberals aim to supplant White people with people of color by welcoming immigrants,²⁹ and “abortion abolition,” which appropriates nineteenth-century anti-slavery rhetoric to advocate for the total criminalization of abortion as murder. Their efforts are not marginal: anti-abortion “abolitionists” have proposed bills in 17 U.S. states.³⁰

In 1992, after defending clinics in Southern Louisiana against a weeklong Operation Rescue siege, Laura Weide underscored the irony of the antis’ appropriation of civil rights rhetoric: “I heard some ORs chanting ‘KKK anti-gay’ against us when we were chanting ‘Racist, sexist, anti-gay, born-again bigots, go away,’ which again affirms that these people violently oppose everyone’s civil rights.”³¹ As Weide’s comments suggest, the far-right anti-abortion movement, undergirded by White supremacist-misogynist ideology, promulgates a culture of violent care. Such “care” is not truly care for life; its concern is for the fortification of White patriarchy.

“WE DID IT BEFORE, AND WE’LL DO IT AGAIN”: RADICAL ABORTION DEFENSE AS REVOLUTIONARY CARE

The Far Right’s violent care ideology isn’t an abstract evil force; it is structurally determined by neoliberal capitalism. This ideology reflects what Laura Briggs describes as the “privatization of dependency” under neoliberalism, or the “political revolution that began in the late 1970s in the United States, in which corporate America and Wall Street...reset government priorities to shrink spending on the well-being of actual humans—from schools to housing to child welfare programs like [Aid to Families with Dependent Children]—in order to keep corporate taxes low and profits high.”³² As Briggs shows, the neoliberal imperative to privatize care has justified the state’s continued impoverishment of poor women of color. Briggs’ analysis contributes to a reproductive justice framework, which since the 1990s has provided a critique of racist structural barriers to the reproductive autonomy and thriving of women of color and their families.³³

How can we counter the institutionalization of violent care? How can we fight a Right that, under the guise of care, sickens and immiserates bodies that it views as exploitable or as obstructive or irrelevant to its White wealth- and nation-building project? Bay Area abortion defenders developed several approaches, all of which are instructive. First, they built independent clinics like Women’s Choice to establish standards of trauma-informed feminist care that center patient autonomy. Working with Medi-Cal, California’s state insurance program, which covers abortion care, they filled the gap created by the Hyde Amendment by offering this care to low-income and other marginalized people, including survivors, sex workers, immigrants, people with AIDS, and queer and trans people. They consolidated survival skills and knowledge, dissem-

inating these into the community. Crucially, Bay Area abortion defenders cultivated an underground in which laypeople could collaborate with health workers at a licensed clinic, become trained in gynecology and abortion, and take their training and practice beyond the clinic’s walls.

