

# Catalyst

VOL

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Biden's Economic  
Constraints

**Suzy Lee**  
Immigration Strategy  
in the Biden Era

**Matt Huber**  
Still No Shortcuts  
for Climate Change

**Chris Maisano**  
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**Jared Abbott**  
Have Democrats  
Learned Anything?

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The election of Joe Biden is a pivotal event in American politics, and for the Left in particular. First and foremost, it means that one of the most aggressively cancerous people to ever occupy the White House has been ousted.

It is clear that even while Donald Trump is no longer president and has much of the American corporate class lined up against him, he remains the most powerful figure within the Republican Party, which is descending into a deep crisis. The Democrats, for their part, are showing signs of coming to life for the first time in decades. Even while Biden has been faithful to the neoliberal creed for most of his career, his first weeks in office are already tilting more to the left than any president since Jimmy Carter — certainly more than ever witnessed in Barack Obama’s tenure. As we go to press, his nearly \$2 trillion proposed relief package has been a surprise to most analysts as well as to us. It contains a more aggressive ecological agenda than offered by any recent president; a \$15 per hour minimum wage; considerable relief for local governments, and other measures that, while falling short of a Bernie Sanders-style New Deal, nevertheless mark an entirely new direction in policy.

This leftward tilt is undoubtedly due to the changed political environment since 2016. There is, of course, the fact of an economic and social crisis, which calls for bold and extensive action. But it is important to recall that Obama also came into office during a crisis — and proceeded to underwhelm on every level. What is truly distinctive about this moment is not the

fact of the crisis, but the change in political balance within and without the Democratic Party. Biden faces a party with a small but vocal left flank, an electorate that is more restive than we have seen in years, and, in consequence, a dramatic shift in public opinion, which he finds impossible to ignore. Policy proposals that were dismissed as fringe five years ago are very much in the mainstream today. The greater opening for the Left has not gone unnoticed among more conservative Democrats. Just as Biden has had to concede to political pressure, so his wing of the party has moved aggressively to quash it. There are already warnings being issued about the consequences if the “far left” — i.e., the Sanders wing — is able to define the party. Biden himself has played a very careful game of adopting some of its policies even while he moves decisively to block its members from key positions in his administration.

What is clear is that the political situation is more fluid today than in decades. This calls for a careful analysis of the conjuncture — of the opportunities that it offers to the Left and the limits that still constrain us. Toward this, we devote the entire issue of *Catalyst* to the Biden ascendancy. Addressing the critical problem of the economy, David Kotz shows that the COVID-19 crisis only exacerbated a long-term problem of declining investment and anemic growth. This makes it all the more important to launch an ambitious public investment program as a foundation for equitable growth. Kotz powerfully argues that the warnings from deficit hawks in both parties are unfounded, and that the greater danger is not of excessive spending but of it being insufficient. Of course, for Biden to move aggressively on a progressive economic agenda will most likely require political pressure from his constituency, labor being the most important. But Chris Maisano shows that, even while there are signs of a revival in working-class mobilization, the labor movement is still exceedingly weak, and its left

flank is only just holding on. Suzy Lee observes that, even in this weakened state, labor can still expect to benefit from Biden on the immigration front, but Biden's horizon seems limited to returning to the Obama-era status quo, which was, on most any measure, deeply hostile to immigrants.

Labor's organizational weakness does not portend well for meaningful progress on the ecological front, and Matt Huber suggests that even the progressives in the Democratic Party are largely wedded to the nonprofits and think tanks rather than labor unions, as sources of pressure. He warns that this amounts to a kind of magical thinking, in which politicians will take the steps essential to reverse ecological catastrophe, but through moral suasion rather than through political mobilization. On the foreign policy front, Jason Brownlee places Biden in a longer sweep, from George W. Bush through Trump. Brownlee shows that Biden seems committed to returning to Obama's status quo ante with regard to American geopolitics. But that status quo is nothing to celebrate — indeed, on several fronts, it was bloodier and more aggressive than Trump's tenure. Of all the dimensions on which we examine Biden, Brownlee persuasively argues that foreign policy is likely to be the biggest failure from a progressive standpoint, and the area where the Left will face the greatest challenges.

Finally, Jared Abbott reviews Seth Masket's book on the lessons that the Democratic Party drew from its defeat in 2016, *Learning From Loss: The Democrats, 2016–2020*. Abbott observes that Masket offers a useful window into the party's reorientation in the wake of Trump's victory. The book shows that, in most every way, Democrats failed to appreciate the real reasons for their defeat, so that they are likely to persevere in their courting of the suburbs and elites within minority populations. As he dolefully concludes, this will only deepen the alienation of working people from the party, further blocking the chances for left resurgence within it.

The next four years will undoubtedly be pivotal for both the mainstream parties, and especially so for the Left. The fluidity in social and political alignments is of an order that we have not seen in decades. In upcoming issues, *Catalyst* will continue to develop the analysis of this moment in American politics, with essays on the Republican Party, racial formation, the evolving American role in the Middle East, and changes in working-class occupational structure. This, with our continuing focus on conceptual and theoretical debates crucial for socialist revival. ☞



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The neoliberal form of capitalism is no longer viable, in the United States and elsewhere. One possible direction of change is toward green social democracy, while another is a descent into authoritarian nationalism. This article considers the economic factors and class forces that will affect the outcome in the approaching years, along with the lessons for the Left.

# Biden's Economic Constraints

David Kotz

What is the likelihood that the incoming Joe Biden administration can be pushed to pursue a progressive policy agenda? An assessment of the prevailing economic conditions in the United States reveals both opportunities and obstacles that the Left will face in its efforts to move policy toward the widely popular agenda of the Bernie Sanders campaign. This article argues that the current condition of US capitalism makes a major change in direction toward progressive policies possible. At the same time, the consequence of a failure to move US policy away from decades of neoliberalism would likely be an even more retrograde future.

Understanding the current economic conditions and the possibilities they generate requires taking account of the interplay of

continuity and change in capitalism over time. Capitalism has taken a series of discrete institutional forms, or “regimes,” over time. The monopoly stage of capitalism arose around 1900, superseding the previous small-business competitive capitalism. After World War II, regulated (or social democratic) capitalism emerged and lasted until the 1970s. Then, around 1980, the contemporary neoliberal form of capitalism arose.<sup>1</sup> In each period, the system remained capitalist but, at a more concrete level, many of the institutions, as well as the dominant ideas, changed from one regime to another.

The institutions and dominant ideas of each previous form of capitalism promoted capital accumulation and economic expansion for several decades, but eventually the contradictions of each form gave rise to a structural crisis in which the existing regime no longer promoted normal accumulation. Such structural crises have brought some combination of prolonged economic stagnation, a falling rate of profit, and heightened economic instability. History suggests that a structural crisis continues until a new institutional form of capitalism emerges that again promotes normal capital accumulation. Hence, each institutional form can be called a social structure of accumulation (SSA).<sup>2</sup>

During the period in which a regime of capitalism is working “effectively,” it is difficult to change the policy trajectory in a way

---

1 Some analysts refer to the current phase of capitalism as “globalized” or “financialized” capitalism. In my view, while increased global economic integration as well as an expanded role for financial institutions have been important aspects of the current form of capitalism, the term “neoliberalism” better captures the underlying principles of contemporary capitalism. See David M. Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015): chapter 2.

2 There are several related theories of this process of successive regimes of capitalism, including social structure of accumulation theory and regulation theory. See David M. Kotz, Terrence McDonough, and Michael Reich (eds.), *Social Structures of Accumulation: The Political Economy of Growth and Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation* (London: Verso, 1979); and David M. Kotz, “A Comparative Analysis of the Theory of Regulation and the Social Structure of Accumulation Theory,” *Science & Society* 54, no. 1 (1990): 5–28.

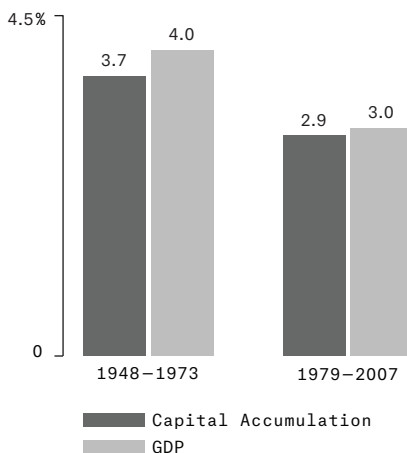
that is inconsistent with the dominant institutions and ideas. For example, once post-World War II regulated capitalism was consolidated in the late 1940s, an alternation of political party control of the administration had little impact on the overall policy direction. In the neoliberal era, the Democratic US presidency of Bill Clinton and Labour Party rule under Tony Blair in the UK extended and deepened neoliberalism, despite promises to the contrary during their respective election campaigns.

Once an institutional form of capitalism enters its crisis phase, however, a change in direction makes its way onto the agenda. The financial crisis and Great Recession of 2008 marked the beginning of the structural crisis phase of neoliberal capitalism. This has important implications for assessing the possibility of moving toward a progressive policy agenda in 2021. In such a structural crisis period, competing proposals for major change suddenly move from the political fringes into the mainstream, as happened in the 1930s and the 1970s. As we have seen in recent years, authoritarian nationalism, which had been marginalized in the developed capitalist countries after World War II, experienced a remarkable rise from the dead in many places, including in the United States with the election of Donald Trump as president on an authoritarian nationalist appeal. At the same time, Senator Bernie Sanders, running as a self-proclaimed democratic socialist, came close to winning the Democratic primary for president in 2016 and in 2020 was a leading candidate for president again.

This article first examines economic developments since 1980 and their consequences that have brought us to the current conjuncture, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Next we will consider the implications for the ability of the Left to effectively promote a progressive shift in the policy direction in the United States in 2021, as well as the dangers that loom if the Left fails in that effort.

**Figure 1.** Annual Rate of Capital Accumulation and GDP Growth Rate over Two Periods

Source: US Bureau of Economic Analysis, National Income and Product Accounts, Tables



## NEOLIBERALISM

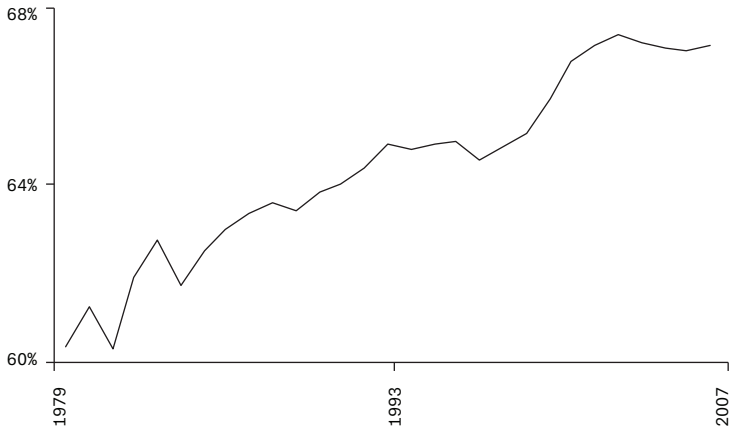
The advocates of neoliberal transformation of US capitalism promised that releasing private business from the shackles of government regulation, high taxes, and trade union rules would bring an era of growing investment driving rapid economic growth. Tax cuts for corporations and the rich would “trickle down” by creating jobs and boosting worker pay. Thus, a rising tide would lift all boats. The actual results tell a different story.

Neoliberal transformation did overcome the crisis of the 1970s. For some twenty-five years after 1980, the US economy had long economic expansions — during 1982-90, 1991-2000, and 2001-07 — interspersed with relatively mild and brief recessions through 2007. Inflation was subdued throughout that period and remains so today. However, capital accumulation and GDP growth were only moderate, less vigorous than in the preceding period of regulated capitalism when government and unions had supposedly been strangling the economy, as figure 1 shows.<sup>3</sup> The long

3 Postwar regulated capitalism was working effectively from 1948 to 1973, while the effective period of neoliberal capitalism was 1979-2007 (Kotz, *Rise and Fall*,

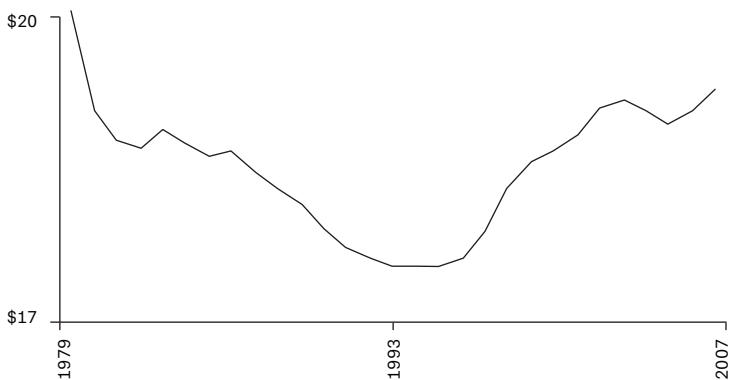


**Figure 2.** Consumer Expenditure as a Percentage of GDP



Source: US Bureau of Economic Analysis, National Income and Product Accounts, Table 1.1.5.

**Figure 3.** Average Hourly Earnings in 2012 Dollars, 1979 – 2007



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (Note: For production or nonsupervisory workers.) Because the BLS revised the wage series in the late 1980s, there is not a single consistent wage series dating back to 1948. For the overlapping years, the two series move similarly, but the values differ by about 3 percent.

expansions through 2007 were sustained by consumer spending that rose faster than GDP, as figure 2 shows.<sup>4</sup> The leading role of consumer spending in expansions was possible despite declining real wages (see figure 3), as a series of big asset bubbles in corporate stocks and real estate enabled households to borrow to pay their bills rather than fully relying on their inadequate after-tax disposable income. Newly deregulated financial institutions found ways to lend even to low-income households. This process drove twenty-five years of modest economic expansion.

The quarter century following 1980 saw a tide that, far from raising all boats, left working people marooned in the shallows. The neoliberal era brought declining real wages, while CEO pay skyrocketed. Figure 3 above showed that the hourly wage in 2012 dollars was lower twenty-eight years later, on the eve of the 2008 financial crisis, than it had been at the start of the neoliberal era. By comparison, during the period of postwar regulated capitalism, the hourly wage rose steadily from 1948 to 1973, an increase of 75 percent over the period, as figure 4 shows. Figure 5 demonstrates that the heyday of regulated capitalism gave rise to mildly equalizing growth in family income through 1973, but after 1979, growth became sharply disequalizing. The share of income going to the very rich rose steadily through the eve of the financial crisis of 2008, reaching a level approximating that of the eve of the Great Depression (see figure 6). Jobs with good health care benefits, good retirement benefits, and long-term job security became scarce.

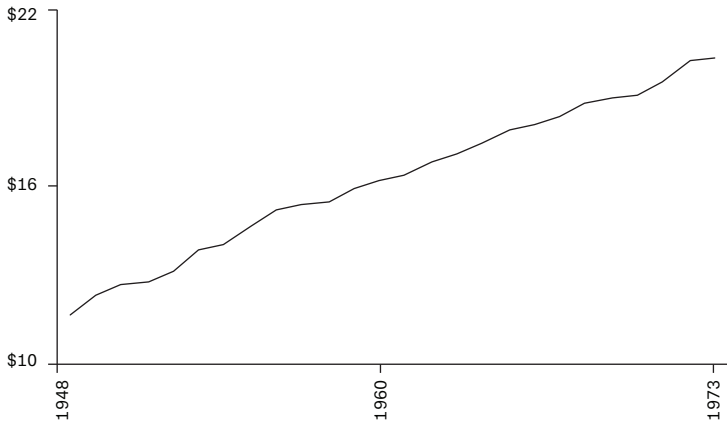
Cutbacks in state funding for public colleges and universities shifted a growing share of the cost onto students and their families.

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6–7). Capital accumulation, measured by the ratio of annual net investment to the value of the capital stock, is one measure of investment performance. Other measures of investment, such as net private investment relative to net domestic product, also show inferior performance in the neoliberal era.

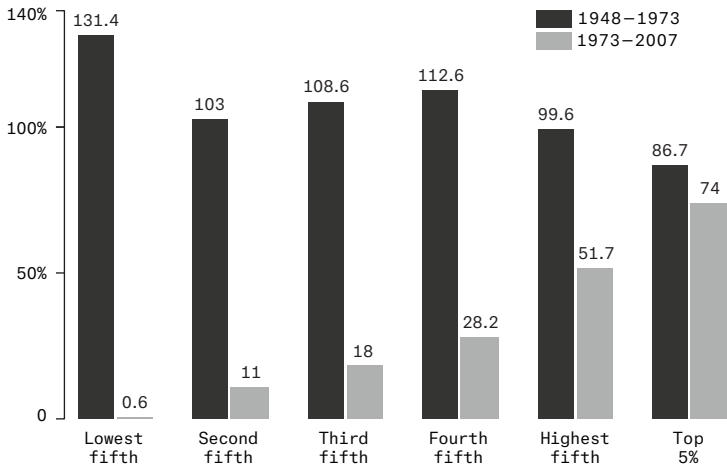
4 After 1979, consumer spending also rose faster than after-tax household income.

**Figure 4.** Average Hourly Earnings in 2012 Dollars, 1948 – 73



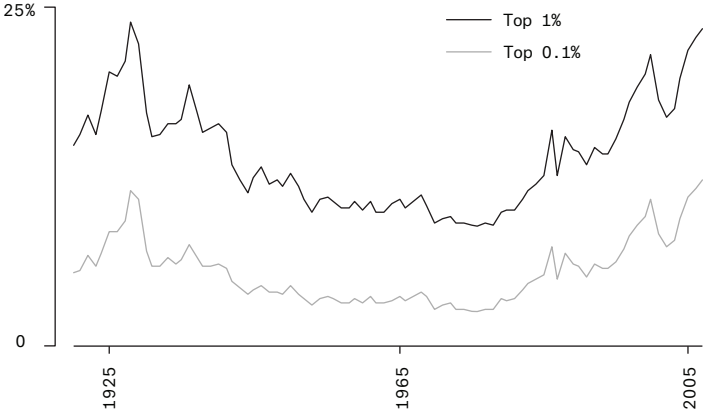
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics (Note: For production or nonsupervisory workers.)

**Figure 5.** Percentage Increase in the Average Real Family Income of Quintiles and the Top 5 Percent



Source: US Bureau of the Census, 2013, Table F-3.

**Figure 6.** Income Shares of the Richest 1% and 0.1% as a Percentage of Total Income



Source: Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, "Income Inequality in the United States, 1913-1998," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118, no. 1 (2003): 1-39.

Outstanding student debt rose to \$1.7 trillion in September 2020, 3.5 times greater than in March 2006 when the Federal Reserve first began reporting that figure. Average student debt for four-year college graduates reached \$42,200 in 2012.<sup>5</sup> As scientists began to warn of the dangers of global warming, the neoliberal resistance to environmental regulation contributed to a sluggish response. African Americans and other people of color have been particularly affected by the retrograde trends of the neoliberal era. Deindustrialization and cutbacks in public employment both disproportionately affected African American workers, while an era of mass incarceration of black people began.

The above cited trends gave rise to growing anger at the status quo among working-class people, young people, and people of

5 US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008/12 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B:08/12); and federal-reserve.gov/.

color. However, as long as neoliberal capitalism was effectively promoting economic expansion, it was difficult to confront the underlying causes.

## STRUCTURAL CRISIS

The financial crisis and Great Recession of 2008 marked the end of the period when the neoliberal form of capitalism promoted normal economic expansion. Figure 7 shows the annual growth rate of GDP during recoveries from recessions in the United States since the late 1940s. Normally, such recoveries are relatively rapid, given the presence of ample available labor and unused productive capacity, typically with GDP growth of 4 percent per year or higher. However, the recovery after 2009 stands out, with an annual growth rate of only 2.3 percent. Despite the decade-long expansion following the financial crisis, the GDP growth rate from the pre-crisis peak in 2007 through the peak in 2019 was only 1.7 percent per year. Such data clearly indicate a condition of prolonged stagnation.<sup>6</sup> Neoliberal institutions are no longer effectively promoting accumulation. The mechanism driving debt-fueled consumer spending, which had made economic expansion possible in the face of wage suppression, ceased to operate after 2008.<sup>7</sup>

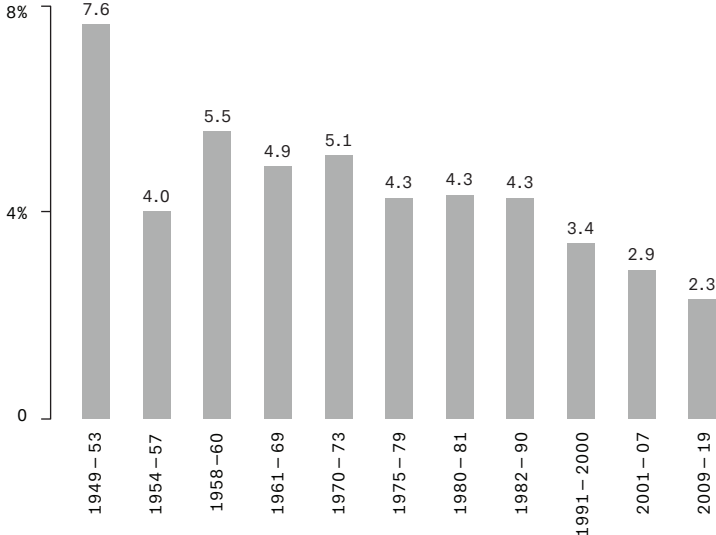
The dominant economic ideas of the neoliberal era centered around the claims that the economy needs no assistance from

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6 The view that the recent period has been one of economic stagnation in the United States has attracted significant support from mainstream economists. See Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Lawrence H. Summers, "U.S. Economic Prospects: Secular Stagnation, Hysteresis, and the Zero Lower Bound," *Business Economics* 49, no. 2 (2014): 65–73. While there is debate about the causes of the stagnation, there is wide agreement that it has indeed taken hold in the United States.

7 For a full explanation of the causes of the current structural crisis and the continuing stagnation, see Kotz, *Rise and Fall*; and David M. Kotz and Deepankar Basu, "Stagnation and Institutional Structures," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 51, no. 1 (2019): 5–30.

**Figure 7.** Annual Growth Rate of GDP during Recoveries from Recessions



Source: US Bureau of Economic Analysis, National Income and Product Accounts, Table 1.1.6.

the government and that state interventions are not only unnecessary but only serve to worsen economic outcomes. The severity of the financial and economic collapse in 2008 led officials and even most mainstream economists to suddenly abandon their cherished beliefs, opting for bank bailouts, extreme monetary expansion, and a large fiscal stimulus, with no concern for the effect on the government deficit. It seemed to be a “Keynesian moment” of recognition that government has a major role to play in the economy, particularly when a crisis strikes.

The Keynesian turn was indeed a “moment” — by 2010, the old economic religion returned in the guise of austerity policy. Once the bankers had been saved and the collapse of GDP had been arrested, neoliberal ideas flooded back. Not just Republican

congressmembers but a wide array of pundits warned about impending disaster due to large government deficits and growing public debt, and the major mass media served as a chorus to drive home the warnings. Congress imposed a reversal of fiscal policy in 2010, from stimulus to mainly contractionary policy, which further contributed to the stagnation afflicting the economy since 2008. This reversal of policy reflected the staying power of an SSA, which cannot be superseded quickly when a structural crisis strikes. The transition to a new SSA requires a more or less extended struggle among various groups and classes.

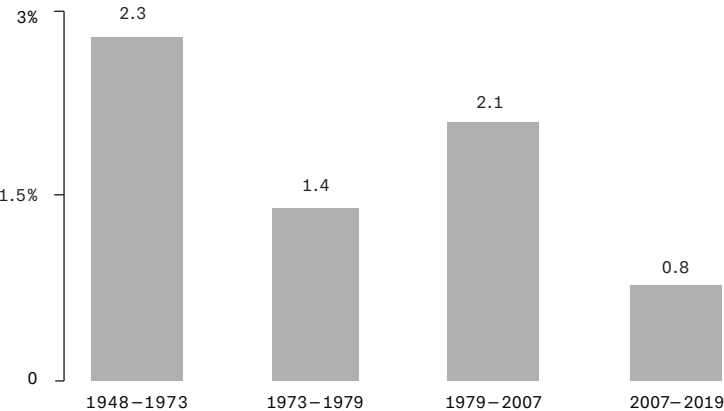
However, the fundamental reason for the prolonged stagnation is the inability of the neoliberal form of capitalism to promote normal accumulation any longer. The clearest manifestation of this is the remarkable disjuncture since 2009 between a high rate of profit and sluggish capital accumulation. Since 2009, the rate of profit has been higher than in any of the previous four expansions since 1980, while the rate of capital accumulation has been the lowest of any of the four expansions.<sup>8</sup> Some Keynesian economists have argued that a large fiscal stimulus along with continuing monetary expansion would restore normal economic growth, but an SSA analysis suggests that, while such policies would be helpful, they would have to be part of a larger institutional restructuring of US capitalism in order to resolve the stagnation crisis.

Sluggish corporate investment starting in 2008 has brought not only stagnation but also a decline in a key underlying driver of economic prosperity: growth in labor productivity (output per hour). Figure 8 shows the rate of labor productivity growth during the two periods when an SSA was working effectively and the two structural crisis periods since World War II. During each structural

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8 David M. Kotz, "The Rate of Profit, Aggregate Demand, and the Long Economic Expansion in the United States since 2009," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 51, no. 4 (2019): Table 4, 531.

**Figure 8.** Annual Growth Rate in Labor Productivity



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

crisis, the productivity growth rate slowed down, and the slowdown has been even sharper since 2007. Since 2007, capitalists have largely failed to carry out their “historical mission” of using their profits to invest in superior methods that raise the productivity of human labor. With slow productivity growth, the only means of rapid profit growth is driving down the wages and benefits of workers and/or further reducing corporate taxation.

Trump bragged about the performance of the stock market during his presidency. However, rising stock prices have been driven not by strong economic performance but by a wave of corporate stock buybacks that boost stock prices together with big dividend payouts to shareholders. Rising corporate profits have increasingly gone not to finance productive investment, but to enrich corporate executives as well as other wealthy shareholders.

The sole strong point of economic performance since 2009 was the eventual fall in the official unemployment rate to 3.5 percent at the end of 2019. Trump claimed credit for this, but it resulted from a continuation of the sluggish 2.3 percent per year expansion



that began under Barack Obama. Trump pushed a tax cut through Congress in 2017, which provided a modest fiscal stimulus that brought a temporary one-year bump upward to 3 percent GDP growth in 2018, before falling to 2.3 percent in 2019. The tax cut mainly benefited the rich and large corporations, which led to more corporate stock buybacks rather than a boost in investment. The brief expansionary effect came from a temporary tax cut for households who then increased their consumer spending.

The financial and economic crisis of 2008, and the government's response to it, started a process of radicalization in some parts of the US population. The crisis exposed the fallacies of neoliberal economics. It turned out that the economy was not eternally stable and prosperous as long as the government and trade unions were held at bay. Instead, it is highly unstable and was self-destructing in plain sight. Only a big government intervention in 2008–09 prevented a Great Depression–size economic catastrophe. At the same time, working people were outraged to see the government bail out the bankers, whose highly risky yet highly profitable ventures had brought the economy to the edge of ruin, while little was done for ordinary homeowners as millions faced foreclosure. The stage was set for an uprising.

Many disaffected working people and young people initially placed their hopes in Barack Obama, whose election as president seemed to promise a major change. However, during his eight years in the White House, the retrograde trends affecting wages and job security continued, student debt continued to climb, and global climate change remained on a trajectory to destroy the future. As a candidate, Trump seemed to promise a turn away from neoliberalism, promising a big infrastructure investment program, protection of American industry and American jobs, and even safeguarding social security and Medicare. A consistent authoritarian nationalist program might have begun to overcome the stagnation, as will be

argued below. However, upon taking office, Trump faced a Republican-led Senate made up largely of neoliberals as well as other obstacles to imposing his full program. The Trump administration ended up combining nationalist trade and immigration policies with an intensified neoliberalism on domestic policy, including deregulation, privatization, and regressive tax cuts. This economically incoherent regime has been unable to overcome the stagnation.<sup>9</sup>

## PANDEMIC STRIKES

The final important development affecting the policy possibilities in 2021 was the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, which struck sharply in the United States beginning in March 2020. The pandemic is having complex effects on the economy and society that are relevant for the possibility of progressive policy change in 2021.

The long economic expansion since 2009 was bound to end in recession at some point, but it was the pandemic that abruptly brought it to an end. The peak of the post-2009 expansion was reached in the last quarter of 2019.<sup>10</sup> By the second quarter of 2020, GDP had fallen from its previous high by 10.1 percent — by far the sharpest decline in GDP since 1946. While a recovery began in the third quarter of 2020, GDP remained 3.5 percent below the previous peak, which would rank it as the second-largest GDP decline since the late 1940s, exceeded only by the 4.7 percent decline in the Great Recession of 2008–09. Early indicators as of this writing suggest that the recovery slowed in the final quarter of 2020.

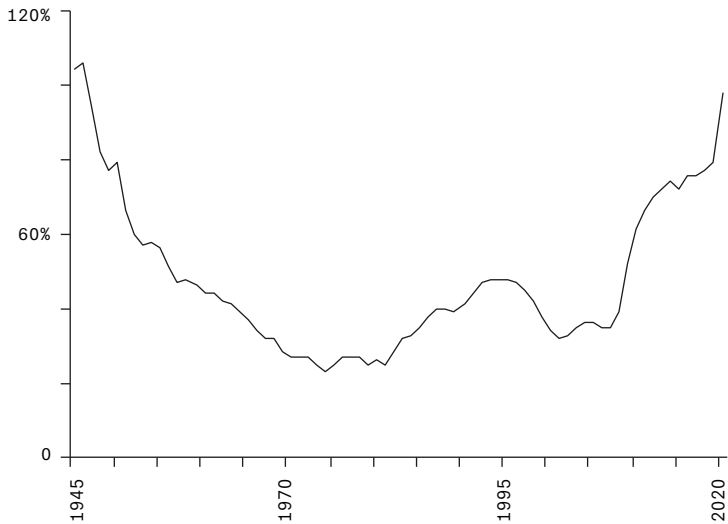
The unemployment rate shot up to 14.7 percent in April 2020, as 21.8 million jobs were lost in one month, then steadily declined to the still-high rate of 6.9 percent in October. The following month,

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9 See David M. Kotz, “The Specter of Right-Wing Nationalism,” *Jacobin*, May 30, 2017.

10 February 2020 was the monthly date of the business cycle peak, but a rapid decline in March pulled the first-quarter 2020 GDP below that of the last quarter of 2019.

**Figure 9.** Public Debt as a Percentage of GDP, 1945 – 2020



Source: Congressional Budget Office, “An Update to the Budget Outlook: 2020 to 2030,” September 2020.

job market improvement stalled, when the unemployment rate fell by only two-tenths of a percentage point to 6.7 percent. Even that slight improvement was due only to the departure of workers from the labor force, while total employment actually fell. As of November, the US economy had lost 7.8 million jobs since the start of the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> Presumably, the severe economic collapse, combined with the Trump administration’s hands-off response to COVID-19 as it infected millions of Americans and killed a quarter of a million of them, contributed to Biden’s election victory.

The huge federal bailout bill of March 2020 was financed by government borrowing. The federal deficit in fiscal year 2020,

<sup>11</sup> Employment data are from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (bls.gov).

which ended on September 30, reached 14.9 percent of GDP, the highest rate since the end of World War II. Outstanding public debt rose to 98 percent of GDP in 2020, close to the high of 106 percent of GDP after World War II, as figure 9 shows.<sup>12</sup>

The sharp economic downturn that began in March 2020 is not of the type that typically afflicts capitalist economies. A capitalist economy periodically generates recessions — that is, reductions in output and employment lasting from six months to a few years — that are rooted in the fundamental features of capitalism. The recession that began in March 2020 is different.

While the underlying cause of a typical recession can be either a declining profit rate or overproduction relative to demand, the downturn begins when aggregate (total) demand falls short of actual output in the private sector, leading to cutbacks in production and layoffs of workers. However, the current pandemic recession began with what economists call the “supply side” rather than a shortfall of aggregate demand. As COVID-19 spread, people stopped going to work, and companies had to close or sharply cut back production due to government-imposed restrictions and shortages of workers and supplies. This drove the remarkably rapid decline in output and employment. However, as workers lost all or part of their income, and companies cut orders of supplies needed for production, aggregate demand also began a precipitous collapse. Pandemic capitalism had managed to produce a more or less “balanced” contraction, with supply-side and demand-side factors acting in unison.

Facing this unprecedented crisis, a panicked Congress quickly passed the CARES Act, a truly massive \$2.2 trillion bailout bill that was signed by President Trump on March 27.<sup>13</sup> It provided

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12 Congressional Budget Office, “Options for Reducing the Deficit: 2021 to 2030,” December 2020; and Congressional Budget Office, “An Update to the Budget Outlook: 2020 to 2030,” September 2020.

13 The official name of the bill was the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act.

onetime cash grants to individuals and families, expanded and extended unemployment benefits, loans to small businesses, aid for large corporations, and subsidies for state and local governments. Remarkably, the Republican-dominated Senate passed a bill that gave \$600 per week in special unemployment benefits, which exceeded the previous take-home pay of many newly unemployed low-wage workers. The bill greatly reduced the decline in total demand in the economy and contributed to the sharp rebound in the summer of 2020. It also saved millions of people from being plunged into poverty and homelessness. Some measures of the poverty rate actually declined in the following months. However, administrative problems caused a significant share of the newly unemployed to receive the aid only after a long delay, while many eligible unemployed workers never received their benefits. The support ended gradually over the course of 2020.

The effect of this atypical economic crisis on working people has been uneven. Those who were able to begin working from home — mainly high-income workers — have been largely unscathed financially. Some portions of the manual labor force have continued to work full time, in agriculture, manufacturing, public utilities, and parts of the construction sector, still getting a paycheck but in some industries enduring high rates of infection. Health care workers have faced growing work pressure under dangerous conditions, as have workers in other service sectors deemed “essential,” such as eldercare, home delivery services, and trucking. The greatest increases in unemployment have been in leisure and hospitality (hotels and restaurants); so-called “information” workers (including motion pictures); wholesale and retail trade; and oil, gas, and mining. Newly unemployed leisure and hospitality workers make up fully 25 percent of all newly unemployed

workers.<sup>14</sup> Female and minority workers have been particularly harmed by the economic collapse.

The pandemic recession has hit the bottom line of big corporations hard in many sectors, such as airlines and aircraft manufacturing, while others have prospered, such as online services. As the stock market rose in defiance of the pandemic, the wealth of 650 US billionaires rose by \$1 trillion, a 34 percent increase, from March through November, while many working people have had to raid their retirement savings to survive.<sup>15</sup> More than 110,000 restaurants, or one in six in the United States, were estimated to have closed permanently or long-term by December.<sup>16</sup>

## **POSSIBLE OBSTACLES TO A SHIFT TO PROGRESSIVE POLICY**

Many analysts point to the past record of Joe Biden and the Democratic congressional leadership as evidence that nothing progressive can emerge in 2021. That record features support for neoliberal policies, including mass incarceration and harsh policing tactics. However, the past actions of political figures are an imperfect guide to their future behavior in a structural crisis, when a transition to a new SSA is in the offing. History offers examples of political leaders undergoing a sharp change in direction in a structural crisis, under the impact of the crisis and the class forces operating within it. Franklin D. Roosevelt was a mainstream Democratic Party governor who ran for president in 1932 on a program calling for a balanced budget. The first New Deal policies

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14 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Household Data Table A-14, "Unemployed Persons by Industry and Class of Worker."

15 Chuck Collins, "US Billionaire Wealth Surges Past \$1 Trillion Since Beginning of Pandemic," *Inequality.org*, November 25, 2020.

16 Carolina Gonzalez, "Restaurant Closings Top 110,000 With Industry in 'Free Fall,'" *Bloomberg*, December 7, 2020.

were politically inconsistent but, beginning in 1934–35, the New Deal made a sharp left turn. The result was passage of the laws that supported the right to collective bargaining and began to construct a welfare state. In 2021, the Biden administration will take office amid a radically different political-economic context from the one prevailing before 2008.

There is concern that the high level of public debt and the recent large federal deficits will act as a severe constraint on any progressive economic initiatives. Most, if not all, of the policy changes supported by the Left would require stepping up public spending. Austerity advocates warn that the already high debt will impose a huge cost on future generations as they are forced to repay it. Hence, the federal government must sharply cut spending so as to run a budget surplus and thereby begin repaying the debt. Did the large tax cut for the rich and big business in 2017, together with the 2020 CARES Act, poison the well, requiring austerity ahead regardless of who occupies the White House?

The answer is an unqualified no. In the 1930s, John Maynard Keynes demonstrated that, in a recession, the government should increase its spending, financed by borrowing.<sup>17</sup> Keynesian economics entered the textbooks after World War II and became part of the dominant orthodoxy through the 1960s. Then a counterattack, led by University of Chicago professor Milton Friedman along with some younger followers, pushed Keynesian economics out of the mainstream in the 1970s. However, Keynes's basic claims were valid, as economists were reminded in 2008.

A large deficit and a high level of debt are not necessarily a problem in a country such as the United States, where monetary

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<sup>17</sup> Keynes's main innovation was to overturn Say's Law, an orthodox belief that a market economy cannot have a shortage of total demand since "supply creates its own demand." Karl Marx had offered a cogent critique of Say's Law long before Keynes.

policy is controlled by the government, not a foreign entity, and the government has an effective system of taxation. Whether the government should expand or contract its spending, and whether increased spending should be financed by borrowing or increased taxes, depend on the macroeconomic conditions. As Keynes pointed out, in a condition of high unemployment and ample unused productive capacity, an increase in public spending will expand GDP and reduce unemployment. To get the maximum expansionary impact, the government should borrow the funds rather than financing the increased spending with increased taxes. If the government borrows the funds from the central bank (the Federal Reserve) rather than private investors, the expansionary impact is still greater, since that means the increased spending is financed by new money created by the Fed when it lends to the Treasury, rather than with funds borrowed from private actors who buy new government bonds. Deficit spending will increase the public debt, but the burden of servicing that debt will be low in a recession when interest rates are low, and the expanding GDP resulting from the fiscal stimulus will bring rising tax revenues over time to service the debt payments.

On the other hand, if the economy is operating at full employment of available labor and full use of productive capacity, then an increase in public spending cannot immediately call forth additional production and instead will tend to bring rising prices — that is, inflation. Thus, at full employment, a plan for increased public spending for some purposes is feasible only if other types of public spending are reduced.<sup>18</sup> This trade-off is captured by the slogan “guns or butter.”

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18 An alternative is to raise taxes to cut private spending by a compensating amount.



The Keynesian view of deficits and debt finds strong support from the experience of the US economy in the decades following World War II. When the United States entered the war in December 1941, a huge increase in federal spending financed by borrowing rapidly drove the unemployment rate down from double digits to under 2 percent. By the end of the war, the public debt had reached 106 percent of GDP, as figure 9 showed.

In recent times, austerity advocates have warned that the US public debt as a percentage of GDP is approaching the high level of 1946. That is supposed to be a warning of disastrous consequences ahead. Yet what followed after 1946 was twenty-five years of the fastest and most widely shared economic expansion in US history. This was not achieved by an austerity policy of running a budget surplus. Instead, on average from 1946 through 1974, the federal budget was in deficit. Nevertheless, the debt fell from 106 percent of GDP in 1946 to only 23 percent of GDP by 1974 (figure 9). How was this possible? The answer is that GDP grew faster than the debt.<sup>19</sup> Growing public spending played an important role in bringing a robust 4 percent per year GDP growth rate over that period.

The high level of public debt will not be a constraint on progressive economic policies in 2021. The pandemic recession brought a high unemployment rate, which will still be high when the Biden administration takes office. Interest rates are at the historically low level of just above zero, which makes the payments on public debt rather low, despite the large outstanding principal. Thus, at first there should be no constraint from debt concerns on the ability of a Biden administration to begin pursuing progressive policies in 2021.

Assuming that such an effort does emerge, the first order of business will be to confront the COVID-19 pandemic. As long as the

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<sup>19</sup> The austerity advocates, many of whom are trained in advanced mathematics, forget that a fraction can decline not only by a reduction in the numerator but by an increase in the denominator.

pandemic rages, it will not be possible to fully revive the economy in the face of pandemic-induced supply constraints, uncertainty about the future that discourages productive investment by firms, and people's reluctance to engage in normal consumer spending. Active federal leadership based on proven public health measures can contain the virus, while wide distribution of the new vaccines will finally conquer it. As such measures bring the pandemic under control, it will become possible to introduce the kinds of policies advocated by Bernie Sanders.

Some progressive policies will carry a large price tag. Massive public investments are needed to combat global climate change. Public higher education should become free to all, and the current huge educational debt should be forgiven. Health care, including prescription drugs, should be available to all and affordable. Some radical monetary theorists claim that expansion of government programs should be fully funded through Fed-created new money handed to the Treasury. That is bad economics and a losing strategy politically. A sound progressive financial policy should call for borrowing to finance new public investments, such as in a sustainable economy and in education. The rationale is that, since the benefits will be gained over time, they should be paid for over time, rather than out of current tax revenues coming from today's taxpayers.<sup>20</sup> Those progressive programs that mainly provide current benefits, such as expanded social security retirement benefits, should be financed from progressive taxation that targets the rich and corporate profits.

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20 The second argument for funding public investment via borrowing, besides the fact that its benefits will come over time, is that it may speed up the increase in GDP and thus generate the taxable income to service the debt. However, that consideration may not apply to all of the needed investments aimed at environmental sustainability, since, while they will generate significant future benefits, those benefits will not come in the form of faster GDP growth. Indeed, GDP growth might have to slow down to achieve global temperature goals.

The defeat of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enactment of a progressive policy program would generate many high-paying jobs and move the economy toward full employment. As the economy reaches full employment, choices must then be made in order to continue with a progressive program. The United States has long led the world in military spending, with a military budget in fiscal year 2019 that was greater than the ten next largest in the world.<sup>21</sup> The military budget escalated sharply during the Trump administration, reaching \$934 billion for all categories of military spending in the fiscal year 2021 budget. That represents 62.8 percent of the \$1.485 trillion fiscal year 2021 discretionary budget that Congress allocates.<sup>22</sup> At full employment, further expansion of progressive programs will require a major cut in military spending. The huge US military budget is sustained by the political power of military contracting corporations, but it is also buoyed by the long-standing US government pursuit of global domination, which is an expensive proposition. The Left will have to find a way to confront the false claim that, if the United States does not continue to run the world, disaster would follow.