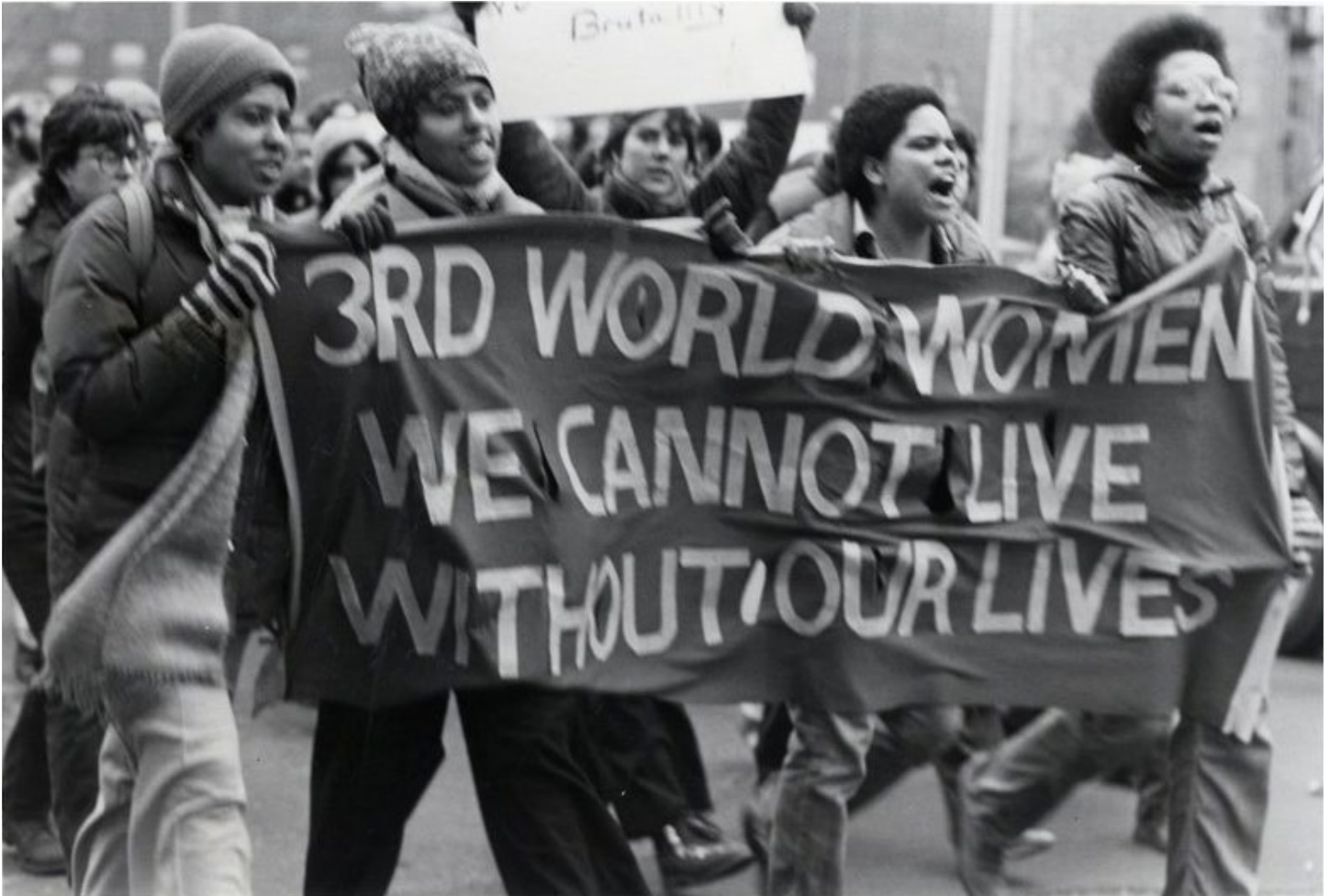
Bay Area abortion defenders also developed creative community self-defense approaches to clinic defense, including bringing satirical street theater to outdoor areas in front of churches. For example, in 1989, they staged an ostentatious mock wedding outside San Francisco’s First Orthodox Presbyterian Church, in which a “minister” pronounced a couple “man and property,” while rowdy “guests” shouted “Breed! Breed! Breed!” and pelted the bride with coat hangers and plastic babies.³⁴ Using imagination and humor, their direct actions countered the repressive violent care that has defined the anti-abortion movement.

Violent care is not care—radical abortion defenders understood this. They repudiated the violent care of the Right and the state by *doing care differently*. Their decades-long movement to ensure abortion access reveals that community-based care at its best is shared, empowering, trauma-informed, equitable, and revolutionary. Moreover, care is a commitment to health and safety—regardless of the legal status of its provision. And radical care centers the need for solidarity in struggle, across different experiences of race, class, and gender, and across political ideologies. As Linci Comy once put it to me, “We did it before, and we’ll do it again.” Of course, radical abortion defenders never stopped doing it. They have been doing care differently all along. Herein lies the power of their revolutionary movement.

Angela Hume is a feminist movement historian, critic, and poet. She is the author of Deep Care: The Radical Activists Who Provided Abortions, Defied the Law, and Fought to Keep Clinics Open (2023) and co-editor of the book Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field (2018). Her books of poetry include Middle Time (2016) and Interventions for Women (2021). More at linktr.ee/angelahume.

BY ANDREA J. RITCHIE

Practicing Emergent Strategies to Fight the Right and Resist Fascism



Members of Combahee River Collective at the March and Rally for Bellana Borde against Police Brutality, Boston, January 15, 1980. (Credit: Susan Fleischmann/The History Project)

Edited excerpt from Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies by Andrea J. Ritchie (AK Press, 2023), pp. 5–7, 9–11, presented with footnote numbers from the original. Reprinted with permission from the publisher and author.