## CLASS MATTERS

The direction of change that will emerge in a period of structural crisis of a form of capitalism is not foreordained by any narrowly technical economic factors. It depends on the balance of forces among key classes and groups. History shows that a relatively progressive SSA emerges only when, first, working people are mobilized and strong enough to effectively press for such a

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21 Peter G. Peterson Foundation, "U.S. Defense Spending Compared to Other Countries," May 13, 2020.

22 Kimberly Amadeo, "US Military Budget, Its Components, Challenges, and Growth," *The Balance*, September 3, 2020; and White House, "A Budget for America's Future: FY 2021," Table S-4.

direction, and second, a growing radical mass movement induces fear of more radical change on the part of big business. That was the case when the postwar SSA was emerging in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as during the Progressive Era reforms of 1900–16 that were part of the early-twentieth-century SSA.

Decades of neoliberalism have left the labor movement historically weak today. Some outbreaks of labor militancy have emerged recently, among teachers and others, but not on the scale of the labor upsurge of the 1930s and '40s. Young people have emerged as a distinct group in political motion demanding major reforms around climate change and higher education. Recent public opinion surveys have shown that slightly over half of those aged eighteen to twenty-nine in the United States favor “socialism,” a remarkable development given the limited mass appeal of socialism in the past. If even a small share of the huge number of young people who say they favor socialism become active socialists, that would bring a major change in the potential for movement toward progressive change.<sup>23</sup> Decades of severe repression of African Americans brought the massive Black Lives Matter protests that have generated further pressure for progressive reform. Trump’s assault on immigrants, particularly Latino/a immigrants, mobilized many young Latino/a people.

There is evidence that overall public opinion in the United States has swung to the left on many economic policy issues, including a higher minimum wage, access to affordable health care as a human

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23 It is not clear what those who say they favor socialism mean by that term. It is likely that, for most, it means they do not like the capitalism they have grown up with, and they are attracted to what they think would be a different system aimed at meeting human needs. That could mean support for progressive reform of capitalism, that is, social democracy, or it could mean openness to a move beyond capitalism to a system without a wealthy class of owners whose pursuit of profit runs the economy. The meaning has not yet been established for most of the young people attracted to “socialism.”

right, action to combat climate change, affordable higher education, and the right to join a union. While most black voters chose Biden over Sanders in 2020, they have also shown strong support for Bernie's economic policy demands. The COVID-19 pandemic may have further increased public support for progressive economic policies. The pandemic has served as a real-life case study of the limits of the "free market" and the value of a comprehensive welfare state that assures access to health care, a strong public health system, and income security for the population.

As president, Biden will face significant pressure from labor, from people of color, and from young people to move boldly to enact a progressive agenda. On the other hand, the various constituencies that have favored neoliberalism will press for caution and a centrist agenda that would leave neoliberal capitalism in place. A key question is the role that big business — the group that brought us neoliberalism at the end of the 1970s — will play in 2021.

Big business as a whole did not buy into Trump's nationalist politics. Trump's tariff offensive has disrupted the highly profitable globally integrated economy that big business constructed. Big business wants access to immigrant labor, both high-skilled and low-skilled. Large corporations today have racially integrated managements and do not support Trump's white supremacy.<sup>24</sup> However, Trump's aggressive anti-labor, deregulation, and tax cut policies have pleased big business. So far, American big business has remained in support of neoliberalism.

There are signs that big business may be moving away from neoliberalism on some issues. Corporations' analyses of the impact of climate change on their future bottom lines may be inducing a readiness to support measures to arrest global warming. In August

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24 It was Trump's warm statements toward white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 that led the corporate CEOs on his two business advisory councils to disband them. The move was led by minority and female CEOs.

2019, the Business Roundtable, an organization of corporate CEOs that is the leading big business policy organization, issued a statement calling for a rejection of the dominant corporate management policy of a sole focus on profits, to be replaced by taking account of the interests of employees, customers, and the general public as well as shareholders.<sup>25</sup> The proposed new policy had been the official corporate ideology in the era of postwar regulated capitalism, but it was replaced through the victory of the “shareholder value” movement in the 1970s, which held that the only corporate responsibility is to maximize the return to shareholders.

After World War II, the economic and technological rivalry with the USSR was a major factor driving federal promotion of technological advance and a large expansion of federal funding for higher education. As the economic rivalry between a rising China and the United States has intensified, some big business thinkers may notice that active state programs have fostered a very high rate of productive investment in China, while neoliberalism in the United States has encouraged unproductive financial expansion at the expense of productive investment. While China has made rapid strides in innovation with strong state support, US federal spending on research and development declined in the neoliberal era after 1987, as figure 10 shows. Such considerations may prod big business to turn away from neoliberal policies that encourage financialization and limit government support for innovation, opting instead for a sizable expansion of state support for productive investment and technological innovation. That could extend to support for making higher education more affordable.

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25 “Business Roundtable Redefines the Purpose of a Corporation to Promote ‘An Economy That Serves All Americans,’” Business Roundtable, August 19, 2019.

**Figure 10.** Federal Spending on Research and Development as a Percentage of GDP, 1953 – 2018

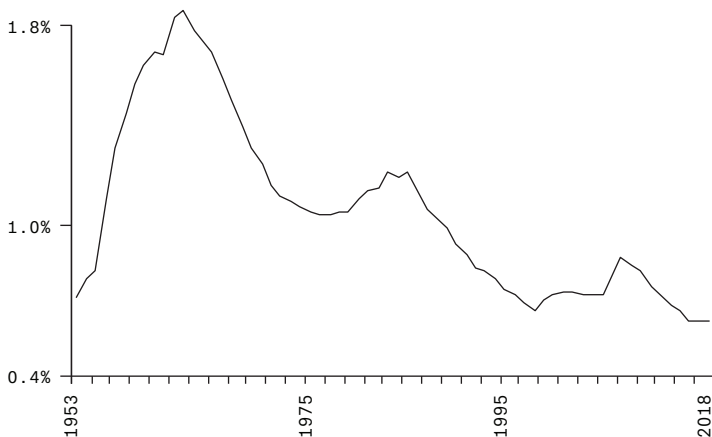


Figure 10: National Science Foundation, [nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf20307/#data-tables&](https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf20307/#data-tables&).

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## REGIME CHANGE?

It is possible that the neoliberal form of capitalism will survive for some time despite the continuing stagnation it brings. However, the continuing stagnation puts growing pressure on all groups and classes to support measures that would overcome it. The only feasible route to doing so is through a nationalist or a green social democratic restructuring of capitalism. Either direction could lead to a new SSA.

If a decisive segment of big business does turn away from neoliberalism based on the above developments, they might throw their support behind a nationalist SSA. A further possibility is that big business will accept another period of compromise with labor and other popular constituencies, which is a condition for moving

toward green social democracy in the United States, given the limited power of those constituencies.<sup>26</sup>

The defeat of Trump in November did not eliminate the possibility of a nationalist direction in the United States. If stagnation and its accompanying retrograde trends are not reversed under Biden's presidency, either Trump or another authoritarian nationalist is likely to have a good chance at winning the presidency in 2024, which could lead to a consistent nationalist restructuring. A consistent nationalist direction would repress labor and keep wages in check, which promotes rising profit and encourages growing investment. Growing state investment in infrastructure and technology would aim to maintain US economic superiority, while rising military spending would buttress continued US global domination. Rising government spending would keep aggregate demand growing despite stagnating wages. A nationalist ideology provides the glue for such a form of capitalism, as the acquiescence of working people is obtained through identification with a strong state.

A green social democratic direction could also construct a new SSA. A new capital-labor compromise would bring rising wages as well as rising profits, which can coexist given increasing labor productivity. Rising profits would encourage productive investment, while rising wages would promote growing aggregate demand.<sup>27</sup> A major infrastructure spending program aimed at stopping global

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26 In the UK and Scandinavia after World War II, a social democratic structure was imposed on big business by dominant socialist or labor parties. That led to a more developed social democracy than the postwar US version, which arose with big business as a powerful player in the construction of the new regime.

27 The rate of profit in the United States reached its highest level since the end of World War II not in the neoliberal era, but in the mid-1960s, at the height of regulated capitalism. While the share of profit in total income has been greater in the neoliberal era, the higher rate of utilization of productive capacity under regulated capitalism, due to the rapid growth of both wages and public spending, gave rise to a higher rate of profit on invested capital.



climate change, in combination with other progressive policy initiatives, would further contribute to growing aggregate demand. Regulations designed to reign in the financialization that has retarded productive investment would also be likely. A Keynesian ideology of a “mixed economy,” with private enterprise and an active state that together bring benefits shared by all classes and groups, would underpin such a form of capitalism.

The narrowness of the Democratic majority in the incoming Congress presents a potential obstacle to any move toward green social democracy, but not necessarily an insurmountable one. Even with the loss of their Senate majority, Republicans will have significant capacity to obstruct proposed legislation. However, history shows that public officials shift their positions during a time of resolution of a structural crisis. Post-World War II regulated capitalism was finally consolidated only after Republicans won control of both houses of Congress in the 1946 election. The first government moves toward neoliberal transformation in the United States began in the last two years of Jimmy Carter’s presidency, when deregulation, cuts in social programs, tax benefits for business, and austerity policy came to dominate the administration’s policy agenda. If a decisive segment of big business does opt for at least some parts of the green social democratic agenda, they may be able to bring enough Republican senators along to pass the necessary legislation.

## **GREEN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY**

The best future path for working people in the United States would be some version of green social democracy. Socialism is not on the political agenda at this time. However, a period of green social democracy has the potential to at least slow global warming to stave off the danger of disastrous global climate change. It would bring significant improvements for working people, young people,

people of color, and other popular constituencies. Green social democracy based on compromise between capital and labor would be far better for working people than an authoritarian nationalist SSA, which would repress labor and leftist movements and would contain the seeds of costly global conflicts. Green social democracy would prevent a turn toward authoritarian nationalism in the United States, a direction that would be a disaster for the majority in the country and around the world.

If green social democracy does emerge in the United States, to include a new progressive international policy would prove challenging, as it would mean abandoning the long-standing US drive to control the world. In a powerful capitalist state, the pursuit of profit generates a drive toward imperialist domination to secure the profit interests of the capitalist class. Responding to that imperative, mainstream Democratic and Republican officeholders have long supported the goal of US global hegemony. Biden's current position on US relations with China shows he is no exception.

The previous round of regulated capitalism in the United States included the maintenance of global domination along with frequent military interventions abroad. In the late 1940s, the US economy was so dominant in the world that it could sustain several decades of progressive reform in domestic policy while devoting massive resources to the military — both guns and butter were affordable. Eventually that contradiction played a role in the demise of postwar regulated capitalism, when the cost of the US war in Vietnam was one factor destabilizing the American and global economies. The US economy today is much smaller compared to the global economy than it was in 1945. In 2021, a continuing government commitment to maintaining global domination would pose an obstacle to a consistent green social democracy.<sup>28</sup> When

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28 Also, it is unclear whether the United States today has the economic strength

the economy reaches full employment, further policy progress would stall without a major reduction in the military costs of maintaining an empire.

The above analysis suggests a strategy for the Left in this period. We should join efforts to press the Biden administration to move toward green social democracy. At the same time, we should contribute to building a stronger labor movement and a growing socialist movement. Those aims are not competing; they are complementary. We cannot bring about a move beyond capitalism at this time, but we can contribute to a green social democratic direction while marginalizing authoritarian nationalism. It was the radicalization of the New Deal in the mid-1930s that undercut popular support for the then-growing neofascist movement in the United States. If we succeed in helping to build a more powerful labor movement and a growing socialist movement, that will contribute to pushing toward green social democracy in 2021.

Social democracy, while the best form of capitalism for working people, is still a form of capitalism. At some point, the contradictions of a green social democratic capitalism will bring about a structural crisis of that form of capitalism. If the Left succeeds in building a sufficiently strong mass socialist movement during a new period of green social democracy, a transition beyond capitalism may well move onto the political agenda in that future structural crisis. Only a transition beyond capitalism can bring a secure, satisfying, peaceful, and environmentally sustainable future, which can never be reached within a system based on the pursuit of profit by a small wealthy class from the labor of the majority. ☞

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Organized labor had high hopes going into the November elections. While Donald Trump's defeat gives labor breathing room from Republican attacks, the election cycle likely did not move the needle far enough to make a fundamental difference in labor's fortunes. Hence, the political environment remains hostile to the labor movement, even while the movement is too weak to shift the environment on its own.

# Can Labor Break Its Double Bind?

Chris Maisano

America's top labor leaders had extremely high hopes going into the November general election. Many opinion polls pointed to the possibility of a "blue wave": a landslide victory for Joe Biden over Donald Trump, a new Democratic majority in the US Senate, and an expanded Democratic majority in the House of Representatives. The most optimistic scenarios raised the prospect of previously unthinkable conquests like winning control of the Texas legislature's lower house for the first time in decades, which would have given Democrats a seat at the table in redistricting a big and increasingly competitive state. After years of withering defeats, it looked as if organized labor's loyalty to the Democratic Party might finally pay off in a badly needed round of legal reform and

economic restructuring. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) president Mary Kay Henry summed up the heady atmosphere that prevailed in labor's higher circles during the closing weeks of the campaign: "I think it's going to be a combination of the New Deal, the Marshall Plan and the 1960s Civil Rights Act all in one administration."<sup>1</sup>

In the end, the voters poured cold water on these fervid expectations. Biden defeated Trump for the presidency, but not as decisively as many expected. He had very short coattails, and down-ballot Democrats lost many of the races they were widely forecast to win. They achieved a fifty-fifty Senate split by flipping both of Georgia's seats in January's runoff, which will create some breathing room for meaningful economic recovery policies. Even so, while Kamala Harris nominally holds the tiebreaking vote as vice president, the chamber's balance of power will ultimately rest in the hands of conservative Democrats like Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema. Democrats retained their House majority but failed to beat a single Republican incumbent and lost at least eight seats of their own, yielding the slimmest majority since the 1940s. They made no meaningful gains at the state level, where Republicans will draw redistricting maps that protect their incumbents for the next decade. The worst possible outcome — a second Trump administration — was avoided, and a relatively pro-union administration will help labor at the margins and provide a measure of breathing room from GOP attacks. But the election cycle likely did not move the needle far enough to make a fundamental difference in organized labor's fortunes.

The US labor movement heads into the new decade with uncertain and contradictory prospects. There are some genuine

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1 James Politi, "Bidenomics: Can Democrats Deliver on Their New Leftwing Agenda?" *Financial Times*, October 29, 2020.



grounds for restrained optimism. Public approval of labor unions is at its highest level in fifty years, and pro-worker policies like minimum wage increases enjoy widespread popular support.<sup>2</sup> Hundreds of thousands of workers went on strike in the last two years, many of them in open defiance of their employers and the law, and their actions left a clear mark on the political landscape. The labor platforms of the major Democratic Party candidates ranged from decent to excellent, and there is now a nascent pro-labor, social democratic faction within the party. Popular concern with inequality and workplace health and safety during the pandemic has put workers' needs and interests squarely on the political agenda. At the same time, however, decades of retrenchment have taken their toll on labor, both politically and organizationally. Unions suffer from overconcentration in specific sectors and geographic areas, as does the new Left represented by groups like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The 2020s could yield breakthroughs for American workers and the Left, but achieving them will require a level of organization and political activity capable of fighting strong headwinds that will prove very difficult to overcome.

## CONTOURS OF DECLINE

US labor entered the election year in dire straits. The 2019 union membership data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) continues to paint a downward trend in both the public and private sectors, despite the uptick in strike action that swept the country in 2018 and 2019. Overall union density stood at 10.3 percent, private-sector density at 6.2 percent, and public-sector density at 33.6 percent. Since 2000, the overall number of employed

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2 Jeffrey M. Jones, "As Labor Day Turns 125, Union Approval Near 50-Year High," Gallup, August 28, 2019.

wage and salary workers grew by almost 20 million, a 16 percent increase. Because labor cannot organize workers quickly enough to keep up with this growth, it continues to lose ground. Since the turn of the century, the total number of union members declined by almost 1.8 million, bringing the unionization rate down from 13.4 percent to 10.3 percent.

A closer look at the data reveals a few conspicuous trends that anyone worried about the future of the US labor movement should be concerned about.

*Private-sector unionism is in a bottomless free fall:* Private-sector deunionization began as early as the 1950s, and the pace accelerated in the 1980s. Private-sector density slipped below 20 percent in 1981, and industrial unions collapsed under the blows of an employer offensive aided and abetted by the Volcker shock. By the turn of the century, the rate of private-sector unionization was below 10 percent, and it has not shown any signs of recovery since. From 2000 to 2019, total private-sector employment grew by about 20 million, an increase of about 17 percent. Private-sector unionization, however, cratered in both absolute and relative terms. There were more than 1.7 million fewer private-sector union members in 2019 than in 2000, a decline of 19 percent, and private-sector union density shrank from 9 percent to 6.4 percent. While the number of union members actually increased in a range of private-sector occupations, these gains were often not large enough to keep pace with or exceed the growing number of workers in the field.

Take the category of health care practitioner and technical occupations, for example. The number of union members in this category, which includes registered nurses, rose from 693,000 in 2000 to 1,076,000 in 2019, an impressive increase of 55 percent. But employment in this field increased even faster, so the union membership rate actually declined from 12.9 percent to 11.8

percent. It is extremely difficult for American unions to merely keep their heads above water, even in industries and occupations where they are organizing new members in meaningful numbers.

The situation is even more challenging in fields like manufacturing, where employment, the absolute number of union members, and union density all dropped during this period. Manufacturing employment in the United States has mounted a partial recovery since it bottomed out in 2010, but the total number of union members and union density are well below their levels at the turn of the century. This dynamic illustrates how, even in traditionally organized industries like manufacturing, private employers have the power to resist unionization during periods of relatively low unemployment and steady (if unimpressive) economic growth.

*Public-sector unions are holding up, but cracks are appearing:* The situation in the public sector is generally less gloomy, but portents of decline can be found here as well. The rate of overall public-sector unionization remained quite steady until the Great Recession, but since then, a wide-ranging legal and political assault on public-sector unions has begun to take its toll. The 2010 Republican sweep of state legislatures put them in a position to rewrite labor laws in a number of traditionally pro-union states such as Wisconsin, where the infamous Act 10 nearly halved public-sector union density in a decade. GOP legislators in other states followed Wisconsin's lead, and in 2018, the Supreme Court issued its anti-union ruling in *Janus v. AFSCME*.

Public-sector unions have, on the whole, fared better than expected in the face of *Janus*. They have had some help from politicians, but they've also been compelled to reengage their members in order to win and maintain their voluntary loyalty. Still, it's clear that some workers have returned their union cards. Over the last decade, total public-sector density dropped from 37 percent to 33.6 percent, the lowest level since the great wave of public-sector

unionization in the 1970s. This decline has largely been driven at the federal and local government levels, with the latter seeing a sharp drop from 43.2 percent in 2011 to 39.4 percent in 2019. This is the first time local government union membership fell below 40 percent since the beginning of the BLS data series in 1983.

A second Trump administration would have been disastrous for public-sector unions. It would have intensified attacks on federal employee unions and possibly moved to privatize the US Postal Service, a union stronghold that is particularly important to the fortunes of black workers in this country.<sup>3</sup> While the worst-case scenario has been avoided, continuing Republican strength at the state and local levels — where authority over public-sector labor law largely resides — means that union organization in labor’s remaining stronghold is likely to erode further.

*Deunionization has largely been concentrated among white men:* Because workers are not evenly distributed across sectors, industries, and occupations, patterns of unionization can vary widely across categories like gender and race. Union membership and density is down for men and women alike. But the decline is largely concentrated among men, because industries that disproportionately employ them have suffered some of the steepest declines in employment and unionization in recent decades.

Since 2000, the total number of employed men who are union members declined by more than 1.7 million. When race is factored into the analysis, it becomes clear that the decline in unionization is concentrated not among men in general but among white men in particular. This should not be surprising, considering white men’s historically higher levels of unionization, but the trend is still striking. There were roughly 1.67 million fewer unionized white men

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3 Michael Hiltzik, “The Postal Service Is America’s Most Popular Government Agency. Why Does Trump Hate It?” *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 2020; Paul Prescod, “Defend the Post Office, Defend Black Workers,” *Jacobin*, July 3, 2019.

in 2019 than in 2000, while their unionization rate dropped from 14.8 percent to 10.9 percent. This accounts for the vast majority of the decline in unionization among all employed men since the beginning of the century. Indeed, it accounts for the vast majority of the roughly 1.8 million total union members the United States lost between 2000 and 2019.

The extent of deunionization among white men in this century has been quite dramatic. The unionization rate among Latinos and Asian American men, for example, has also declined, but the number of union members in each of these two groups has increased since 2000. The deep decline in unionization among white men is unmatched in any other segment of the labor force, and it's a major reason why Trump was able to breach the Democrats' much-vaunted "blue wall" and win the White House in 2016.<sup>4</sup>

*The labor movement is getting older:* The decline in unionization among men has been felt in every age cohort except for one — men aged sixty-five and older, where the number and percentage of unionized workers has gone up significantly since the beginning of the century. By contrast, the unionization rate among employed men aged twenty-five to thirty-four has fallen to 9.2 percent, well below every age cohort above them as well as the overall men's unionization rate. The unionization rate among women workers also declined (though typically not as sharply) among every age cohort except for one: employed women aged sixty-five and older, where the total number of union members has more than tripled since 2000. The percentage of unionized women aged twenty-five to thirty-four now stands at 8.4 percent, below every age cohort above them as well as below the overall women's unionization rate of 9.7 percent.

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4 Alex Leary and Kris Maher, "Democrats Labor to Stem Flow of Union Voters to Trump," *Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2019.

The aging of the labor movement raises some difficult questions. Will unionized seniors be replaced by younger unionized workers as they age out of the workforce? Will young workers entering the labor market, most of whom lack any personal or family connection to the labor movement, voluntarily join unions in the public sector or take major risks to organize in the private sector? The aging of the labor movement will continue to quietly sap union density — not to mention the financial solvency of union retirement plans — unless labor manages to bring a significant cohort of younger workers into its ranks.

*Unions are extremely concentrated geographically:* An often-overlooked fact about the US labor movement is that a majority of all union members live in just seven states: California, New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington. This reality has long been shaped by broader patterns of economic geography, and to some extent, it has been a natural result of the uneven pattern of industrial development in this country. But unionism's historic failure to take root in the South is primarily a reflection of the lingering political power of Southern slave owners and landlords. Slavery's legacy can be found in the kind of "low-road capitalism" that took root in the ex-Confederate states and spread to the rest of the country through open shop laws and attacks on public goods.<sup>5</sup>

In 2019, just two states, Hawaii and New York, had union membership rates above 20 percent, and the Empire State's union density slipped to 21 percent from nearly one-quarter in 2015. By contrast, the number of states with union density below 5 percent rose to eight in 2019 from just two in 2000, while an additional nine states were poised between 5 percent and 7 percent. Altogether,

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5 John Clegg, "How Slavery Shaped American Capitalism," *Jacobin*, August 28, 2019.

twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia had a union membership rate at or below the national average of 10.3 percent. Labor's confinement behind a regional *cordon sanitaire* undermines its ability to push major pro-union reforms at the federal level, where private-sector labor law is decided and promulgated. It is difficult to imagine meaningful reform legislation passing a Congress with so few members representing districts and states where unions are a significant presence.

## RETURN OF THE LABOR QUESTION

Despite labor's retrenchment, labor issues and workers' rights occupied an important place in the Democratic Party's presidential primary campaign. The failures of neoliberalism are now so profound that figures like Joe Biden, one of the leading architects of his party's neoliberal turn, can no longer ignore or justify them.<sup>6</sup> The Fight for \$15 campaign and the public education strike wave made a clear mark on the political landscape and compelled Democratic presidential candidates to advance some of the strongest labor platforms in decades. And, in their own ways, both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump brought the roiling discontents of American society into the heart of the political arena. Sanders revived an eclipsed tradition of social democratic, working-class politics in the Democratic Party and vowed to establish a "workers' government in Washington, D.C." Trump barreled into the White House with a reactionary nationalism that, at least rhetorically, took aim at the "American carnage" of "rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation."<sup>7</sup>

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6 James Politi, "Bidenomics: Sharp Shift to the Left Touts Workers Over Wealth," *Financial Times*, September 28, 2020. For a comprehensive survey of Biden's neoliberal record in public office, see Branko Marcetic, *Yesterday's Man: The Case Against Joe Biden* (New York: Verso, 2020).

7 "Teamsters Host Presidential Forum, Learn Candidates' Vision," International

After largely staying on the sidelines during the primaries, a notable departure from 2016, when they prematurely tipped the scales in Hillary Clinton's favor, major national unions stepped up their voter mobilization efforts behind Joe Biden and the Democrats' general election campaign. Labor's ambitious plans, however, were seriously disrupted by the pandemic. As late as February 2020, major national unions were planning to spend heavily on canvassing operations in key states across the country. SEIU alone planned to spend \$150 million on mobilization in forty states, with a focus on infrequent African American and Latino voters in the main battleground states. The goal was to have 6 million face-to-face conversations and send 20 million text messages to boost working-class turnout in places like Philadelphia, the Twin Cities, Detroit, and Milwaukee.<sup>8</sup> But as the pandemic swept through working-class communities nationwide, the focus of labor's get out the vote (GOTV) operations moved largely toward phone calls, text messages, direct mail, and digital advertising. This shift away from face-to-face persuasion and mobilization, the bread and butter of labor-based GOTV work, threatened to have a material impact on the outcome of the election. As one SEIU member activist in Virginia put it, "This is very hard, it's very different to just sit in the house and make calls eight hours a day as opposed to walking and knocking on doors ... This coronavirus has really put us in a dilemma."<sup>9</sup>

In the end, unions spent nearly \$190 million on the 2020 election cycle.<sup>10</sup> Labor spending was, of course, dwarfed by business

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Brotherhood of Teamsters, December 8, 2019; Donald J. Trump, "The Inaugural Address," The White House, January 20, 2017, [trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov](http://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov).

8 James Hohmann, "SEIU Will Spend \$150 million on 2020 Elections, Focused on Mobilizing Infrequent Voters," *Washington Post*, February 27, 2020.

9 Rafael Bernal, "Union Leader Vows 'Infrequent' Minority Voters Will Help Deliver Biden Victory," *The Hill*, September 29, 2020.

10 Center for Responsive Politics, "Labor: Long-Term Contribution Trends,"



spending, which reached a total of roughly \$4.6 billion.<sup>11</sup> Early estimates put the total cost of the election at \$14 billion, making it twice as expensive as the 2016 election cycle and easily the most expensive election of all time.<sup>12</sup> Despite this massive spending disadvantage, election returns seem to indicate that labor's efforts had a significant impact on the outcome of the presidential race in a number of key states. SEIU spent the most money, but it's likely that the hospitality union UNITE HERE made the single most decisive contribution to Biden's victory. Unlike most other unions and progressive groups, the union and its state and local affiliates carried out an extensive canvassing operation in Nevada, Arizona, and Pennsylvania, targeting union members and working-class voters in cities like Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Philadelphia. Somewhat perversely, UNITE HERE's campaigning was aided by the fact that so many of their members were available to canvass because of the devastating pandemic-related layoffs in the hospitality industry.<sup>13</sup> Their efforts helped to drive up Biden's margins in the vote-rich areas of states that wound up deciding the election — particularly in Arizona and Nevada, where Biden beat Trump by a combined 44,000 votes.<sup>14</sup>

National exit polls offer evidence that Biden successfully reversed some of the inroads that Trump made among union

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OpenSecrets.org, accessed December 5, 2020.

11 Center for Responsive Politics, "Business-Labor-Ideology Split in PAC & Individual Donations to Candidates, Parties, Super PACs and Outside Spending Groups," OpenSecrets.org, accessed December 5, 2020.

12 Center for Responsive Politics, "2020 Election to Cost \$14 billion, Blowing Away Spending Records," OpenSecrets.org, October 28, 2020.

13 Dave Jamieson, "Organized Labor Helped Boost Biden in Critical Battlegrounds," *Huffington Post*, November 6, 2020.

14 Benjamin Swasey and Connie Hanzhang Jin, "Narrow Wins in These Key States Powered Biden to the Presidency," NPR, December 2, 2020.

household voters in 2016.<sup>15</sup> He won the national union household vote 56-40, a 16-point margin over Trump. This was a significant improvement on Hillary Clinton's performance in 2016, when she won union household voters by just an 8-point margin, the weakest showing for a Democratic presidential candidate since Walter Mondale in 1984.<sup>16</sup> Biden's support among union household voters was even higher in key states he needed to win in order to carry the election. He defeated Trump among these voters 62-37 in Michigan, 59-40 in Wisconsin, and 58-39 in Nevada. He essentially split the union household vote with Trump in Pennsylvania, where, unlike in Ohio, these voters have not decisively realigned behind the Republicans. Of course, union households' share of the electorate is declining as unions continue to shrink in both relative and absolute terms. But they still represent an important bloc of voters nationally, as well as in the battleground states that will continue to decide presidential elections in the near future.<sup>17</sup>

Organized labor did its part to oust Trump from the White House. But it wasn't enough to offset the increase in pro-Trump turnout in a number of key states and metropolitan areas, particularly those with large Latino populations.<sup>18</sup> It also wasn't enough to

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15 Exit polling can often be misleading, and the pandemic's impact on in-person voting likely contributed to even larger exit polling problems in 2020. For a primer on the issues with exit polling in the 2020 election, see Laura Bronner and Nathaniel Rakich, "Exit Polls Can Be Misleading — Especially This Year," *FiveThirtyEight*, November 2, 2020. Nonetheless, I draw on exit polling data here because it is, as of this writing, the only available source of data on union household voting patterns in the 2020 election.

16 "National Exit Polls: How Different Groups Voted," *New York Times*, accessed December 5, 2020; Jake Rosenfeld and Patrick Denice, "The Union Household Vote Revisited," *OnLabor*, April 11, 2017.

17 Both national and state-level exit poll results can be found at the *New York Times*' 2020 Election Results site: [nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-president.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-president.html).

18 Jed Kolko and Toni Monkovic, "The Places That Had the Biggest Swings Toward and Against Trump," *New York Times*, December 7, 2020; Ford Fessenden,

overcome those aspects of the electoral system that systematically favor the Republicans — the Senate’s rural skew and the strong concentration of Democratic voters in urban areas — which contributed to the Democrats’ weak showing in down-ballot races.<sup>19</sup> The Biden campaign essentially reprised Clinton’s personality-based 2016 campaign, and that was enough to put him over the top in the well-educated suburban districts where anti-Trump animus ran high. But it allowed Trump and the Republicans to successfully disaggregate the economic and public health crises, which contributed to Trump’s unexpectedly strong showing in heavily Latino areas the pandemic has devastated.<sup>20</sup> As Larry Cohen, chairman of Our Revolution and the former president of the Communications Workers of America, put it, “This election is a dismal rubber stamp of the unacceptable status quo.”<sup>21</sup>

## BIDEN’S BALANCING ACT

Whatever hopes America’s union leaders had for a historically pro-labor Biden administration were probably overheated in the first place. Many in the labor movement are still smarting from the Democrats’ inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to pass the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) in 2009 despite unified control of government and a sixty-vote supermajority in the Senate.

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Lazaro Gamio, and Rich Harris, “Even in Defeat, Trump Found New Voters Across the U.S.,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2020.

19 Nate Silver, “The Senate’s Rural Skew Makes It Very Hard for Democrats to Win the Supreme Court,” *FiveThirtyEight*, September 20, 2020. For an extensive analysis of how the urban concentration of left-leaning voters hurts the Democratic Party and its center-left counterparts in countries with similar electoral systems, see Jonathan A. Rodden, *Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

20 Mike Davis, “Rio Grande Valley Republicans,” *London Review of Books* 42, no. 22 (November 19, 2020).

21 Sydney Ember, “Treasury Secretary Warren? Progressives Line Up to Press Their Agenda on Biden,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2020.

Under Biden, congressional Republicans will be unified in their opposition to any meaningful pro-labor legislation, while there is no guarantee that Democratic ranks will stick together behind a push to increase wages or advance the right to unionize. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten maintains that there will still be “a real fight” to pass the PRO Act, which would provide meaningful protections for the right to organize and bargain, in the Senate. Considering the fact that the EFCA didn’t even come up for a vote when the Democrats had a Senate supermajority, these claims seem like an exercise in face-saving more than anything else.<sup>22</sup>

Now that the legislative path to reform is likely blocked, labor’s attention has largely turned to the possibilities for executive and administrative action. These possibilities will depend, to a significant extent, on the appointments President Biden makes to his White House staff, cabinet-level positions, and administrative agencies. Biden’s early appointments are a mixed bag, from a labor perspective. The most important appointment, as of this writing, is former Federal Reserve chair Janet Yellen as Treasury secretary. The AFL-CIO celebrated her appointment as “the right choice for all working families” and claimed that she represents a move away from “decades of bipartisan Wall Street groupthink.”<sup>23</sup> It’s not the worst choice Biden could have made. Her insistent focus on the health of the labor market signaled a welcome change in perspective at the Federal Reserve, for example.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, however, Yellen has somewhat

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22 Rebecca Rainey and Eleanor Mueller, “Democrats’ Lackluster Performance in Senate Spells Trouble for Labor,” *Politico*, November 6, 2020.

23 Richard Trumka, “Yellen Is the Right Choice for All Working Families,” AFL-CIO, November 30, 2020.

24 Pedro Nicolaci da Costa, “Janet Yellen’s Departure From the Fed Is a Huge Loss for Anyone Who Cares About Unemployment,” *Business Insider*, January 31, 2018.

hawkish instincts regarding fiscal policy, including support for cuts to Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security spending.<sup>25</sup> She will back the biggest possible stimulus package to deal with the pandemic, but she may also support a move toward fiscal consolidation when the virus is tamed and the need for emergency spending subsides.

Biden's early economic policy nominations show the balancing act he's playing between the moderate and progressive wings of the party — one that is subtly weighted in favor of the moderates. This comes through most clearly in his appointments to the National Economic Council (NEC) and the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA). Labor and progressive groups are quite pleased with the appointments of Cecilia Rouse, Jared Bernstein, and Heather Boushey to the CEA, with Rouse as chair. All three are about as progressive as high-level economists in Washington can get, and they will bring a focus on inequality and boosting workers' bargaining power to the White House's economic policy apparatus. The CEA, however, does not shape economic policy outcomes as directly as the NEC. Here is how one economist explains the difference between the two bodies:

If the president sought an analysis of why young adult males are dropping out of the labor force, that analysis would likely be authored by CEA, submitted through a process led by NEC. If on the other hand the president wished to develop a policy to increase labor force participation, NEC would lead that process with the CEA chair as one of the participants.<sup>26</sup>

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25 Alan Rappeport, Ana Swanson, Jim Tankersley, and Jeanna Smialek, "Yellen Would Assume Vast Policy Portfolio as Treasury Secretary," *New York Times*, November 24, 2020.

26 Charles Blahous, "The Importance of the National Economic Council," E21, November 21, 2016.

The person Biden appointed to lead the NEC is Brian Deese, an executive at BlackRock, the enormous asset management company that has overtaken Goldman Sachs as the most politically powerful Wall Street firm. Biden tapped another BlackRock executive, Adewale “Wally” Adeyemo, to serve as Yellen’s deputy secretary at the Treasury. BlackRock’s rise to power in the Biden administration represents a changing of the guard in the financial industry, where hedge funds and private equity firms have displaced investment banks as the main centers of innovation, profit-making, and risk in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>27</sup> When the Federal Reserve rolled out its program to fight the COVID-19 crash, it turned to BlackRock to run its vehicles for purchasing corporate debt and commercial mortgage-backed securities. BlackRock is now deeply embedded in economic policymaking at the highest levels, and it will exercise a significant degree of influence over many of the most important decisions the Biden administration will have to make.<sup>28</sup>

The cabinet-level position organized labor has most influence over, at least under Democratic administrations, is secretary of labor. Considering the barriers to meaningful pro-labor legislation, the choices Biden makes in staffing the Department of Labor (DoL) will be quite important to labor’s fortunes over the course of his term. The department is tasked with administering federal labor laws, and a vigorous enforcement agenda would combat some of the worst abuses employers routinely get away with in this country. An aggressively pro-worker and pro-union DoL would not be able to single-handedly revive labor’s fortunes, but it could undo some

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27 James Politi, “Joe Biden Announces Team to Steer US Economy Through Covid Crisis,” *Financial Times*, November 30, 2020; Thornton McEnery, “BlackRock Poised to Replace Goldman Sachs Inside the White House,” *New York Post*, November 30, 2020; David Dayen, “How BlackRock Rules the World,” *American Prospect*, September 27, 2018.

28 Gillian Tett, “Why the US Federal Reserve Turned Again to BlackRock for Help,” *Financial Times*, March 26, 2020.

of the Trump administration's worst policies and provide workers with a supportive hand in the midst of the crisis.

The leading contenders for labor secretary were Boston mayor Marty Walsh, Representative Andy Levin (D-MI), and California labor commissioner Julie Su.<sup>29</sup> Levin and Su had influential supporters in the labor movement, but Biden ultimately chose Walsh, a former head of the Boston Building and Construction Trades Council who's retained his popularity among the more blue-collar sections of organized labor. His long-standing personal links to Biden, as well as the strong backing he received from public employee unions like the AFT and the AFSCME, ultimately gave him the edge over his competitors.<sup>30</sup> Su probably would have been the best possible pick, considering her record of aggressive action against wage theft and misclassification in California. But organized labor should be generally happy with Walsh. The question is whether he will be able to use his administrative powers to raise workers' conditions and incomes at more than just the margins.

Labor was far more unified on the question of Biden's pick for United States Trade Representative (USTR), Katherine Tai. Tai served for years as the chief trade lawyer for the House Ways and Means Committee, and she played a key role in promoting Democratic priorities during the negotiations for the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) that replaced NAFTA last year. The AFL-CIO hailed her nomination as proof that "President-elect Biden is living up to his word to forge a bold new direction" on trade issues, particularly when it comes to labor,

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29 Eleanor Mueller and Megan Cassella, "Unions Disagree Over Biden's Labor Secretary Pick," *Politico*, November 16, 2020.

30 Josh Eidelson, "Boston Mayor Has Major Union Backing in Race to Be Labor Chief," *Bloomberg*, November 11, 2020; Josh Eidelson, "Michigan Lawmaker Has Union Support to Be Biden's Labor Chief," *Bloomberg*, November 10, 2020; Ben Penn and Josh Eidelson, "California's Su Rises in Biden Labor Chief Race as Unions Split," *Bloomberg Law*, November 24, 2020.

consumer, and environmental protections.<sup>31</sup> When it comes to China trade policy, however, Tai would represent continuity with the Trump administration rather than a new direction. She is reportedly just as hawkish on China as Robert Lighthizer, the Trump administration's USTR, and she does not appear poised to move quickly to lift Trump's wide-ranging tariffs on Chinese exports.<sup>32</sup> Industrial unions were pleased with Lighthizer's aggressive approach to China, and they will likely be pleased with Tai if the Senate confirms her nomination. It is far from clear, however, that Trump's China tariffs have done much of anything to boost the fortunes of US workers and industrial firms. If anything, they've boomeranged back on US companies and consumers in the form of higher prices and reciprocal measures by the Chinese government.<sup>33</sup>

The other executive agency of particular interest to labor is the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The board, which is perhaps best known for running union representation elections, has become a hotly contested partisan football in recent decades, precisely because of the difficulties of dealing with labor issues through Congress. The NLRB is a quasi-judicial body whose five-member board is tasked with enforcing the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), the law that governs conflict between workers and employers in the private sector. Board members are appointed by the president and serve five-year terms, with one board member's term expiring each year. In recent years, the board has been plagued by dysfunction and infighting between

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31 Richard Trumka, "Biden's USTR Pick Shows Commitment to America's Working Families," AFL-CIO, December 10, 2020.

32 Finbarr Bermingham, "Katherine Tai: Joe Biden's US Trade Chief Pick 'Unmatched' on China Issues, Would Not Be Soft on Beijing," South China Morning Post, December 10, 2020.

33 Jeanna Smialek and Ana Swanson, "American Consumers, Not China, Are Paying for Trump's Tariffs," New York Times, January 6, 2020.



Democrats and Republicans, and the Trump administration made moves to undermine career staff in favor of political appointees. These internal struggles have often delayed board rulings and disrupted the normal operations of the agency, a situation that tends to benefit employers over workers and unions.<sup>34</sup>

The Biden administration sent an important pro-union signal by taking the unprecedented step of firing Peter Robb, the board's aggressively pro-employer general counsel (GC). Reports suggest that a lawyer for the Communications Workers of America (CWA) is expected to be appointed as his replacement as GC, which would give her discretion over which cases to bring before the board.<sup>35</sup> There are currently four board members — three Republicans and one Democrat — and one vacancy. The Biden administration will certainly move to appoint relatively pro-labor board members and improve the agency's effectiveness. But it won't be able to do so right away, because the current Republican majority will remain in place until at least August 2021, when one of the Republican members' terms is set to expire. The Democrats' double victory in the Georgia Senate runoffs will allow Biden to alter the board's partisan balance earlier than he would have otherwise. It remains to be seen just how quickly this can be done, but once it is, the board will have an opportunity to reverse at least some of the harmful, pro-employer rulings the Trump board made over the last four years.<sup>36</sup>

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34 For background on the structure and operations of the board, see "About NLRB," NLRB.gov (accessed December 8, 2020). For an overview of recent conflicts at the NLRB, see Ian Kullgren and Andrew Hanna, "Dysfunction and Infighting Cripple Labor Agency," *Politico*, April 18, 2018.

35 Robert Iafolla, "Biden Names Acting Top NLRB Lawyer After a Pair of Firings," *Bloomberg Law*, January 26, 2021.

36 Robert Iafolla and Ian Kullgren, "Biden Can't Take Full Control Over NLRB Until Personnel Changes," *Bloomberg Law*, November 7, 2020; Robert M. Schwartz, "Will Biden Resuscitate the NLRB?" *Labor Notes*, December 7, 2020.