Over the past four decades, I have learned that the majority of the work to build the worlds we want happens outside of the structures that manufacture and preserve existing relations of power. I've developed a deeper awareness and understanding that we must step beyond what we know to ex-

periment with, build, and practice new ways of being in relationship with each other and the planet.

Yet, as conditions worsen and urgency increases, as millions are increasingly mired in economic and climate crises while billionaires bank on our suffering, as the Right rises around the globe and comes for our throats with a clear intention to obliterate communities I am part of and care deeply about, the destruction of so much of the planet we call home looms large, and as police, state, and white-supremacist violence and repression intensify and multiply, it feels hard-

er and harder to try on different strategies to resist and persist. It feels riskier to experiment; to reach for different ways of thinking, being, and relating; to imagine and create conditions for something new to emerge. The more pressure we are under, the more urgency, uncertainty, and fear we face, the stronger our instincts are to cling to the familiar. Under pressure, we are more likely to double down on strategies that have largely failed in the past, and turn to the institutions and structures that manufacture, produce, and sustain the current order in the hopes of changing them—or of at least

staving off the worst of what's to come. We fight harder but continue to fight in the ways we know.

This is precisely the time when we most need to critically examine the ways we are seeking to make change, and to explore where and how we need to shift our approach.

This moment calls on us to practice new ways of relating, new forms of governance, and new modes of being that enable the worlds we want to emerge instead of relying on top-down, law and policy-based strategies that are mired in the illusion that we can change systems and institutions doing exactly what they were created to do: produce and maintain societies that promote extractive accumulation by the few at the expense of the many and of the planet, structured by laws, policies, and institutions that distribute life chances through surveillance, policing, punishment, and exclusion.

Philosopher, organizer, and beloved

movement elder Grace Lee Boggs would often begin conversations by asking, "What time is it on the clock of the world?" According to Grace, one answer is that "in the midst of this epochal shift, we all need to practice visionary organizing." For her, that meant moving beyond protest organizing: "Instead of viewing the US people as masses to be mobilized . . . we must have the courage to challenge ourselves to engage in activities that build a new and better world by improving the physical, psychological, political, and spiritual health of ourselves, our families, our communities, our cities, our world, and our planet."⁹ In her view, visionary organizing "begins by creating images and stories of the future that help us imagine and create alternatives to the existing system."¹⁰

In *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, Grace writes with Scott Kurashige: "The tremendous changes we now need

and yearn for in our daily lives... cannot come from those in power or from putting pressure on those in power. We ourselves have to foreshadow or prefigure them from the ground up."¹¹ In other words, we need to stop looking exclusively to the same places we always have looked, doing the same things we have always done, being the same people we have always been. Instead, we must seek out new ways of thinking, doing, and being in everyday actions, with the intention of shifting large and complex systems and relations of power. We need to seek out as many portals as we can find into futures we cannot currently imagine and practice them every day.

I have come to believe that emergent strategies offer important clues to help us to find new paths forward, to step outside of what we know and into the futures we want to create, to survive, and to resist the futures racial capitalism and Right-wing forces seek to make inevitable.

Protest outside Cook County Jail in Illinois in June 2023. (Credit: Risingthermals/Flickr.com)



EMERGENT STRATEGY AND EMERGENT STRATEGIES

adrienne maree brown's book, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, has served as an introduction to emergent strategies for hundreds of thousands of people, including me. (I use *Emergent Strategy* to refer to adrienne maree brown's book of that name, and emergent strategies to refer to the broader body of work the book draws on.) It summarizes a broader set of ideas about how to create, shift, and change complex systems—including human society—through relatively simple interactions. Emergent strategies, as adrienne describes them, focus on starting small and making space for and learning from uncertainty, multiplicity, experimentation, adaptation, iteration, and decentralization.