The Biden administration could pursue some progressive policy changes through executive and administrative action despite these severe challenges. A reinvigorated Wage and Hour Division (WHD), for example, could aggressively target wage theft, unpaid overtime, and misclassification. Biden could also leverage the federal government's vast contracting and purchasing power to make private contractors raise wages, improve health and safety standards, and boost working conditions for millions of workers. These would not be simply cosmetic changes; they would have a positive impact on many workers' lives if implemented. Even so, they would not be nearly as far-reaching and politically effective as congressional legislation, which is far from guaranteed even after the Georgia Senate sweep. These are arcane and bureaucratic measures that would operate largely outside the public eye, and they would likely be subjected to conservative judicial scrutiny and potential reversal by the next Republican administration.<sup>37</sup> It won't be totally impossible to win progressive, pro-worker measures from the Biden administration, but its scope of action will be significantly constrained by the limits of executive action as well as by employer and conservative opposition.

## LABOR'S DOUBLE BIND

Three weeks after the presidential election, the New York City-based Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), an affiliate of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), petitioned the NLRB for a union election at a 1,500-worker Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama. Amazon is one of the great corporate linchpins of global capitalism, and its importance to the

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37 Harold Meyerson, "How Biden Can Raise Some Wages Even if Congress Won't," *American Prospect*, December 4, 2020; Heidi Shierholz, "Use the President's Contracting Power to Improve Workers' Lives," *The American Prospect*, November 24, 2020.

economy has only grown during the pandemic. As stay-at-home orders accelerate the shift toward online commerce, the company has gone on a hiring binge of unprecedented proportions. Over the course of 2020, Amazon hired an average of 1,400 new workers per day, both at its corporate offices in Seattle and in its growing archipelago of warehouses around the country. It now has nearly 1.2 million employees globally, a stunning 50 percent increase in just one year. These numbers, as staggering as they are, actually undercount the number of workers who do their jobs with or through Amazon in some fashion. It leaves out the roughly 100,000 workers the company hired for the holiday season, as well as the 500,000 drivers who deliver Amazon packages but are not company employees. Simply put, a revival of the US labor movement is unlikely without a major breakthrough at Amazon. A crack in this fortress could send a signal to workers across the country that the hour of organization is finally here.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, Amazon has endless resources to combat unionization, and it is not hesitating to use them. It has retained former Republican NLRB members now with Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, the notoriously anti-union law firm, to fight the unionization campaign. A recent leak of internal corporate documents revealed an extensive surveillance system that Amazon uses to track the activities of labor and environmental activists in Europe, and the company has employed similar tactics in its efforts to fight unionization here in the United States. If the UAW's repeated failures to organize the Southern auto industry are any guide, the Alabama union drive can expect not just employer opposition but an all-out anti-union campaign by the state's political class. In 2014 and 2019,

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38 Dave Jamieson, "Amazon Warehouse Workers File for Union Election in Alabama," *Huffington Post*, November 24, 2020; Karen Weise, "Pushed by Pandemic, Amazon Goes on a Hiring Spree Without Equal," *New York Times*, November 27, 2020.

Tennessee Republicans vociferously opposed efforts to organize Volkswagen's Chattanooga plant, including personal visits by the state's governor to directly pressure workers to vote against the union. It is difficult to organize workers in any part of the country today. But it is doubly difficult to organize workers in the South, where the general political climate is almost uniformly hostile to worker organization, and where unions are disdained as an outside imposition from benighted locales like New York City or Detroit.<sup>39</sup>

The viciously anti-union Trump administration is gone, but it appears as if labor's already difficult legal-political environment will only become more challenging. One of the more troubling results of the November elections was the passage of Proposition 22 in California, which will allow Uber, DoorDash, and other gig economy companies to continue classifying their workers as independent contractors rather than employees. It is likely that these companies will try to take their victory in California nationwide, as other states weigh how to approach the question of worker classification in the age of digital labor platforms.<sup>40</sup>

The Right's biggest victory under Trump was the successful completion of its decades-long campaign to remake the federal judiciary in its image. His three Supreme Court appointments generated the most attention, but the Republicans' top-to-bottom overhaul of the lower federal courts was no less important. Since taking office in 2017, Trump has successfully appointed over two hundred federal judges, which includes more than fifty judges to the pivotal US Courts of Appeals. These judges will have lifetime

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39 Jay Greene, "Amazon Effort to Thwart Alabama Union Drive Suffers Early Defeat at Labor Board," *Washington Post*, December 3, 2020; Lauren Kaori Gurley, "Secret Amazon Reports Expose the Company's Surveillance of Labor and Environmental Groups," *Vice*, November 23, 2020; Bobby Allyn, "Tennessee Workers Reject Union at Volkswagen Plant — Again," NPR, June 15, 2019.

40 Dave Lee, "Uber and Lyft in Driving Seat to Remake US Labour Laws," *Financial Times*, November 5, 2020.

tenure, and many of them are currently in their thirties and forties, so they will have a significant impact on American jurisprudence for decades to come.<sup>41</sup>

Amy Coney Barrett's ascension to the Supreme Court gives us a sense of what to expect from that body, as well as from Trump-appointed judges in lower federal courts. Just before her appointment to the highest court, Barrett joined a ruling that denied overtime pay to a group of Grubhub food delivery workers.<sup>42</sup> In 2019, she and three other Trump appointees joined the majority in a case called *Kleber v. CareFusion Corp.*, which narrowed the scope of federal age discrimination law on the basis of a highly questionable statutory interpretation.<sup>43</sup> As the legal scholar and labor activist James Gray Pope has argued, the federal courts are on a path back to the infamous *Lochner* era, when the judiciary was implacably hostile to not just union organization but popular power and democratic rule in general.<sup>44</sup> Barrett and the rest of the Supreme Court's reactionary majority will soon have a new opportunity to turn the clock back in the *Cedar Point Nursery v. Hassid* case, which addresses a California regulation that grants union organizers access to agricultural employers' property in order to talk to workers. The nursery argues that such access amounts to an unconstitutional "taking" of its property under the Fifth Amendment. If the court rules in its favor, it will open the door to fundamental attacks not

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41 John Gramlich, "How Trump Compares With Other Recent Presidents in Appointing Federal Judges," Pew Research Center, January 13, 2021; Moiz Syed, "Charting the Long-Term Impact of Trump's Judicial Appointments," *ProPublica*, October 30, 2020.

42 Walker Bragman and David Sirota, "Supreme Court Nominee Amy Coney Barrett Is an Enemy of Workers," *Jacobin*, September 27, 2020.

43 Andrew Strom, "Amy Coney Barrett Is as Anti-Worker as the Rest of Trump's Judges," *OnLabor*, October 7, 2020.

44 Alice Herman, "How Amy Coney Barrett's Appointment Would Escalate the War on Workers," *In These Times*, September 28, 2020.

just on union organizing but on basic government regulations of private business, like health and fire inspections, too.<sup>45</sup>

The US labor movement finds itself trapped in a vexing double bind. It cannot make new breakthroughs or exercise power without a major shift in the broader political terrain. But, at the same time, it can't reshape the political terrain without exercising a level of power it currently does not have. Unless it can forge stronger alliances with the forces that powered the Bernie Sanders campaigns and reorient itself toward a more wide-ranging strategy of popular mobilization, it will keep struggling to defend itself and make new gains. The pandemic or other crises to come could generate shocks that set a critical mass of workers into motion, but these could just as well strengthen the forces of reaction. To a significant extent, this outcome is in the hands of the Republican Party, which is facing protracted internal conflict after Trump's most fanatical supporters stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. In any case, the decade we have entered seems decisive. We will witness either US labor's dramatic rebirth or its further slide toward political oblivion. If the latter happens, the prospects for whatever remains of American democracy will be grim indeed. ☹

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45 Ian Millhiser, "The Supreme Court Will Hear a New Attack on Unions. The Implications Are Profound," *Vox*, November 17, 2020.

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The end of the Trump presidency is a precarious moment for immigrants' rights movements. While the departure of an openly nativist president is something to be celebrated, we should be wary of the Biden administration's promise to return immigration politics to the pre-Trump status quo.

# Immigration Strategy in the Biden Era

Suzy Lee

It's hard to avoid hyperbole when considering the Donald Trump presidency. Years from now, it may be possible to look back at this period of time and construct a measured understanding of what happened and what it meant in the context of neoliberal capitalism's transition to whatever else it may become, but the drama of the current moment — a collision of public health, economic, and political crises — makes it difficult to write with anything other than panic and lamentation. This is true for almost every major issue on the political horizon, but it can feel especially so for immigration, which the Trump administration named as a central cause of all these crises. Immigrants were carriers of pestilence who, in their industriousness, stole jobs from native-born Americans and, in

their sloth, siphoned resources from the social safety net — all while hijacking American democracy with their fraudulent votes. Consequently, the solution offered for these problems has targeted immigrants or immigration policy, which, in turn, required the Left to focus its political energies on immigration in defense.

The whole situation has been made more complicated by the reality that COVID-19 does present legitimate public health justifications for the restriction of human movement. The exigencies of public health forced the machinery of international migration — from airplanes and buses to consular bureaucracies — to a halt, while at the same time catalyzing the kind of acute economic crisis that exacerbates populist nativism under even the best circumstances. The situation is a holy mess, and it can be difficult to imagine what will happen to immigration policy now. How do we make sense of what has happened? How does the Left orient itself with regard to immigration under these conditions? How many of these changes represent foundational shifts in the American political economy that will impose long-term constraints on what the Left can hope to achieve? And what of the incoming Joe Biden administration, the tenuous Democratic majorities in Congress? Can any progress be made in immigrants' rights in the next four years?

## **THE LEGACY OF TRUMP, SUCH AS IT IS**

The Trump administration's impact on immigration should be examined along two dimensions: (1) the legal, bureaucratic, and material effects of the policy changes initiated in the last four years, and (2) the effect of those initiatives, and the rhetoric that accompanied them, on the political discourse and public opinion around immigration. Of course, the two are interrelated, with many of the Trump administration's most dramatic policy initiatives, such as promises of building "the wall" between Mexico and the United

States or the first iterations of the Muslim ban, intended more to create a public relations impact than as actual policy. Even those policy changes that were more workmanlike — the hundreds of bureaucratic changes that, without much fanfare, increased the difficulty of migrating to the United States through authorized routes — contributed to a general atmosphere of inhospitality to immigration.<sup>1</sup> Still, it is useful to make the distinction between these forms because, while there have been modifications in both, the changes in policy are comparatively easy to reverse and do not have the potential to shift the way immigration is approached in the United States. The changes in the political discourse do.

## **Impact on Policy**

In the realm of policy, while the Trump administration acted with an aggressiveness and cruelty that had not been seen in immigration politics in some time, most of the reforms implemented were not, in their approach, qualitatively different from what had come before. The one exception to this might be regarding involuntary migrations (refugee and asylum policy), where the administration used its discretion to set yearly admissions ceilings and control foreign diplomacy in order to drastically reduce the number of asylum seekers and refugees who are able enter the United States.<sup>2</sup> For almost everything else, Trump's interventions relied

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1 Sarah Pierce and Jessica Bolter, "Dismantling and Reconstructing the U.S. Immigration System: A Catalog of Changes Under the Trump Presidency," Migration Policy Institute, July 2020.

2 The Trump administration lowered the ceiling on refugee resettlement for fiscal year 2017 from 110,000 (a number set by the Obama administration) to 50,000, then lowered it again in subsequent years to 18,000. This number was set prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Migration Policy Institute, "U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted, 1980-Present," 2020). Actual refugee admissions declined by 77 percent in the first two years of the Trump administration, from 97,000 in 2016 to 22,471 in 2018. Notably, 2018 was the first year since the passage of the Refugee Act in 1980 that the United

on legislation that had been put in place during, or practices that had been developed by, prior administrations.<sup>3</sup> For example, the Trump administration was more aggressive in its attempts to force state and local governments to participate in immigration enforcement, but the basis for the attack on sanctuary cities was laid well before Trump assumed office. The constitutionally questionable practice of enlisting state and local governments in the enforcement of immigration law, as well as the statutory provision Trump’s Department of Justice used to withhold federal funding from sanctuary cities, are products of the last round of immigration reform, which occurred in the mid-1990s.<sup>4</sup> Immigration has been more difficult, and immigrants have experienced more repression, than at any other point in the past thirty years — but ultimately, this has represented an escalation of the oppressiveness of a long-standing system, not a system redesign.

Much more dramatic changes were imposed on the immigration system after the outbreak of COVID-19 — including the

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States was not the world’s leader in refugee resettlement (Jynnah Radford and Phillip Connor, “Canada Now Leads the World in Refugee Resettlement, Surpassing the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, June 19, 2019). To curtail the number of migrants permitted to remain in the United States while awaiting adjudication of their asylum claims, the Trump administration initiated a number of bilateral programs that would require asylum applicants to either await adjudication in other countries or be deported if they had failed to meet newly imposed requirements. To obtain the cooperation of partner countries like Mexico and Guatemala, the Trump administration threatened economic sanctions, including imposing tariffs, taxing remittances, and banning travel (Pierce and Bolter, “Dismantling and Reconstructing”).

3 This has been pointed out by many observers of immigration in the United States. See, e.g., Bill Ong Hing, *American Presidents, Deportations, and Human Rights Violations: From Carter to Trump* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

4 The statutory provision is 8 U.S. Code §1373, which forbids state and local governments from prohibiting or restricting communication with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the precursor to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

suspension of most types of entry visas for permanent migration and for some types of temporary migration, as well as bans on any form of entry from a wide swath of countries.<sup>5</sup> The Trump administration chose to interpret pandemic-related national emergency powers broadly, ordering immigration restrictions that go much further than what would be required by the logic of virus containment. Still, these proclamations have time-limiting sunset clauses — and, as with all of the pre-COVID executive orders, they can be undone by the Biden administration with a simple executive signature, which the Biden campaign promised and has already started to do. Rebuilding the infrastructure to process the flow of immigration will take some time, but procedurally speaking, there are few obstacles to returning to the status quo ante.

## Impact on Political Discourse

Of course, the more important questions are whether we would want to return to that status quo ante in the first place, and what impact the Trump presidency has had on our ability to push for something different. I'll focus first on Trump's impact on the political discourse and address the structural constraints imposed by the political economic moment in a later section. There's no denying that Trump's impact on the conversation around immigration was

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5 White House, "Presidential Proclamation 10014 of April 22, 2020: Suspension of Entry of Immigrants Who Present a Risk to the United States Labor Market during the Economic Recovery Following the 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak," *Federal Register* 85, no. 81 (April 27, 2020): 23441–44; White House, "Proclamation 10052 of June 22, 2020: Suspension of Entry of Immigrants and Nonimmigrants Who Present a Risk to the United States Labor Market During the Economic Recovery Following the 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak," *Federal Register* 85, no. 123 (June 25, 2020): 38263–67; Pierce and Bolter, "Dismantling and Reconstructing" (finding that, by mid-2020, the Trump administration had imposed travel bans on thirty-one countries in response to COVID-19).

The term "immigration" in American law technically refers to visas for permanent migration. "Nonimmigrant" visas are issued to people who enter under temporary migration categories.

significant and potentially long-lasting. Because we couldn't look away from the humanitarian crisis exacerbated by Trump's anti-immigrant policies or ignore the constant scapegoating of immigrants for the country's economic and social woes, American politics seemed to revolve around the question of immigration during the four years of Trump's presidency. And the Trump administration, with its overt nativism, seemed to be willing to push the public debate into terrain it had not occupied since the early part of the twentieth century.

For decades, the immigration debate had been mainly limited to the treatment of those migrants that could be labeled — either because of their irregular legal status or a violation of the criminal code — as “illegal” or criminal. Mainstream politicians described “legal” migrants as virtuous, hardworking, modern incarnations of the “nation of immigrants” American mythos — and exempted them from the rhetoric of crisis that was deployed to justify an increasingly repressive state apparatus. A more generalized antagonism toward all forms of migration was dismissed as the viewpoint of an extremist fringe. The Trump presidency gave that fringe view a legitimate national platform, and suddenly, the leading Republican position on immigration was no longer limited to more effective enforcement of existing immigration laws and resistance to amnesty for unauthorized migrants, but involved a rethinking of the immigration regime altogether. In 2017, Trump backed a bill introduced by conservative Republican senators Tom Cotton and David Perdue that sought to reduce overall immigration levels by 50 percent, drastically cutting immigration on the basis of family reunification.<sup>6</sup> Given the low levels of congressional support for it, the purpose of the bill was primarily rhetorical, not to implement

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6 115th US Congress, Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment Act, S. 354 (2017).



actual reform. It indicated that “legal” migrants were no longer protected from anti-immigrant attacks. This signal was amplified in hundreds of ways — whether through Trump’s rhetoric, which openly disparaged all categories of immigrants, or through the slew of executive actions that sought to erode migrants’ access to legal status or political participation: decimation of the refugee and other humanitarian migration programs, the repeal of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), increased institutional support for denaturalization (the stripping of citizenship from foreign-born Americans), and procedural changes that raised the requirements for permanent resident status.

Despite Trump’s populist slogans about American greatness and jobs for native workers, the evidence suggests that these policies were not actually about decreasing the flow of migrants into the country. Migration through authorized channels in reality *increased* slightly in the first three years of the Trump administration, from 7,136,600 in 2016 to 7,169,639 in 2019.<sup>7</sup> The decline in permanent migrations — primarily refugee admissions and family-sponsored migrations — was more than mitigated by admissions through temporary guest worker programs, which increased by more than 200,000 in that time. Agricultural workers entering through the H-2A program alone increased by nearly 100,000.<sup>8</sup> While the number of undocumented migrants is always difficult to calculate, existing estimates from the early Trump years suggest that this population did not experience a significant decline.<sup>9</sup> And

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7 US Department of Homeland Security, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2016, 2019. These numbers include new arrivals with immigrant visas (i.e., green card recipients, including refugee visas) and all persons entering the United States with nonimmigrant visas (issued form I-94), excluding diplomats, temporary visitors for tourism or business, transit visa holders, and commuter students.

8 US Department of Homeland Security, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2016, 2019.

9 Randy Capps et al., “Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States: Stable

this is not surprising. Until the pandemic, there was no great shift in the American political economy that would have indicated a need for a change in the flow of labor into the country. The first three years of the Trump era, in terms of the American economy, were not much different from the final years of Obama's presidency. Levels of growth and employment were comparable; there was no major transformation in production or service provisions that significantly increased or decreased the need for immigrant workers. Trump's nativism may have been sincere, but its goal did not seem to be to reduce the number of immigrants entering the country — just to immiserate their lives and make them more vulnerable to exploitation.

What should we make of the shifts the Trump presidency provoked in the public discourse on immigration? On the one hand, these shifts have increased the insecurity of immigrants. Hate crimes against immigrant groups, particularly Muslims and Latinos, increased precipitously.<sup>10</sup> The emboldening of the far right, combined with the risks caused by the Trump administration's more aggressive anti-immigration policies, has pushed immigrants further to the margins of society, making them not only less likely to challenge employers or participate in political action but even to access medical care during the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the Trump presidency has not produced a wide-ranging nativist backlash against immigration among the general public. Opinion polls on immigration through 2019 continued

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Numbers, Changing Origins," Migration Policy Institute, 2020.

10 See, e.g., Brad Brooks, "Victims of Anti-Latino Hate Crimes Soar in U.S.: FBI Report," Reuters, November 13, 2019; CAIR New York, "CAIR-NY Reports 74% Increase in Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes Since Trump's Election," March 15, 2018.

11 Amanda Holpuch, "I Live in Fear': Under Trump, Life for America's Immigrants Can Change in a Flash," *Guardian*, October 18, 2018; Miriam Jordan, "We're Petrified': Immigrants Afraid to Seek Medical Care for Coronavirus," *New York Times*, March 18, 2020.

to report that the vast majority of Americans support permitting undocumented immigrants to remain in the United States and prefer legal immigration rates to remain at current levels or increase. The percentage of people who support a decrease in legal immigration actually declined in the first year of the Trump presidency.<sup>12</sup> Even in the middle of the pandemic, after unemployment levels had skyrocketed, a supermajority of Americans surveyed — including a majority of Republicans — believed that immigrant workers did not compete with native-born workers, rather filling jobs that US workers did not want.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this should be a source of relief, a reason to believe that the tone of the political debate around immigration can become less strident under the Biden administration.

But if the immigration debate returns to the pre-Trump status quo, it will also be an opportunity missed. Ugly as it was, the Trump presidency's extremism helped to clarify the conversation around immigration. While the parameters of the immigration debate over the past forty years — built on an opposition between “illegal” migrants and “legal” ones — may have offered some protection for the majority of immigrants who live in the United States with authorization, they also created a political catch-22. This logic not only produces the current system, with its harsh enforcement measures against “illegal” migrants, but, as long as the level of immigration the state is willing to authorize remains below the number of those who enter, it justifies the intensification of these measures over time. Within this system of reasoning, without

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12 Pew Research Center, “Public’s Priorities for U.S. Asylum Policy: More Judges for Cases, Safe Conditions for Migrants,” August 12, 2019; Pew Research Center, “Shifting Public Views on Legal Immigration Into the U.S.,” June 28, 2018.

13 Jens Manuel Krogstad, Mark Hugo Lopez, and Jeffrey S. Passel, “A Majority of Americans Say Immigrants Mostly Fill Jobs U.S. Citizens Do Not Want,” Pew Research Center, June 10, 2020.

a *deus ex machina* that miraculously stops the migration flow, there is no long-term solution for those who are outraged by the human rights violations required to enforce migration restriction. Amnesties fail to address the underlying problem and, moreover, can trigger backlashes among those who really believe in the legitimacy of the legal/illegal distinction. The Trump administration's appalling detention and border policies took things to their logical extreme, and in so doing, made explicit the moral absurdity of the entire edifice. To this, Trump added his attacks on legal migration, creating an opening for a broader discussion about the nation's restrictionist immigration framework.