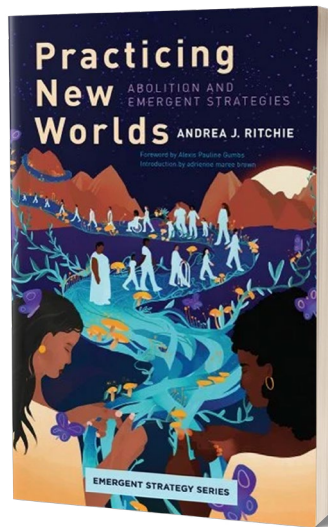
These ideas are not new—*Emergent Strategy* draws on a much deeper body of work rooted in the workings of the natural world, Indigenous lifeways, complexity science, change theory, Grace Lee Boggs's later writings, the work of the Complex Movements Collective, and the observations of scholars and organizers across generations. In many ways, *Emergent Strategy* distills and invites us to hone key principles already at play in effective organizing efforts and movements. Emergent strategies, by definition, require attention to emergence—what becomes possible under certain conditions when we

- start small and focus on critical connections,
- build decentralized networks,
- iterate and adapt with intention, and
- cooperate toward collective sustainability,

rather than trying to control or impose change through law, policy, and other top-down strategies.

“Emergent strategies invite us to act based on shared values and principles at a smaller scale, and to connect our actions across time and space into networks with the power to shape complex systems.”

While this approach may feel counter-intuitive given the scale of the problems we face and the growing political power of authoritarian forces, change scholars Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze argue that emergence has made large-scale resistance and societal shifts possible. According to them, these shifts hap-



Practicing New Worlds. (AK Press, 2023)

pened through “many local actions and decisions, most of which were invisible and unknown to each other, and none of which was powerful enough by itself to create change. But when these local changes coalesced, new power emerged. What could not be accomplished by diplomacy, politics, protests, or strategy suddenly happened.”¹²

...

Practicing emergent strategies doesn't mean that we no longer try to affect large systems. It “doesn't mean eschewing the systemic for the interpersonal or vice versa. Emergence is an invitation to hold a dual focus.”¹⁴ As someone living in a time of climate collapse, mounting fascism, and rising rates of white-supremacist,

gender-based, homophobic, transphobic, colonial, and anti-Black violence, I am painfully aware that large systems are increasingly constraining possibility at every scale. As a Black feminist, I am committed to what the Combahee River Collective Statement describes as “the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking,” and on the premise that “if Black women were free that would mean everyone else would have to be free because our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression.”¹⁵ None of the changes I want to see in the world are possible without eliminating a global economic system built on racial capitalism and the structural violence it requires and produces along the axes of race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, and nation, operating in the lives of Black women, trans and gender nonconforming people, and our communities everywhere. By definition, this requires large-scale, systemic change.

The knowledge that what happens at the small-scale replicates, coalesces into, and shapes larger social structures and systems simply shifts the primary focus of transformation to our relationships, interactions, networks, and communities instead of strategies that rely exclusively on mass mobilization and top-down legislative and policy initiatives. Emergent strategies invite us to act based on shared values and principles at a smaller scale, and to connect our actions across time and space into networks with the power to shape complex systems. They remind us that we are constantly learning and adapting to changing conditions at the individual and collective levels. They point to critical guidance offered by the natural world on building resilience under pressure through decentralization, cooperation, and interdependence. They urge us to ask generative questions; move beyond binaries; value uncertainty; practice while learning from our mistakes; and to create more possibilities. They invite us to engage our radical imaginations and to center joy and pleasure in our efforts.

...

WHY EMERGENT STRATEGIES MATTER IN A TIME OF FASCISM

Even if you are not convinced that emergent strategies can play an important role building toward the worlds we want, there are still important reasons to learn about them. In fact, I have come to believe that we can't afford to not to be emergent strategists in this time—because emergent strategies are part of how we got to where we are. Over the past six decades, the religious Right has leveraged the power of relatively small

faith communities, social media posts, and conversations with families and friends.²⁰ Neo-Nazis are similarly deploying decentralized strategies reliant on small groups of people to form “a web, instead of a chain of command.”²¹ *No Pasarán!: Antifascist Dispatches from a World in Crisis* contributors Emmi Bevenssee and Frank Miroslav write, “One of the most concerning developments is the shift by various strands of fascism into becoming more horizontal and to using distributed organizing mechanisms . . . There are a number of reasons this kind of distribut-

and communities, to recognize that “the bridges we build one by one between individuals are the strongest,” to understand our struggle as one of fundamental values, and to move with the knowledge that “every step toward liberation must have liberation in it.”²⁸ As organizer Shane Burley writes in *No Pasarán!*, “The antidote to fascism in all its manifestations is community-building.”²⁹ Emmi Bevenssee and Frank Miroslav argue that, “Whereas fascists use complexity to promote their violent and overly simplistic worldview, antifascists can use complexity to cultivate richly diverse and evolving networks of resistance.” In other words, to fight a competing world vision that is rapidly spreading in part through what could be characterized as emergent strategies, we need to at least understand and practice them ourselves.

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interactions—in church basements and prayer circles, over harvest and coffee—to shape the systems and conditions we are now living. While the use of law, policy, political parties, think tanks, and judicial appointments to advance Right-wing agendas is more visible, these strategies represent the tip of the iceberg in terms of how the Right built the power they are now exercising in an attempt to dominate what they describe as the seven mountains or pillars of society: economy, education, family life, religion, media, culture, and government.¹⁹ While our collective focus has rightly been on authoritarian, top-down Christian evangelical efforts, led by charismatic leaders, to pass legislation to ban abortion and gender-affirming care, attempt to eradicate the public existence of trans and queer people, to take over and overturn systems of government, and to impose a white-supremacist, patriarchal Christian theocracy, there is much more at play.

The Christian Right has adopted the strategy of calling on its followers to “go and make disciples” and to “invade” each of these seven arenas with the intention of shifting larger systems further toward white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy. Supporters are encouraged to advance theocratic values through critical connections: in their workplaces,

ed white terror is becoming more popular; the most obvious of which is that it works.”²² In a particularly alarming turn, the Patriot movement is bastardizing “dual power” approaches that originate in revolutionary struggles of the Global South and focus on both challenging state power and building prefigurative community institutions.²³ In the Patriots’ case, they do so by creating militias and common law courts that prefigure the dictatorship they seek to impose on broader society.²⁴ Alt-Right groups are likewise seeking to dismantle centralized states while upholding patriarchal non-state “tribal” systems rooted in male dominance.²⁵ In other words, Right-wing movements are also manifesting decentralized, adaptive, and iterative approaches to shaping the world that build on critical connections and networks to shift larger systems.

As a result, as organizer and strategist Suzanne Pharr, longtime student of Right-wing, white-supremacist movements, puts it, “They are so pervasive as to be obscured and normalized to the extent that they are simultaneously everywhere all the time and difficult to detect.”²⁶ Like a virus, they infect communities, replicate themselves, and spread.²⁷ To resist, Pharr calls us to engage in local work aimed at transforming individuals

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BY KITANA ANANDA

Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies

Author Q&A with Andrea J. Ritchie



Protestors at a solidarity protest for Palestine in Trafalgar Square, London, on October 15, 2023. (Credit: Alisdare Hickson/Flickr.com)

Abolitionist organizer, advocate, and author Andrea J. Ritchie hadn't planned to write a book about emergent strategies for social transformation. After all, as she admits in *Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies*, Ritchie is "an unlikely emergent strategist" (p. 1) who was raised to practice the organized Left's traditional power-building strategies. But after organizing for policy change and fighting the violence of policing and criminalization as a lawyer, she realized more was needed to fight the Right and build safer, more just futures.

Ritchie wrote *Practicing New Worlds* after seeing principles of emergence reflected at scale in 2020's racial justice uprisings, which brought wider attention to abolitionist ideas and demands developed over decades. She observed how

local organizers adapted those demands iteratively within shifting conditions and built relationships and networks while learning from one another. As new possibilities for abolitionist struggle developed—despite fierce backlash—Ritchie felt that they warranted a deeper exploration of the principles and strategies behind effective abolitionist organizing.

If experimenting with emergent strategies involves taking risks, Ritchie argues that it's also essential to surviving and resisting the Right's rise under racial capitalism. *Practicing New Worlds* weaves together Black feminist, Indigenous, and queer and trans of color organizing lineages; insights from today's abolitionists; and imaginative practices like fiction to illustrate how emergent strategies are already "at work in movements and organizations around the globe... shaping how

we are building futures without violence" (p. 93). In the process, the book highlights how organizers are creating systems change while dreaming and building the worlds we long for into being.