For the most part, the Left failed to leverage this opening to make an argument against American restrictionism. Instead, the conversation remained focused on humanitarian questions. This placed Democrats in the shameful position of condemning practices not so different in kind from those that occurred under Democratic presidents, directing their outrage not toward the acts themselves but toward differences of degree — e.g., the Trump administration was bad not because it caged children, but because it caged more children, for longer, and with less shame than previous administrations had. This position is indefensible. The other response, which has been to promote another version of the “comprehensive immigration reform” that has been circulating around Washington, DC, for two decades, is equally indefensible. It merely repeats the amnesty-for-enforcement trade-off that has been proven to fail.

There is no defensible position that seeks to preserve the immigration system as it is, that respects the distinctions — whether among workers (native or foreign) or among immigrants (illegal or legal) — on which it is built. These distinctions exist to serve the interests of employers, who use the vulnerabilities they produce to drive down wages. Worse, immigrant workers deprived

of rights (or in possession of rights they're afraid to claim for fear of losing their permission to remain in the country) are more difficult to organize, which undermines workers' attempts to cohere as a political force. Pointing to immigrant workers is one of the most effective tools capitalists have for distracting native workers from class struggle, invoking identity in service of material interests. Trump was a master at this, sneering about migrants from "shithole countries" while claiming to empathize with the suffering of American workers. And discrimination based on national origin is more robust to liberal humanitarian critiques than other forms of discrimination, because, among identities, citizenship is one of the few that are still considered legitimate grounds for discrimination in liberal societies. The Left's answer to Trump must address these realities and insist that *they* are the reason the "immigration problem" festers in our politics. Protecting immigrant workers should not be merely an act of humanitarianism but an act of solidarity that rejects the terms of the problem altogether. During the Trump years, even socialist leaders like Bernie Sanders failed to consistently make this case.<sup>14</sup>

For better or for worse, the Trump presidency changed the way we talk about immigration. Already, politicians on both the Right and the center left are trying to change it back.<sup>15</sup> We should resist this urge and push policymakers in a more emancipatory direction.

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COVID-19

It may turn out that the legacy of the Trump administration is less relevant to the next four years than the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting economic disaster. Here, it's even more

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14 Jason Lemon, "Bernie Sanders Says U.S. Can't Have 'Open Borders' Because Poor People Will Come 'From All Over the World,'" *Newsweek*, April 8, 2019.

15 Jordain Carney, "Biden Win Revives Immigration Talk," *The Hill*, November 17, 2020.

difficult to assess the long-term effects. What we know is that the pandemic lockdown precipitated an economic catastrophe, one that disproportionately affected workers, who lost jobs in the tens of millions in the first months of the shutdown (estimates of job loss between March and June of 2020 range from 20 to 40 million — somewhere between 12 percent and 24 percent of the total civilian labor force).<sup>16</sup> While the stock market rebounded quickly, returning to pre-pandemic levels before the end of the year, employment recovered more slowly. By December of 2020, official unemployment numbers had declined to 6.7 percent, but this statistic does not account for the additional 4 million people who have dropped out of the labor force altogether since February.<sup>17</sup> These job losses disproportionately affected low-wage workers, but they were concentrated in certain niches of the service sector, particularly leisure and hospitality, where employment levels remain at 77 percent of what they were pre-pandemic. Employment in other sectors, including retail, transportation and warehousing, and construction, returned to near pre-pandemic levels by the end of the year. Employment levels in some industries, including agriculture and other essential food production, fulfillment and operations, and retail, held steady or even grew.<sup>18</sup> In the first months of the pandemic, employment in agriculture actually *increased* from the same period in 2019.<sup>19</sup>

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16 Eric Morath, “How Many U.S. Workers Have Lost Jobs During Coronavirus Pandemic? There Are Several Ways to Count,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 3, 2020.

17 US Bureau of Labor Statistics. The civilian labor force participation rate — that is, the number of people who are currently employed or who had actively sought employment in the previous four weeks — is the lowest it has been since the 1970s, when increases in women’s employment started to drive up overall labor force participation numbers.

18 US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

19 US Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service.

What impact has this had on immigration politics? While the scale of employment loss and economic hardship would typically feed nativist responses, the pandemic is so overwhelmingly and obviously a cause of the crisis that efforts to turn popular anger toward immigrants have had little traction. As always, there remains an extremist fringe, but the more general culture war has largely coalesced around the pandemic response itself — with the Right too focused on masks and lockdown rules to be bothered about immigration. This is also a reflection of the idiosyncrasies of a pandemic-driven crisis. Even if the pandemic had bred more anti-immigrant sentiment, it's not clear what could be done about it. The risk to public health has made immigration enforcement actions in communities unjustifiable. Besides which, governments had already imposed some of the most comprehensive travel restrictions in living memory, not just across international borders but domestically. If these factors have dulled nativist impulses for now, there remains a question about their long-term impact on public opinion. This is likely to be the first time most people have experienced a suspension of the mass migration that has characterized American life for the past fifty years. Moreover, it happened for a legitimate public health reason, and even if it had little effect in preventing the spread of the virus in the United States, there are enough examples of successful COVID-19 management involving migration restrictions to legitimize closing borders as a policy instrument. Will the lesson we carry into the future be that the United States did not shut our borders early enough and tightly enough?

For capital, the lessons of the pandemic are more straightforward. First, the COVID-19 crisis provided further confirmation of trends we have seen throughout the neoliberal period, that the profitability of capital is not directly linked to domestic employment. Nearly 10 percent of service-sector jobs — the category in

which offshoring is most difficult to achieve — were eliminated without any long-term effect on the valuation of the stock markets. Among those jobs that remained, the pandemic forced an experiment with offsite work, not only demonstrating that many of them could be done remotely but also accelerating the development of management tools to make this mode of work more efficient. The business media has written throughout the pandemic about the normalization of “working from home,” but such a shift will do more than save businesses the expense of maintaining office space — it will make skills-based employment visas like the H-1B or EB visas even more irrelevant, eliminating any support the immigrants’ rights movement might have expected from the companies that made use of them.<sup>20</sup>

But what of the role of “essential” workers? If the pandemic revealed which jobs were superfluous to the economy or could be offshored, did it not also highlight the social value of those workers — many of them immigrants earning low wages — who were not expendable, whose work was truly essential to the functioning of society?<sup>21</sup> The silver lining of the pandemic for the Left has been the hope that this demonstration will have some political consequence. If it does, it will not be because capitalists learned a lesson from the pandemic. Being essential to society is not equivalent to being essential to the economy, to the profitability of capital. The sectors where most essential workers could be found — K-12 education, care work for children and the elderly, health care, agriculture and food production — are either primarily

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20 Rob McLean, “These Companies Plan to Make Working From Home the New Normal. As in Forever,” *CNN Business*, June 25, 2020. |

21 Only a week after suspending routine visa services in mid-March, the Trump administration was forced to create exceptions for H2 visa holders in both categories A (agricultural workers) and B (nonagricultural temporary workers) because they were “essential to the economy and food security” of the country. US Department of State, “Important Announcement on H2 Visas,” March 26, 2020.



public or nonprofit, or far from the economy's leading profit centers. Workers might be able to win concessions from employers, but pressure here will be unlikely to produce policy changes at the national level. The one exception might be the big winners of the COVID-19 pandemic: businesses in the fulfillment and logistic industry, which do not have the option of moving their warehouses abroad. Many in the labor movement have already identified this sector as crucial to labor's prospects, and I can only add that, like all geographically bound industries, it disproportionately hires foreign-born workers, making immigrant organizing and migrant-native solidarity critical to this effort.<sup>22</sup>

## THE BIDEN ERA

Joe Biden's presidential campaign was run on the promise of a return to the Obama era. With regard to immigration, this translated to a pledge to immediately rescind Trump's executive orders and to revive some version of the comprehensive immigration reform that failed in 2013.<sup>23</sup> Despite some rhetoric in the weeks immediately following the election that suggested the administration might retreat from this position, it looks as though the Biden White House will follow through on its promises.<sup>24</sup> Biden's nominee for secretary of Homeland Security (who will oversee border security and immigration enforcement), Alejandro Mayorkas, is

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22 For example, 22.1 percent of workers in the warehousing and storage industry are foreign-born, compared to 14.6 percent of the total non-agricultural labor force. US Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey.

23 "The Biden Plan for Securing Our Values as a Nation of Immigrants," [joebiden.com/immigration](https://joebiden.com/immigration).

24 Franco Ordoñez, "On Immigration, Activists' Demands May Exceed Biden Realities," NPR, December 13, 2020; John Burnett, "Biden Pledges to Dismantle Trump's Sweeping Immigration Changes — But Can He Do That?" NPR, September 14, 2020; Nick Miroff, Maria Sacchetti, Abigail Hauslohner, and Arelis R. Hernández, "Biden's Policies on Immigration," *Washington Post*, December 2, 2020.

a former Obama appointee who has been called the “creator” of the DACA program, the policy that has been a rallying point for immigrant activists in the past decade.<sup>25</sup> On his first day in office, Biden repealed Trump’s Muslim ban, suspended work on the southern border wall, and issued a one-hundred-day moratorium on deportations. Perhaps more surprising, the Biden administration also sent a broad immigration reform bill to Congress that — while maintaining the essential amnesty-for-enforcement framework — is much more ambitious in its expansion of rights for undocumented immigrants than its 2013 iteration. It offers immediate legal relief to a broad swath of undocumented immigrants and makes some categories of humanitarian and labor migrants immediately eligible for legal permanent residence. It promises to remove obstacles to legal immigration, including eliminating long-term bans on immigration that are currently imposed on individuals who overstay their visas, clearing visa backlogs, and providing for the temporary admission of family-sponsored immigrants while they await their green cards. It also commits to addressing some of the vulnerabilities of immigrants in the workplace, offering protection from deportation to those who experience workplace retaliation. And while the proposal does not reject enforcement altogether, it does try to finesse the issue in a way that distinguishes it from previous versions of comprehensive immigration reform: increased funding for enforcement will be spent on better standards of care for detainees and improved surveillance technology rather than armed personnel.<sup>26</sup>

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25 Shaun Courtney, “DACA Creator Mayorkas Tops Biden Homeland Security Speculation,” *Bloomberg Government*, October 2, 2020.

26 “Fact Sheet: President Biden Sends Immigration Bill to Congress as Part of His Commitment to Modernize our Immigration System,” White House, January 20, 2021.

Given the Democrats' slim majorities in Congress, we might be safe in assuming that this proposal is as much a symbolic move by the Biden administration as the 2017 bill was for Trump's. There is almost no chance that the proposal will be enacted in its entirety — and the Biden administration appears to acknowledge this.<sup>27</sup> What does matter, however, is that the Biden administration has signaled it is willing to open a broad public debate about immigration reform, beyond merely what is required to undo Trump-era policies. For the Left, this presents opportunities and hazards.

To the extent that this proposal represents the largest expansion of immigrants' rights put forth by a US president in recent decades, the Left should support the effort. Even if only some pieces of what is offered come to pass, permanent resident status and citizenship for millions of workers is significant. Even if we reject as fallacy the idea that immigrant participation in politics will always and automatically be progressive, a widespread amnesty is the kind of reform that has the potential to lay the foundation for a more radical shift. As with any reform, whether it results in a deeper radicalization will depend entirely on the messages with which the reform is delivered.<sup>28</sup> When amnesty and enforcement are packaged together, as they have been in previous comprehensive immigration reform efforts, the inevitable meaning conveyed is that the problem of immigration is one of implementation — better enforcement fixes the problem, while amnesty cancels out the effects of past mistakes. If it works, the only worldview that will be reinforced is one of liberal technocracy; if it fails, it will lay the groundwork for even greater repression. When legalization or amnesty is separated from enforcement — or, better, combined

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27 Laura Barrón-López, Anita Kumar, and Sabrina Rodriguez, "Biden Open to Breaking His Immigration Bill Into Pieces, *Politico*, January 26, 2021.

28 Andre Gorz, "Reform and Revolution," *Socialist Register* 5 (1968).

with a scaling back of the enforcement apparatus — the basic legitimacy of immigration restriction, and the arbitrariness of the native/immigrant divide, can be made an issue. Already, there are voices on the Right arguing that Biden’s proposal, in combination with immigrant rights advocates’ challenges to the enforcement system, portends a reorientation of immigration policy.<sup>29</sup> They are not entirely wrong — the amnesty provisions of Biden’s proposal *could* mean this, but only if we make it clear this is their purpose by separating them from the enforcement provisions.

The Biden proposal’s enforcement provisions seem to be threading a needle between the critiques of the current enforcement system and the parameters of the traditional amnesty-for-enforcement framework. The proposal is carefully written to suggest that increased enforcement funding will be used for criminal law enforcement activities rather than immigration enforcement. The problem with this kind of formulation, as we have seen, is how easily the definition of “criminality” can be expanded to include various forms of migration. Moreover, whatever the intentions of the current administration, there is very little it can do to ensure that the surveillance technology developed with this funding will not be turned against all migrants with a change of political winds. Finally, conceding anything on enforcement, which legitimizes the principle of restriction, increases the likelihood that those winds will blow against migrants.

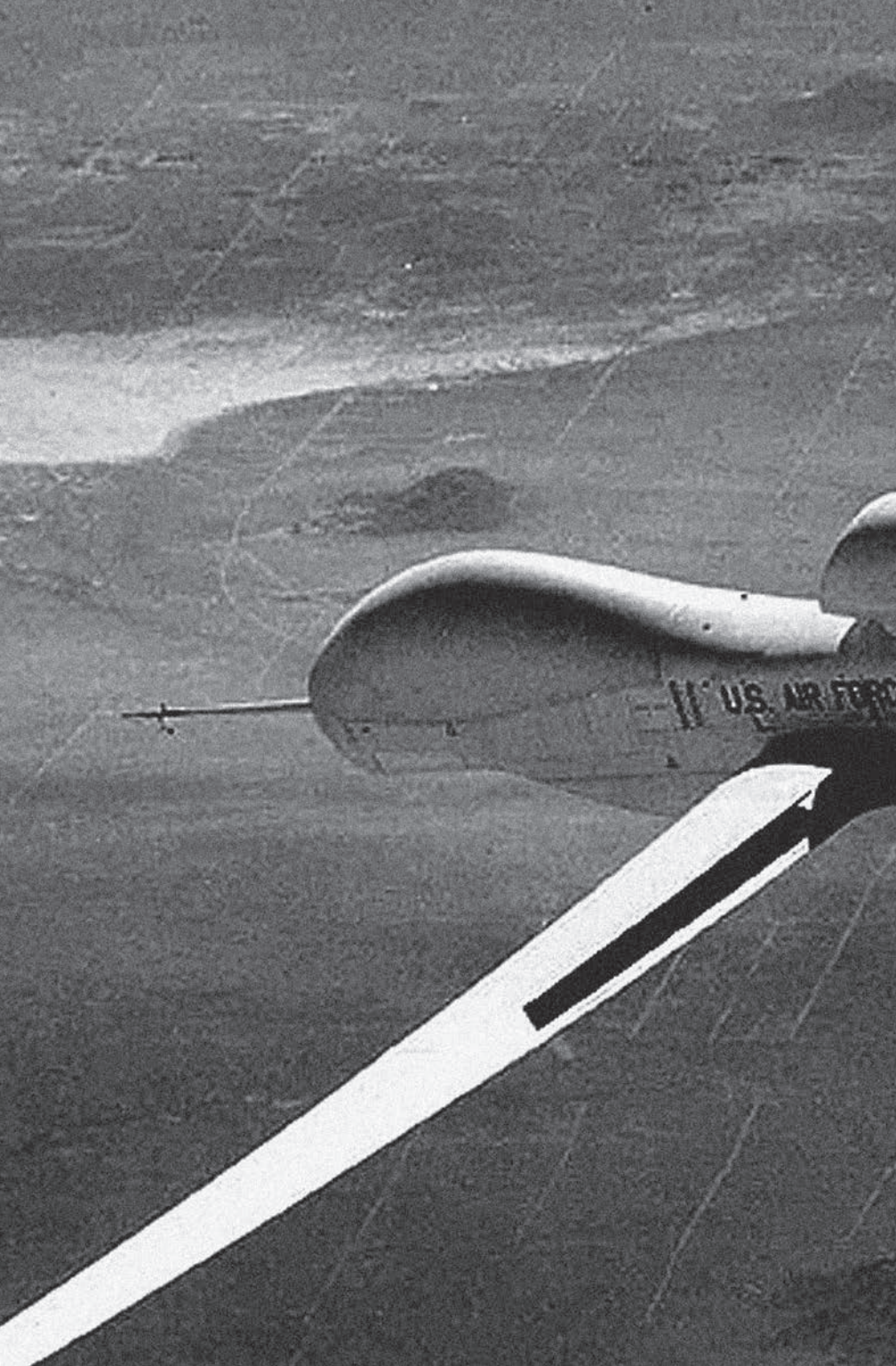
This is the primary hazard of the Biden administration’s immigration push. Keeping the issue at the center of American politics, when the Democrats’ tenuous hold on power ensures a protracted and unwieldy negotiation, risks making immigration a scapegoat for political deadlock and polarization. If the Biden administration

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29 See, e.g., Mark Krikorian, “Biden’s Radical Immigration Proposal,” *National Review*, January 25, 2021.

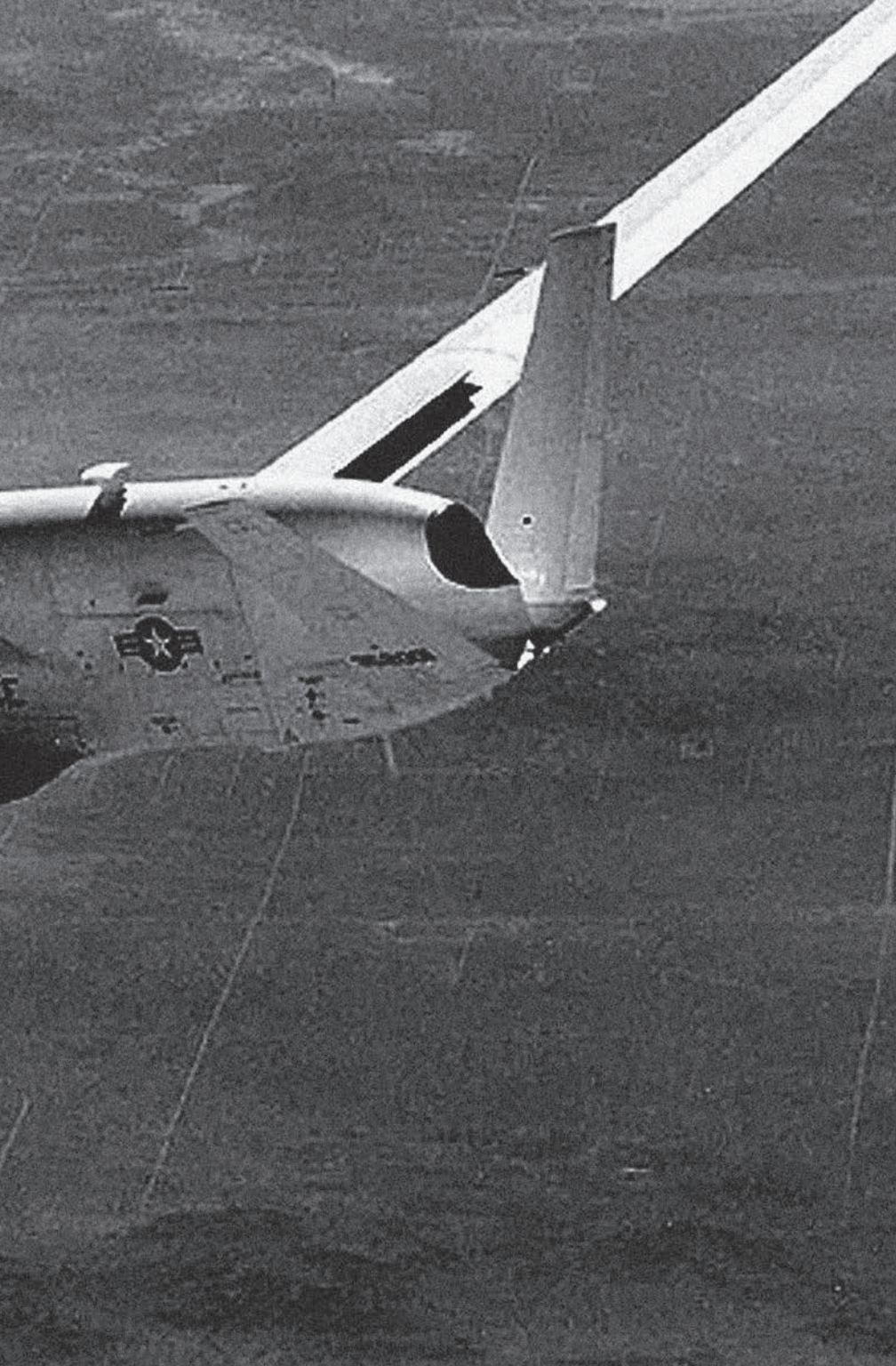
does little to address the economic and social catastrophe we are living through, while spending what little political capital it has on a grand immigration reform it cannot win, it is painting a target on immigrants' backs for the next right-wing populist demagogue who takes office.