Ritchie discussed the book's insights with PRA in an email interview in late December 2023:

PRA: This issue of *The Public Eye* presents an excerpt from *Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies* (AK Press, 2023) about why emergent strategies matter in a time of rising authoritarianism and fascism. In it, you observe that the Far Right increasingly deploys emergent strategies to spread ideas, recruit members, expand its networks, and build "the dictatorship they seek to impose on broader society." Could you

expand on this? What has your study of emergent strategies contributed to your understanding of the resurgent Right? What are the implications of this understanding for organizing to fight right-wing movements?

AJR: Much of our focus with respect to the rise of the Right, authoritarianism, and fascism has been on the seizure of courts, elected office (including by right-wing sheriffs, as PRA has extensively documented!), and legislatures. To be sure, we need to fight in those spaces, but we haven't focused as much as we need to on what made this possible: long-term, decentralized, adaptive organizing by the Right focused on relationships, communities, and networks. What's happening in the courts and halls of government is just the tip of the iceberg. What we don't see as clearly, and are now crashing into, is the much larger, hidden bottom of that iceberg: the deep relationships, information systems, and decentralized networks the Right has built over decades through organizing. These are critical sites of struggle because they shape what happens at the level of institutions and systems of power.

through the portal of the present, and our relationships, communities, and networks are the battlefield.

The importance of such critical connections is clear in resistance to Israel's genocidal violence against Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, which is being enacted by the right-wing Likud party with the U.S., European, Australian, and Indian governments' support. Yes, people are fighting for federal and local ceasefire resolutions, and for legislative and executive action to stop the billions the U.S. has been sending unconditionally to Israel's military. Those are critical fights. But equally critical are the conversations people are having with family members, friends, and comrades, in their synagogues, churches, and faith communities, that are rooted in relationships and shared values. Small groups are practicing and inviting others into resistance to genocide by becoming affinity groups that participate in larger actions; fasting together; disrupting business as usual; answering calls for general strikes and boycott, divest, and sanctions; mounting and supporting mutual aid and solidarity projects with Palestinians in Gaza and beyond; and finding every way to resist

worked actions targeting whatever made the apartheid state possible, whether it was a university, employer, manufacturer, consumer product, business, government—have shown, we can eventually shift systems of power in this way.

By engaging in decentralized, network-based resistance, we grow our relationships, trust, and capacity to care for each other along with our impact. In the process, we build our analysis and collective courage to resist U.S. and global fascism as it grows through the collaboration between right-wing governments hell-bent on imposing authoritarian and genocidal futures on us. We need to show up in our relationships and communities in ways that disrupt the Right's power, invite people into our vision, and are decentralized and adaptive but shaped by a shared intention and practice of collective liberation. Because as I've learned over decades of organizing, and in conversations with organizers that have informed this book, this is the only way we are going to survive.

“By engaging in decentralized, network-based resistance, we grow our relationships, trust, and capacity to care for each other along with our impact.”

Though I'm not an expert on fighting fascism and the resurgent Right, I have learned from so many people about how the Right has organized itself to this moment, and I look to them for guidance and analysis—groups like PRA, and organizers like Kelly Hayes, Shane Burley, Ejeris Dixon, Imara Jones, Ash-Lee Henderson, Suzanne Pharr, Trishala Deb, and Kay Whitlock, among others. What they have taught me, and what abolitionist organizers and people looking to emergent strategies know, is that we need to show up at the level of relationships—because that is what the Right is and has been doing to build power. We are in a battle to push contesting visions of the future

every day. They're networking their relationships and actions together into massive global resistance in support of a #FreePalestine, a permanent ceasefire, ending the occupation, and halting Western nations' financing of the right-wing, Zionist, Israeli settler-colonial regime. In these ways, in the face of the failure of governments, courts, and the UN to act effectively to stop ongoing genocide, we are having an impact against seemingly immovable systems of violence—even if it's far too little and far too slow given the scale and pace of the violence. And as previous movements like the global anti-apartheid movement—which also operated through decentralized, net-

While most of the book is focused on the prefigurative politics of visionary organizing toward abolitionist horizons, a recurrent thread in your conversations with organizers is about the backlash they're facing from growing right-wing White supremacist and fascist movements. As organizers grapple with this, what are the challenges of practicing a commitment to abolitionist principles when organizers face threats from the state and White supremacist violence? What lessons can be drawn from movement history and the building of abolitionist futures today to help organizers navigate this violence and respond to it?

As I spoke with people in the process of writing this book, these questions consistently came up. Yes, they'd say, this all sounds great, but decentralized networks can be disrupted, communities of practice can be crushed, relationships can be poisoned, whole communities can be destroyed and subjected to unspeakable state violence, as we are currently witnessing in Palestine. What do emergent strate-

gies have to offer when it comes to directly contending for power against people who are bent on destroying us and the people we love? I don't know that we necessarily came up with satisfactory answers.

In many ways, ideas about emergent strategies and prefigurative organizing have emerged in the context of organized abandonment—whether in Detroit or in the Global South—in places where the state or other significant external forces were largely absent. What happens when our decentralized communities and net-

“We can start small, but we don't stay small.”

works of resistance are perceived as a threat by the state or the Right? While decentralization and adaptation offer some protection in numbers, nimbleness of tactics, and the absence of a singular leader or infrastructure that can be eliminated—as we've seen with leaderful movements like the struggle to #Stop-CopCity—we need to continue to find ways to strengthen, inoculate, and build power to protect our communities and networks against state and right-wing violence and shift the systems of power that enable it.

Ultimately, we kept coming back to what makes those things possible: the quality of our relationships, our connections, and the strength of our shared values, politics, and practices toward the world we want to see. I was grateful to dive into this with many visionary organizers. As an organizer with roots in resisting authoritarianism in the Philippines, Kalayo Pestaño discussed the importance of affinity groups—smaller groups within mass movements united around shared goals, whose members connect and take care of each other, making courageous and effective resistance possible in the face of violent state repression. Kelly Hayes and Adaku Utah each talked with me about how abortion funds and doulas are forming communities of practice that make continued access to abortion possible amid increasing criminalization. Walidah Imarisha and I talked about how incarcerated people

organize to minimize harm and resist state efforts to quash them.

Recently, at an Interrupting Criminalization event, Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, co-executive director of the Highlander Center for Research and Education, spoke of turning to relationships they had built for decades across the South² following a 2019 White supremacist arson attack on their office building. I experienced those relationships firsthand at a group retreat shortly after the attack. Because of our relationship with the Center, we chose to host the retreat there to support it, and as we traveled there from across the country, we relied on relationships they had built to ensure safe passage for Black trans organizers.

Again, it's not a wholly satisfactory answer, especially in this moment of unspeakable, genocidal violence that is destroying entire infrastructures, families, communities, networks, peoples. But it's the one we have—and it's the one we've seen make liberation movements possible under similar historic conditions.

With its expansive thinking about abolition and storytelling rooted in organizing, *Practicing New Worlds* yields insights that offer infinite possibilities for how we approach complex social change. Some readers will reach the end of the book feeling inspired by its multiple ways forward and openness to “what lies beyond,” while others may still feel overwhelmed by what emergent strategies offer in this world's conditions of intensifying violence. What would you say to these readers about how and where they can start to practice new ways of being, relating, and organizing?

Practicing New Worlds is an effort to illuminate how emergent strategies help bring abolition into the realm of the actionable. If you can do one thing that manifests the world you want to see, find at least one other person to do it with, and practice it daily, in coordination and connection with others, you are shaping abolitionist futures. If you

learn from your mistakes, adapt, iterate, and proliferate through translocal and transnational networks shaped by shared politics and intentions, you can shift power and culture. If we each do this, we can make a collective impact and transform complex systems—like human societies and ecosystems—toward the world we want and need to build.

We can start small, but we don't stay small.

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Kitana joins PRA as Editor of The Public Eye with nearly two decades of experience that spans editorial, communications, and qualitative research. As an editor, she partners with writers to translate their work into strategic insights that will inform social justice organizing and shift public narratives—most recently, as a Health Not Prisons Collective editorial consultant and as Nonprofit Quarterly's Race + Power editor.