This is what the Left must fight against as we engage in the immigration debate. We should publicly and consistently assert that the fight for immigrants' rights is justified not only by a humanitarian logic but by a strategic logic that understands an expansion of rights for immigrant workers can strengthen the working class as a whole. Ultimately, the most important thing the Left must do is refuse to allow debates around immigration reform to distract from the crucial work of building working-class power. No version of the comprehensive immigration reforms the Biden administration might win would go far enough to eliminate the divisions in the working class created by a restrictionist immigration regime — or even the human rights violations to which immigrants are subjected. As long as some form of immigration restriction exists, it will always be an obstacle to workers' solidarity and a reason for repression. ☞



U.S. AIR FORCE





Joe Biden is likely to continue the shadow wars that Barack Obama honed and Donald Trump preserved. Relying on air power and local surrogates, this strategy has inflicted a heavy toll in some of the world's poorest countries while reducing US casualties, enshrining massive Pentagon budgets, and boosting defense industry profits.



# Shadow Wars and Corporate Welfare

Jason Brownlee

For decades, the war on terrorism has been the underbelly of the US-led global order. Compared to the tens of trillions of dollars circulating among G20 nations, the resources at play in the main zones of America's conflicts are modest. More than half of Afghanistan lives below the poverty line, and the populations of Yemen and Somalia are even poorer. But although the immediate economic stakes appear paltry, the human impact of US militarism beggars description. Washington's post-9/11 wars have taken an estimated 800,000 lives from "direct war violence," including more than 335,000 civilians, while displacing tens of millions of

people across multiple countries.<sup>1</sup> There is no sign that the new administration will redress this legacy.

On the question of US military intervention, President Joe Biden is likely to follow the contours that President Barack Obama set during his second term and that President Donald Trump preserved. When a ground escalation in Afghanistan failed, Obama — with support from his risk-averse vice president — moved to safeguard US service members while continuing to kill US adversaries. Air campaigns and surrogate fighters formed the new arsenal against Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Islamic State. This “light footprint” strategy inflicted a heavy toll in some of the world’s least developed countries while minimizing US casualties, justifying historically high Pentagon budgets, and handing enormous rents to US arms firms.

Obama’s successor, despite promises about “stopping the endless wars,” extended these practices. Trump pulled more American boots off the ground in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Somalia. Meanwhile, he expanded US bombings and weapons deals, and he exceeded Obama’s second-term defense spending.

Much of Biden’s foreign policy agenda remains to be determined, but when it comes to anti-terrorism policy, the new administration appears inclined to preserve the status quo of shadow wars and corporate welfare. Biden and several of his foreign policy principals participated in crafting this approach during the Obama presidency. More significantly, though, the drone campaigns and proxy militia battles will continue because, unlike the calamitous ground wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, those operations have not inflicted a domestic political price on policymakers. For any organized efforts to actually stop the endless wars, they would need to alter that calculus.

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1 Costs of War, “Summary of Findings,” Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, [watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/summary](http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/summary).

## FORTY YEARS WORKING ON THE DARK SIDE

Ever since President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, warned of an "arc of crisis" stretching from Kabul to Mogadishu, successive administrations have tried to control the course of events around the Western Indian Ocean — without risking a new Vietnam and incurring the electorate's wrath.<sup>2</sup> This strategy has favored local clients over US forces, leaned into US airpower before committing soldiers or Marines, and promoted secret operations over high-profile campaigns. US presidents who bucked these rules have risked devastation overseas and political fallout back home — such as Carter's failed hostage rescue mission in 1980, the deaths of 258 US servicemembers in the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, and the infamous "Black Hawk Down" losses in Somalia in 1993. However, even as these fiascoes shocked the public, many more operations slipped silently down the memory hole, including the fomenting of the Iran-Iraq War that killed hundreds of thousands, crippling sanctions and bombing campaigns in Iraq during the 1990s, and the start of extraordinary renditions under President Bill Clinton.

The latest incarnation of these practices is the "war on terrorism," now well into its twentieth year. In September 2001, Vice President Dick Cheney told distraught TV audiences, "We ... have to work sort of the dark side ... We're going to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world."<sup>3</sup> In actuality, Cheney and President George W. Bush were seeking wider latitude for existing operations. The US Congress overwhelmingly obliged.

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2 Richard Burt, "U.S. Reappraises Persian Gulf Policies," *New York Times*, January 1, 1979.

3 "Text: Vice President Cheney on NBC's *Meet the Press*," *Washington Post*, September 16, 2001.

In near-unanimous votes, the House (420-1-10) and Senate (98-0-2) passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF). The AUMF gave the Bush administration unprecedented legal cover to enlarge the web of kidnappings and killings that the CIA and Pentagon were already conducting. Bush and company expanded extraordinary renditions, authorized torture, opened indefinite detention centers at Guantanamo Bay and black sites around the world, and carried out the first known US armed drone strikes. Obama and Trump would stretch this network of repression further.

The antecedents and evolution of the war on terror throw into relief the large-scale ground component of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Because of their steep toll, it is tempting to regard Operation Iraqi Freedom and the height of Operation Enduring Freedom as synonymous with post-9/11 US intervention. In the longer historical record, they were aberrations — not because US politicians are squeamish about shooting up other countries, but because ground wars bring steeper political risks than other methods. After the country squandered thousands of US lives battling Iraqi and Afghan insurgents, US foreign policymakers would revert back to options that were politically safer but no less lethal.

## **THE APOGEE OF US GROUND WAR IN WEST ASIA**

After two decades of aggressive but risk-averse US military intervention, the 2003 Iraq invasion threw caution to the wind. President George H. W. Bush had anticipated that a US occupation of Baghdad would be “disastrous,” and his former national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft, slammed the lead-up to the

Iraq War as a digression from the fight against terrorism.<sup>4</sup> Such positions showed the spectrum of debate: when it came to Iraq, the most prominent “antiwar” critique was in fact an argument for sticking to the savvier kind of warring that vested most of the fighting and sacrifice in client militaries and militias rather than putting US personnel on the battlefield. The next ten years brought US officials and voters a grim reminder of the American lives the latter strategy required.

Rather than minimizing US involvement on the ground, Bush had committed approximately 150,000 soldiers and Marines to the initial Iraq War and roughly 10 percent of that number to the 2007 escalation. During his first years in office, Obama put an additional 70,000 men and women in uniform into Afghanistan (on top of an existing 30,000). Hence, the most intense period of US ground fighting in Iraq was 2003–2007, while the high-water mark in Afghanistan was 2009–2012.<sup>5</sup>

These years thrust US soldiers and Marines into the United States’ most intense combat missions since Vietnam. No conflict in the era of post-Carter armed interventionism came anywhere close. During the ten years of 2003–2012, the US military suffered, annually, an average of 660 US battle deaths across the two theaters. That number was more than twice the casualties inflicted by the devastating suicide truck bomb attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut in October 1983. It was four times the 146 total combat

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4 S. H. Kelly, “Bush Tells Gulf Vets Why Hussein Left in Baghdad,” *Pentagram*, March 3, 1999; Brent Scowcroft, “Don’t Attack Saddam,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2002.

5 Amy Belasco, “Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues,” Congressional Research Service, July 2, 2009, 14; Heidi M. Peters and Sofia Plagakis, “Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007–2018,” Congressional Research Service, May 10, 2019, 7; *Associated Press*, “A Timeline of the US Military Presence in Afghanistan,” AP News, September 8, 2019.

and noncombat fatalities of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm during 1990–1991.<sup>6</sup>

The scale of American losses also eclipsed anything in the recent past of the Afghanistan War, or in subsequent years of either war. When one adds up all US casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan during nineteen years of post-9/11 war, the losses in 2003–2012 make up 93.6 percent of the total. These commitments represented exactly the kind of high risk and low return that presidents and national security teams from both parties had dreaded ever since the last Marine helicopters left Saigon in April 1975.

Unlike in Vietnam, the Pentagon’s campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan were fought by an all-volunteer force. Just because the general public was not at risk of being drafted, however, did not mean ordinary Americans were inured to the human toll borne by the individuals who were fighting and their families. Decades of polling shows ordinary Americans favor investing resources in the “security of [their] domestic well-being” rather than pursuing a grand strategy overseas.<sup>7</sup> They are especially averse to campaigns for regime change and operations that will bring US casualties.<sup>8</sup> Surveys during Bush’s terms showed that these sensibilities persisted.<sup>9</sup> (Recent research also indicates that war-weary voters helped Trump win traditionally Democratic swing states in 2016.<sup>10</sup>)

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6 “Iraq Coalition Casualty Count,” [icasualties.org](http://icasualties.org).

7 Benjamin I. Page and Marshall M. Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don’t Get* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 228.

8 Bruce W. Jentleson, “The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force,” *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1992): 49–73.

9 Gary C. Jacobson, “A Tale of Two Wars: Public Opinion on the U.S. Military Interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2010): 606–7.

10 Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, “Battlefield Casualties and Ballot-Box Defeat: Did the Bush–Obama Wars Cost Clinton the White House?” *PS: Political*

US failures in Iraq and Afghanistan compelled a rethink. Even as the White House pointed to new threats — the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia — American boots would be largely kept off the ground or positioned behind the scenes, to “advise and assist” local militaries. By turning once more to air power and non-US surrogates, Obama and his successors could “fight terrorism” without triggering public resistance. Sparing US ground forces while raining down munitions, Obama and then Trump pummeled a sweeping range of “terrorists.”

## LIGHT FOOTPRINT, HEAVY PAYLOAD

The return to shadow wars was formalized in a May 2013 address at the National Defense University. Obama’s speech drew a clear contrast between risky conventional military actions, including special operations raids, on the one hand, and the option of killing alleged terrorists, such as Sunni preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, on the other:

Our operation in Pakistan against Osama bin Laden cannot be the norm. The risks in that case were immense ... So it is in this context that the United States has taken lethal, targeted action against Al Qaeda and its associated forces, including with remotely piloted aircraft commonly referred to as drones.

Arguing that al-Awlaki “was continuously trying to kill people,” Obama defended his decision to “authorize ... the [September 2011 drone] strike that took him out.”<sup>11</sup> He also moved to normalize extrajudicial killings.

Obama contended that such drone attacks were not only ethical, they were legal. His argument involved both reviving and exploiting

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*Science & Politics* 53, no. 2 (2020): 248–52.

11 “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University,” White House, May 23, 2013.

the sweeping reach of Bush's AUMF. The original text stipulated that then-president Bush could "use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons."<sup>12</sup> Obama threw al-Awlaki into this protean frame. The drone strike that took the cleric's life was legal because: "Under domestic law, and international law, the United States is at war with Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and their associated forces."

The concept of "associated forces" became a catchall for blasting nettlesome foes without receiving a fresh congressional mandate. In 2013, "associated forces" already included Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), with which al-Awlaki had been affiliated. In September 2014, Obama claimed the AUMF also applied to its campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). He stuck to this sketchy expansion of military power through his final days in office. In December 2016, with Trump just weeks away from commanding the world's mightiest military, Obama officially stretched the 2001 AUMF to cover al-Shabaab in Somalia, a local militia that had only been classified as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in 2008.<sup>13</sup>

Although Obama's May 2013 address highlighted drones, he ratcheted up all forms of US air attacks. Indeed, when it came to smart bombs and missiles, he and Trump were neither anti-interventionist nor isolationist. US air strikes against al-Shabaab

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12 Amanda Taub, "Experts: Obama's Legal Justification for the War on ISIS Is 'a Stretch,'" *Vox*, September 12, 2014.

13 Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, and Mark Mazzetti, "Obama Expands War With Al Qaeda to Include Shabab in Somalia," *New York Times*, November 27, 2016; "Report on the Legal and Policy Frameworks Guiding the United States' Use of Military Force and Related National Security Operations," White House, December 2016; "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," US Department of State, [state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations](http://state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations).



increased annually between 2015 and 2019, even as African Union forces proved ineffective and the central government in Mogadishu remained feeble.

In June 2016, Obama announced that Operation Inherent Resolve (the two-year-old military campaign against ISIL) was “firing on all cylinders.” After a total of 13,000 air strikes, plus limited ground missions in support of local forces, he stated, “We’ve taken out more than 120 top ISIL leaders and commanders.”<sup>14</sup> In Syria and Iraq, Trump scaled back the level of US troops — to about 500 and 3,500, respectively — but in 2017–2018, the Pentagon hit ISIL almost as frequently as under Obama.<sup>15</sup>

In Yemen, the US air campaign peaked in 2017 (with at least 127 confirmed strikes). US involvement in Yemen came on top of a much larger scope of bombings and missile attacks by Saudi Arabia, which Obama armed and supported when Riyadh first intervened in Yemen’s civil war in 2015. (One component of this policy was a push by Raytheon, which locked in \$3 billion in bomb sales and deployed ex-officials to make sure the deal won the State Department’s imprimatur.<sup>16</sup>) US and Saudi attacks have contributed to prolonging a war that has so far taken a hundred thousand lives and made Yemen the site of the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Finally, Obama oversaw more than a thousand airstrikes in Afghanistan during his last year in office. Under Trump, the scale of this war ballooned to levels unseen since the surge: over 7,000 conventional and drone strikes in 2019 (Table 1).

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14 “Remarks by the President After Counter-ISIL Meeting,” White House, June 14, 2016.

15 Eric Schmitt, “Top General in Middle East Says U.S. Troop Levels Will Drop in Iraq and Syria,” *New York Times*, August 12, 2020.

16 Michael LaForgia and Walt Bogdanich, “Why Bombs Made in America Have Been Killing Civilians in Yemen,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2020.

**Table 1.** Minimum Number of Confirmed Air Strikes in Select Conflict Zones

|  | 2015  | 2016  | 2017   | 2018  | 2019  |
|--|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|
| <b>Afghanistan (US)</b>                            | 235   | 1,071 | 2,609  | 1,985 | 7,167 |
| <b>Iraq and Syria (US and anti-ISIL coalition)</b> | 7,781 | 7,743 | 10,712 | 3,071 | 0     |
| <b>Somalia (US)</b>                                | 11    | 14    | 35     | 45    | 63    |
| <b>Yemen (US)</b>                                  | 21    | 37    | 127    | 36    | 8     |
| <b>Yemen (Saudi Arabia-led coalition)</b>          | 5,444 | 5,107 | 5,233  | 3,365 | 1,181 |

Sources: The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, “Drone Wars: The Full Data” (accessed December 26, 2020); Airwars, “Conflict Data” (accessed December 26, 2020); Yemen Data Project (accessed December 26, 2020).

Even as Trump ordered more US aircraft in the skies of Afghanistan, he pushed US policy toward a Janus-faced arrangement in which the United States would stop fighting the Taliban but arm the central government to the hilt. The “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” was cosigned on February 29, 2020 by US special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.<sup>17</sup> The core of the bilateral deal was a strategic trade: US military withdrawal in exchange for a Taliban commitment that “the soil of Afghanistan” would not be used for attacks on the United States. Pursuant to the agreement, the number of US servicemembers

17 “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America,” US Department of State, February 29, 2020, [state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf](https://state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf) (accessed December 16, 2020).

**Table 2.** Recent US Arms Sales Around the Persian Gulf

|                                 | Total Authorized Foreign Military and Direct Commercial Sales<br>(in thousands of current USD) |                   |                   |                   |
|---------------------------------|--|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                                 | <b>FY 2016</b>   | <b>FY 2017</b>    | <b>FY 2018</b>    | <b>FY 2019</b>    |
| <b>Afghanistan</b>              | 3,025,676  | 2,607,843         | 2,742,041         | 1,701,067         |
| <b>Bahrain</b>                  | 223,815  | 193,281           | 2,511,040         | 1,993,329         |
| <b>Kuwait</b>                   | 166,527  | 632,916           | 7,592,759         | 469,034           |
| <b>Qatar</b>                    | 1,170,231  | 14,534,124        | 361,765           | 886,491           |
| <b>Saudi Arabia</b>             | 8,470,690  | 4,929,265         | 16,046,932        | 17,251,898        |
| <b>United Arab Emirates</b>     | 3,650,424  | 2,869,258         | 4,765,070         | 3,134,730         |
| <b><i>Fiscal year total</i></b> | <i>16,707,362</i>  | <i>25,766,687</i> | <i>34,019,608</i> | <i>25,436,549</i> |

Sources: Section 655 Annual Military Assistance, US Department of State; [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/us\\_655\\_fy2016.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/us_655_fy2016.pdf); Department of Defense Security Cooperation Agency, Historical Sales Book: Fiscal Years 1950–2020.

in the country dropped to 2,500 by the time Trump left office in January 2021 and, unless Biden reverses course, will reach zero by mid-2021.

While the drawdown proceeded, the United States passed ground and air operations to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the internationally recognized government in Kabul, led since 2014 by President (and ex-World Bank analyst) Ashraf Ghani. Ghani's government had been conspicuously absent from the Agreement for Bringing Peace to

Afghanistan. Although the document set an opening date for “intra-Afghan negotiations” about a full cease-fire, it did not deliver a treaty for ending the country’s civil war. Thus, there remains every likelihood that the US government can withdraw from high-risk direct involvement in Afghanistan while US businesses equip the ANDSF and make a killing off the civil war’s next chapter.

During fiscal years 2016–2019, the Pentagon and the State Department authorized more than \$100 billion in government-to-government and commercial sales across six countries of the Gulf region, including Afghanistan, where US military aid financed the purchases (Table 2).

## **THE ARC OF CRISIS BENDS TOWARD PROFIT**

It would be inaccurate to draw a straight line from commercial interests to armed conflict. For one thing, recent security rents constitute a sliver of capital accumulation in the United States. In FY 2020, amid a \$20 trillion economy, four of the largest defense firms pulled in \$200 billion from both civilian and military sales.<sup>18</sup> Even more significant, history is replete with examples of major business leaders opting for compromise over confrontation when the cost-benefit calculus favored that tack.<sup>19</sup>

What can be observed is that America’s leading weapons makers have historically outperformed their peers in the Fortune 500 and, further, that they have operated in a context of perpetual war.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, in the absence of an equally lucrative alternative

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18 Felix Salmon and Hans Nichols, “The Defense Industry Worries About Biden,” *Axios*, November 18, 2020.

19 For example, Cheney, a right-wing hawk, criticized unilateral sanctions on Iran when he was CEO of Halliburton. Richard B. Cheney, “Defending Liberty in a Global Economy,” *Cato Institute*, June 23, 1998.

20 Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, “Bringing Capital Accumulation Back

strategy, defense executives and connected policymakers have no incentive to alter course. This path dependency was manifest in the Obama and Trump eras. While American workers struggled through economic hardship and multiple public health crises, the business class enjoyed bailouts and tax breaks.<sup>21</sup>

As US ground missions in Iraq and Afghanistan wound down, outlays for military operations remained high. The bipartisan Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA) was supposed to restrict all discretionary spending, including defense, but it exempted “overseas contingency operations” (OCO), which could include anything related to war. Obama and Trump exploited this giant loophole, turning OCO into a Pentagon slush fund when other budget items were under the knife.<sup>22</sup>

The Department of Defense watched its military campaigns shrink while its budget swelled. The cost of the anti-ISIL campaign in Iraq and Syria was pocket change by Pentagon standards: a mere \$25 billion.<sup>23</sup> Given that Operation Inherent Resolve was Obama’s most active intervention during his second term, one might expect overall defense spending to decline dramatically.

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In: *The Weapondollar Petrodollar Coalition — Military Contractors, Oil Companies and Middle-East ‘Energy Conflicts,’* *Review of International Political Economy* 2, no. 3 (1995): 446–515.

21 Nomi Prins, “Wall Street Wins — Again: Bailouts in the Time of Coronavirus,” *TomDispatch*, April 5, 2020.

22 Andrew Lautz, “Reforming the OCO Account: A Better Deal for Taxpayers, Watchdogs, and the Military,” National Taxpayers Union, May 26, 2020 (accessed December 16, 2020); Brendan W. McGarry and Emily M. Morgenstern, “Overseas Contingency Operations Funding: Background and Status,” Congressional Research Service, September 6, 2019, 4; Todd Harrison, “What Has the Budget Control Act of 2011 Meant for Defense?” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 1, 2016.

23 Steve Beynon, “Biden Says US Must Maintain Small Force in Middle East, Has No Plans for Major Defense Cuts,” *Stars and Stripes*, September 10, 2020; Kimberly Dozier, “Biden Wants to Keep Special Ops in the Mideast. That Doesn’t Mean More ‘Forever Wars,’ His Adviser Says,” *Time*, September 23, 2020.

However, when Obama left office, the total defense budget (base and OCO) was still a staggering \$660 billion (in constant 2018 dollars), 40 percent higher than in 2001.<sup>24</sup> Under Trump, the defense budget grew further, reaching \$719 billion in 2019, a sum larger than what the world's next ten biggest military spenders put into their armed forces.<sup>25</sup> Adjusted for inflation, the Pentagon received more money under Trump (\$2.9 trillion) than during Obama's second term (\$2.7 trillion).<sup>26</sup>

For CEOs of the major weapons makers, these were very good years. Sales by four of America's largest arms merchants (Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, and General Dynamics) held steady at just over \$160 billion during the Obama administration, then ballooned under Trump to reach \$211 billion.<sup>27</sup> This windfall for defense corporations came mostly from sales to the US government, yet business overseas also brought dividends. Revenues from foreign military sales, already a robust \$42 billion when Trump entered the Oval Office, rose to \$55 billion in each of the next two fiscal years.<sup>28</sup>

The flood of cash from Pentagon programs and foreign arms sales amounted to state capitalism for industry elites.<sup>29</sup> The Center

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24 Defense Manpower Data Center, "DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications."