A former college educator, Kitana earned a Ph.D. in socio-cultural anthropology from Columbia University for her scholarship on diasporic politics in Sri Lanka's ethnonationalist civil war. Her writing has appeared in Prism, CNN Opinion, the New York Times, and elsewhere.

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23 For more on dual power strategies, please see Andrea J. Ritchie and Mariame Kaba, *No More Police*; Andrea J. Ritchie, "Abolition and the State: A Discussion Tool," *Interrupting Criminalization* (New York: Interrupting Criminalization, 2022), <https://www.interruptingcriminalization.com/abolition-and-the-state>; Mijente, *Building Power Sin, Contra, y Desde el Estado*, video, April 12, 2022, <https://mijente.net/2022/04/building-power-sin-contra-y-desde-el-estado>, and Paula X. Rojas, "Are the Cops in our Heads and Hearts?," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 13, no. 2 (Spring 2016), <https://sfonline.barnard.edu/paula-rojas-are-the-cops-in-our-heads-and-hearts>, reprinted from *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

24 Lyons, "Three-Way Fight Politics and the US Far Right."

25 Lyons, "Three-Way Fight Politics and the US Far Right."

26 Suzanne Pharr, *Transformation: Toward a People's Democracy* (Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech Publishing, 2021), 13.

27 Emmi Bevensee and Frank Miroslav call this process "stigmergy," a mechanism of indirect coordination in which an action by one individual "stimulates the performance of a succeeding action by the same or a different agent." This phenomenon could describe, for instance, copycat mass shootings or attacks on spaces

where LGBTQ people are gathered. Emmi Bevensee and Frank Miroslav, "It Takes a Network to Defeat a Network: (Anti)Fascism and the Future of Complex Warfare."

28 Pharr, *Transformation*, 19, 368.

29 Shane Burley, "Building Communities for a Fascist-Free Future," in *No Pasarán! Antifascist Dispatches from a World in Crisis*, ed. Shane Burley (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2022).

Q&A: Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies

1 Ethan Fauré, "101: Far-Right Sheriffs," *Political Research Associates*, July 29, 2022, <https://politicalresearch.org/2022/07/29/101-far-right-sheriffs>; *Political Research Associates*, "Mapping Far-Right and Anti-Immigrant Movement Alignment with County Sheriffs," *Political Research Associates*, September 14, 2020, <https://politicalresearch.org/2020/09/14/mapping-far-right-and-anti-immigrant-movement-alignment-county-sheriffs>; Cloee Cooper, "How a Right-Wing Network Mobilized Sheriffs' Departments," *Political Research Associates*, June 10, 2019, <https://politicalresearch.org/2019/06/10/how-a-right-wing-network-mobilized-sheriffs-departments>.

2 Conversation during a private event. Woodard Henderson and other organizers make a parallel point about building relationships in Megan Krausch, "Grassroots Organizing in Red States Is at the Heart of Abolitionist Struggle," *Truthout*, September 5, 2023, <https://truthout.org/articles/grassroots-organizing-in-red-states-is-at-the-heart-of-abolitionist-struggle/>.

The Art of Activism: An Interview with Cover Artist Zoe Newton



Copyright: Zoe Newton

Can you explain the concept of this artwork to us?

This issue of *The Public Eye* tells us about the reality of where we are as a country right now, and also how we can fight against growing authoritarian forces. For the cover, I wanted to focus more on the latter. The composition shows community members together to mend a quilt of the U.S. The quilt is unfinished; some states are missing or disconnected, while others are loosely stitched together. This emphasis on reimagining and rebuilding is echoed in my color and design choices, from the bright colors to the crooked lines.

What role do you see art playing in resistance movements?

I think art has always played a crucial role—it's a tool of communication that is incredibly fluid and accessible. It can move past censorship and show up in the cracks of our daily lives.

Where do you draw inspiration from?

I draw a lot of inspiration from other artists and designers who work in cultural spaces. It's important in my practice to decenter eurocentric standards of art and design. Many of the creatives that I look to for inspiration are located in West Africa and South America, and their work centers on their community's visual culture. I also collect photos of things I find interesting in daily life and on my travels that speak to my soul.

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