25 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database"; "U.S. Defense Spending Compared to Other Countries," Peter G. Peterson Foundation, May 13, 2020.

26 Lori Robertson, "Trump's False Military Equipment Claim," FactCheck.org, July 2, 2020.

27 Salmon and Nichols, "Defense Industry," *Axios*.

28 Aaron Mehta, "The US Brought in \$192.3 Billion From Weapon Sales Last Year, Up 13 Percent," *DefenseNews*, November 8, 2018; Marcus Weisgerber, "The US Exported Arms Worth \$55B in the Past Year," *Defense One*, October 15, 2019; Vivienne Machi, "Lockheed Martin, Raytheon Lead in FY '19 Foreign Military Sales," *Defense Daily*, October 7, 2019.

29 Seymour Melman, *Pentagon Capitalism: The Political Economy of War* (New

for International Policy has documented how CEOs raked in profits while laying off workers. Between 2012 and 2018, Lockheed Martin (the world's largest aerospace company) reduced its US workforce by 14 percent (16,000 jobs) even as the company brought in tens of billions of dollars in government (i.e., taxpayer-funded) contracts and saw its stock price nearly quadruple. Other top defense firms, including Raytheon, were also cutting jobs, while the national economy grew and overall unemployment fell. The two exceptions, General Dynamics and Northrup Grumman, expanded their payrolls — but only by swallowing up smaller companies (CSRA Inc., Orbital ATK) and taking on a portion of those workforces. While employees got pink slips, executives made out like bandits. The salary of the CEO of General Atomics tripled, from \$6.9 million to \$20.7 million.<sup>30</sup> It speaks volumes that these masters of war were unfazed by Biden's election.

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic and economic shutdown cast a pall over the American labor force, leading weapons manufacturers have been upbeat. Kathy Warden, the CEO of Northrup Grumman, stated before the November 3 election: "Today's threat environment warrants a strong defense ... and we believe both political parties are committed to effectively countering these threats."<sup>31</sup> In recent years, Boeing's weapons branch (which makes up 29 percent of its \$93 billion in annual sales) kept the company aloft when civilian aircraft sales cratered. Boeing CEO Dave Calhoun had no concerns that a Biden administration would threaten that revenue stream. Likewise, Raytheon Technologies CEO

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York: McGraw Hill, 1970).

30 Nia Harris, Cassandra Stimpson, and Ben Freeman, "More Money, Fewer Jobs: The Stubborn Truth About Employment and the Defense Industry," *TomDispatch*, August 4, 2019.

31 Joe Gould, "What the Defense Industry Is Seeing and Saying About the Election," *DefenseNews*, November 2, 2020.

Gregory Hayes called his company's defense business "resilient" and expected it would "help us offset near-term commercial aero headwinds" from COVID-19 and the accompanying recession.<sup>32</sup> It stands to reason that these industry chiefs were bullish about Biden because they expected him to continue the war posture that has benefited them financially.

## **BIDEN AND HIS NATIONAL SECURITY TEAM**

Biden's candidacy and election did nothing to disrupt the political economy of US interventionism. On the contrary, his political career, his recent positions, his personnel appointments, and the domestic political landscape presage continuity: four more years of US violence overseas through drones, special operations, and American-armed surrogates.

In many respects, the present paradigm of US militarism — lucrative for Wall Street, negligible on Main Street — is ready-made for Biden. Since the Carter era, he has been a quintessential neoliberal Democrat, accepting free-market ideology while undermining the American welfare state. When Biden won his second Senate term in 1978, he was already aligning his political imagination with the interests of Delaware's largest companies, chief among them DuPont, and presenting himself as a fiscal conservative.<sup>33</sup>

On national security, Biden generally supported lopsided interventions and balked at missions where enemy armies or

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32 Samuel Stebbins and Evan Comen, "Military Spending: 20 Companies Profiting the Most From War," *USA Today*, February 21, 2019; Leslie Josephs and Christina Wilkie, "Boeing CEO Confident in Defense Spending, No Matter Who Wins the 2020 Election," *CNBC*, July 29, 2020.

33 Branko Marcetic, "The Making of Joe Biden's Conservative Democratic Politics," *Jacobin*, February 22, 2020.



insurgents could hit back. He endorsed US assaults on weak Third World and post-communist militaries (the 1983 Grenada invasion, the 1986 Libya bombing, the 1989 Panama invasion, and NATO campaigns in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s) but voted against Operation Desert Storm in 1991 (to force Saddam Hussein from Kuwait) and opposed Bush's troop surge in Iraq in 2007. As Obama's vice president, Biden also pushed back against the 2009 decision to escalate US ground war in Afghanistan and the US-led invasion of Libya in 2011. Important exceptions to this pattern include Biden's vote for the AUMF, which ushered in Operation Enduring Freedom (the Afghanistan War), and his 2002 vote (amid his last Senate reelection campaign) for the Iraq War.<sup>34</sup>

During the 2020 presidential campaign, Biden stuck to his traditional positions, which would sustain US military operations by keeping them out of the headlines. Two months before his election, Biden told *Stars and Stripes*, "These 'forever wars' have to end. I support drawing down the troops. But here's the problem, we still have to worry about terrorism." Fighting "terrorism" meant "we need special ops capacity to coordinate with our allies," and Biden anticipated keeping "1,500 to 2,000" US servicemembers in conflict zones from Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa.<sup>35</sup> Deploying only a few thousand Americans for "special ops" that "coordinate with ... allies" steers clear of calamitous land wars while maintaining the overall pattern of destructive military operations from Obama's second term and the Trump years.

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34 Nick Gass, "Biden: I Was Right About Libya," *Politico*, June 21, 2016; Branko Marcetic, "In Last Night's Debate, Joe Biden Continued Rewriting His History on Foreign Policy," *Jacobin*, January 15, 2020; Branko Marcetic, "Joe Biden Jumped at the Chance to Help George W. Bush Sell the Invasion of Iraq," *Jacobin*, February 28, 2020.

35 Beynon, "Biden Says US Must Maintain," *Stars and Stripes*.

When a crisis hits, Biden may be the most dovish person in the Situation Room. Although the president's record suggests a measure of foreign policy restraint, he has assembled a team that is more comfortable with never-Trump neocons than left-wing anti-interventionists.

Secretary of state nominee Antony Blinken specialized in European affairs in Clinton's White House, then worked with Biden on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Between 2009 and 2013, he served as then-vice-president Biden's national security advisor. During Obama's second term, Blinken was deputy national security advisor to the president and then deputy secretary of state. In these capacities, Blinken was a key participant in the highest-level discussions as Obama pulled back from the Iraq and Afghanistan quagmires and increasingly imposed US interests through special ops, air power, and clients. In 2015, as the administration backed the Gulf monarchies waging war in Yemen, Blinken spoke from Riyadh to defend US arms sales and declare, "Saudi Arabia is sending a strong message to the Houthis and their allies that they cannot overrun Yemen by force."<sup>36</sup>

After Obama and Biden left office in 2017, Blinken entered the private sector as a founding partner (with former undersecretary of defense for policy Michèle Flournoy) of WestExec Advisors. As a "strategic consultancy," WestExec skirted restrictions on lobbying while monetizing its staff's government experience and promising customers an "on-call National Security Council." The firm's client list is shrouded in nondisclosure agreements, but WestExec is known to advise at least one of America's top five defense firms, likely Raytheon, which in 2019 sold Saudi Arabia more than \$3 billion worth of arms. Blinken has also

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36 Angus McDowall and Mohammed Mukhashaf, "U.S. Expedites Arms Shipments to Coalition Bombing Yemen," *Reuters*, April 7, 2015.

worked for the investment firm Pine Island Capital Partners, which is likewise entwined with arms makers.<sup>37</sup> In terms of his worldview, Blinken tipped his hand when he hopped onto arch-neocon Robert Kagan's *Washington Post* column to claim, ludicrously, that if Washington stopped spreading war, "the world will descend into chaos and conflict, and the jungle will overtake us, as it did in the 1930s."<sup>38</sup>

While Blinken is running US diplomacy out of Foggy Bottom, Jake Sullivan will be at Biden's elbow as national security advisor. Sullivan carries the dubious distinction of being the youngest national security advisor since prodigy McGeorge Bundy counseled military escalation in Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> During the past twelve years, Sullivan, like Blinken, has looped from foreign policymaking to corporate consulting and back. Sullivan worked in a range of capacities under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whose hawkish sentiments he shared, then succeeded Blinken as national security advisor to Vice President Biden. According to Obama's former deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes, Sullivan leaned toward "responses that would incorporate some military element." He backed Obama's war in Libya, supported the assassination raid against Osama bin Laden (which Biden opposed), agreed with the US arming Syrian rebels, and balked at talking with the Taliban until the group accepted US preconditions.<sup>40</sup>

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37 Jonathan Guyer, "How Biden's Foreign-Policy Team Got Rich," *American Prospect*, July 6, 2020; Jonathan Guyer, "What You Need to Know About Tony Blinken," *American Prospect*, November 23, 2020; Eric Lipton and Kenneth P. Vogel, "Biden Aides' Ties to Consulting and Investment Firms Pose Ethics Test," *New York Times*, November 28, 2020.

38 Antony J. Blinken and Robert Kagan, "'America First' Is Only Making the World Worse. Here's a Better Approach," *Washington Post*, January 1, 2019.

39 David Halberstam, "The Very Expensive Education of McGeorge Bundy," *Harpers's Magazine*, July 1969; Noam Chomsky, *The Backroom Boys* (Waukegan, IL: Fontana Press, 1973).

40 Jonathan Allen, "Meet Jake Sullivan, the Man Behind Hawkish Hillary Clinton's

Sullivan returned to Clinton's side for her failed 2016 bid at the White House and has spent the past four years serving Fortune 500 companies while peddling woke neoliberalism.<sup>41</sup> In January 2017, Sullivan took up a strategic consultancy at Macro Advisory Partners (MAP). Like WestExec, MAP's "shadow lobbying" connects moneyed interests to policymakers while avoiding the legal constraints on official lobbying.<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Guyer has uncovered that the firm, led by "former British spy chiefs," has served "mining companies in developing countries, sovereign wealth funds, and the rideshare company Uber." While advising Uber, Sullivan assisted the company's California branch's unsuccessful attempt to get Uber drivers to redesignate themselves as independent contractors.<sup>43</sup> By the time Uber imposed the same outcome through Proposition 22, Sullivan had joined the Biden campaign and was valorizing American workers.<sup>44</sup> A fellow Biden campaign staffer judged Sullivan's conflicts of interest utterly disqualifying for a top policymaking post: "We don't need a tool of hedge funds and mining companies in the White House," they said.<sup>45</sup>

To the extent that Biden's other national security principals are imbricated in America's shadows wars, they are unlikely to rethink US policy. Many of the top appointees have traveled in the same government and corporate circles as Blinken and Sullivan.

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Foreign Policy," *Vox*, September 4, 2015.

41 Jake Sullivan, "I Was Hillary Clinton's Chief Foreign-Policy Advisor. And I Have a #MeToo Mea Culpa," *Foreign Policy*, December 8, 2017.

42 Lipton and Vogel, "Biden Aides' Ties to Consulting."

43 Jonathan Guyer, "How a Biden Adviser Got a Gig With Uber," *American Prospect*, July 8, 2020.

44 Jake Sullivan, "What Donald Trump and Dick Cheney Got Wrong About America," *Atlantic*, January/February 2019; Jennifer Harris and Jake Sullivan, "America Needs a New Economic Philosophy. Foreign Policy Experts Can Help," *Foreign Policy*, February 7, 2020.

45 Guyer, "How a Biden Adviser Got a Gig With Uber."

Avril Haines, Biden's pick for director of national intelligence, was deputy director of the CIA and then deputy national security advisor during Obama's second term. Subsequently, she worked for WestExec and also consulted "for the controversial data-mining firm Palantir."<sup>46</sup> Biden has tapped retired general Lloyd Austin to be secretary of defense. Austin oversaw the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq during 2010–2011 and led US Central Command (CENTCOM) from March 2013 until March 2016. He then joined Raytheon's board of directors.<sup>47</sup> The most prominent exception to this pattern is career diplomat and recent president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, William "Bill" Burns, who Biden chose as director of the CIA.<sup>48</sup> As for the rest, it will be tough to get Blinken, Sullivan, Haines, and Austin to question whether the United States should be arming absolutist monarchs or disseminating killer drones when their future sinecures in the private sector may depend on such policies.<sup>49</sup>

## RELATIONS WITH IRAN, RUSSIA, AND CHINA

Although Biden and his team may be especially ill-suited to ending America's endless wars, the problem is structural; it supersedes variations in which party occupies the Oval Office and which individuals hold the levers of state power. After decades of internalizing the lessons of Vietnam, US elites briefly embraced large-scale

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46 Murtaza Hussain, "Controversial Data-Mining Firm Palantir Vanishes from Biden Adviser's Biography After She Joins Campaign," *Intercept*, June 27, 2020.

47 Corey Dickstein, "Biden Officially Announces He's Picked Retired CENTCOM Gen. Lloyd Austin for Defense Secretary," *Stars and Stripes*, December 8, 2020.

48 "President-Elect Biden Announces Ambassador William J. Burns as his Nominee for CIA Director," White House, January 11, 2021.

49 Upton Sinclair, *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994 [1934]), 109.

ground wars (2003–2012). The public backlash over US losses in Iraq and Afghanistan propelled a rethink. Policymakers then fell back to the politically expedient approach of air campaigns and proxy fighters. As the apparent costs of intervention dropped, public resistance ebbed, and the new strategy solidified.

But the material toll of American armed drone and covert operations has never gone away — instead, it has been funneled to less vocal constituencies (the people of the war zones) and less tangible forms (creeping social spending cuts). Large amounts of killing and dying continue, but the casualties are overwhelmingly non-Americans in West Asia and parts of Africa. The economic cost is diffuse, as mammoth Pentagon budgets trample government spending for education, the environment, health, and infrastructure. Meanwhile, US office seekers and business leaders realize immediate benefits from supporting the war on terrorism — and accessing its rents.

In this context, foreign policymakers in the Biden administration and the Democrat-controlled Congress are set to take the path of least resistance: avoid costly interstate wars but defend US primacy and the dominance of America’s most belligerent allies. In West Asia, Biden may rejoin the “nuclear deal” with Iran while accepting Israeli expansionism and arming an anti-Iranian axis to the hilt. With respect to China and Russia, the president and his team are circling the ideological wagons, hoping to pit Western relations with Beijing and Moscow as a battle between freedom and autocracy. Opponents of US interventionism should expose the costs of these approaches and urge diplomatic compromise in place of unilateral dictates.

The landmark achievement of Obama’s diplomacy in West Asia, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as “the Iran nuclear deal,” was a salutary departure from US efforts to punish Iran’s people and overthrow its government. However,

the JCPOA hovered in a political vacuum, without any broader connection to US-Iranian normalization or US constraint on Israel and other anti-Iranian antagonists. Further, by aiming to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon — without denuclearizing the region — the JCPOA positioned Iran’s leaders to forego the one proven deterrent to US-led invasions.

Trump unilaterally abrogated the deal in 2018, and it is easy to see why Biden and the Democrats may want to rescue it. Preventing Iran from developing a nuke, even as it is surrounded by nuclear powers (India, Pakistan, Israel, US-armed vessels in nearby waters), is a surefire way to keep Iran on its back foot and constrain the country’s influence. It is less clear why Iran’s leaders would want to return to the agreement, unless they receive the kind of massive economic relief and meaningful security guarantee that no US administration has yet granted.

Rather than reassuring the Iranian government and allowing it to operate as a normal nation in its region, US presidents from both parties have supported an anti-Iran axis that includes Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and, at the helm, Israel. Although Obama did grave damage to hopes for a Palestinian state, his immediate successor helped consolidate this durable coalition against Iran.<sup>50</sup> Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Trump “the greatest friend that Israel has ever had in the White House ... it’s not even close.”<sup>51</sup>

The capstone of Trump and Netanyahu’s friendship was a set of four normalization agreements, announced from September to December 2020, between Israel and four Arab states: the United

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50 Josh Ruebner, “Obama’s Legacy on Israel/Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 66, no. 1 (2016): 50–64.

51 “Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu of the State of Israel in Joint Statements,” White House, January 28, 2020 (accessed December 14, 2020).

Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.<sup>52</sup> These diplomatic deals carried little strategic value for Israel's physical security, which has been rock solid since 1979, when the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty removed the Arab world's largest army from the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>53</sup> The biggest material impact of the deals was "normalizing" Israel's program of appropriating lands taken in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War (the Golan Heights and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem) while ghettoizing the land's inhabitants.<sup>54</sup>

Ratcheting down this hostility would be both simple and profound. On the one hand, the United States could join the international consensus and deal with Iran as a regular state, rather than as a pariah. On the other hand, given the current state of US policy in Iran's neighborhood, this would require curbing weapons sales to the anti-Iran coalition and calling a halt to Israeli land grabs. Such a stance is highly unlikely, particularly if the Biden administration simply reverts to the liberal anti-Iranianism (including massive weapons deals for Iran's foes) that was in vogue during Obama's last year in office.<sup>55</sup>

With respect to Russia and China, the United States has few cards to play, and the new administration has already displayed a weak hand. Rather than dealing with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping as peers, Biden has proposed a mystifying ideological campaign centered on a "Summit for Democracy."<sup>56</sup> This bid to depict global

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52 Jim Zanotti, "Israel: Background and U.S. Relations in Brief," Congressional Research Service, September 11, 2020.

53 Jason Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the US-Egyptian Alliance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

54 Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008): 218; B'Tselem, "A Regime of Jewish Supremacy From the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This Is Apartheid," January 2021.

55 See, for example, Tamara Cofman Wittes, "Israel Imperiled: Threats to the Jewish State," Brookings Institution, April 19, 2016.

56 Joseph R. Biden Jr, "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign



politics as a battle between forward-thinking democracies and retrograde autocracies is a transparent attempt to undercut rival powers rather than address them on equal terms.

Much like the Reagan-era ideologist Jeane Kirkpatrick, the Biden administration proposes to separate good governments from bad ones based on their obeisance to US-led capitalism.<sup>57</sup> Political observers have long cautioned that governments will affix the term “democracy” on their friends — and deny it to their foes.<sup>58</sup> Sullivan has clarified that the gathering would encompass only “like-minded democracies.”<sup>59</sup> With this critical qualifier, the new national security advisor gives up the game: if you agree with America’s priorities, you are eligible for membership in Biden’s club. Consistent with this standard, the summit may limit attendees to G7 nations (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the United States) and the European Union, plus Australia, South Korea, and potentially India. These participants would form a “D10.”<sup>60</sup>

The gathering of the like-minded will stand in not-so-subtle opposition to China, Russia, and other “dissimilar-minded” governments. Contrary to Biden’s bromides about the “power of America’s example,” the United States’ main influence comes from its ability to preserve dollar hegemony and dominate international markets.<sup>61</sup> In 2019, the “D10” controlled more than 57 percent of

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Policy After Trump,” *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2020.

57 Jeane Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” *Commentary Magazine* 68, no. 5 (1979): 34–45.

58 George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon*, April 1946; Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and US* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

59 Frederick Kempe, “Biden Has a Plan to Rally the World’s Democracies and Tackle Threats Together,” CNBC, September 13, 2020.

60 Erik Brattberg and Ben Judah, “Forget the G-7, Build the D-10,” *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2020.

61 Ramaa Vasudevan, “COVID-19 and Dollar Hegemony,” *Catalyst* 4, no. 2 (2020):

world GDP, wealth that the United States can leverage against China (16.3 percent of the world economy) and Russia (1.9 percent) when military encirclement and ideological condescension fail.<sup>62</sup> They can also apply these resources against freely elected leftist governments (such as Bolivia and Mexico), which have yet to appear on the guest list.<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although Biden's presidency has just begun, the recent past offers no indication that his foreign policy will spread peace abroad or serve ordinary Americans at home. Most of his top appointees for international affairs return to government after years serving defense firms and other major business interests. Neither they nor Biden evince the political will and worldview to rein in military spending and curb the secretive wars and arms exports that help enrich CEOs at the leading weapons contractors. Their diplomacy with the world's major powers is wrapped in delusions of US-led democracy promotion. As for America's unending wars around the Western Indian Ocean, Biden is set to preserve the "light footprint" strategy that Obama codified and Trump continued.

In an era of upward and often brutal wealth redistribution around the globe, the ultimate question for Biden and his personnel is: Which side are you on?<sup>64</sup> The president has pledged a "foreign

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8-29; Peter S. Goodman, "The Dollar Is Still King. How (in the World) Did That Happen?" *New York Times*, February 22, 2019. |

62 "The World Economy in One Chart: GDP by Country," [howmuch.net](http://howmuch.net) (accessed December 20, 2020).

63 Sullivan's idea of "like-minded democracies" goes further in the direct of free-market ideology than even the right-leaning Freedom House, which identifies dozens of electoral democracies, including Bolivia and Mexico.

64 Since 1980, incomes for the "bottom half of the world adult population" have grown markedly (due largely to trends in Asia), while incomes for the next 49 percent have been "sluggish or nil" and "the top 0.1% has captured as much growth"

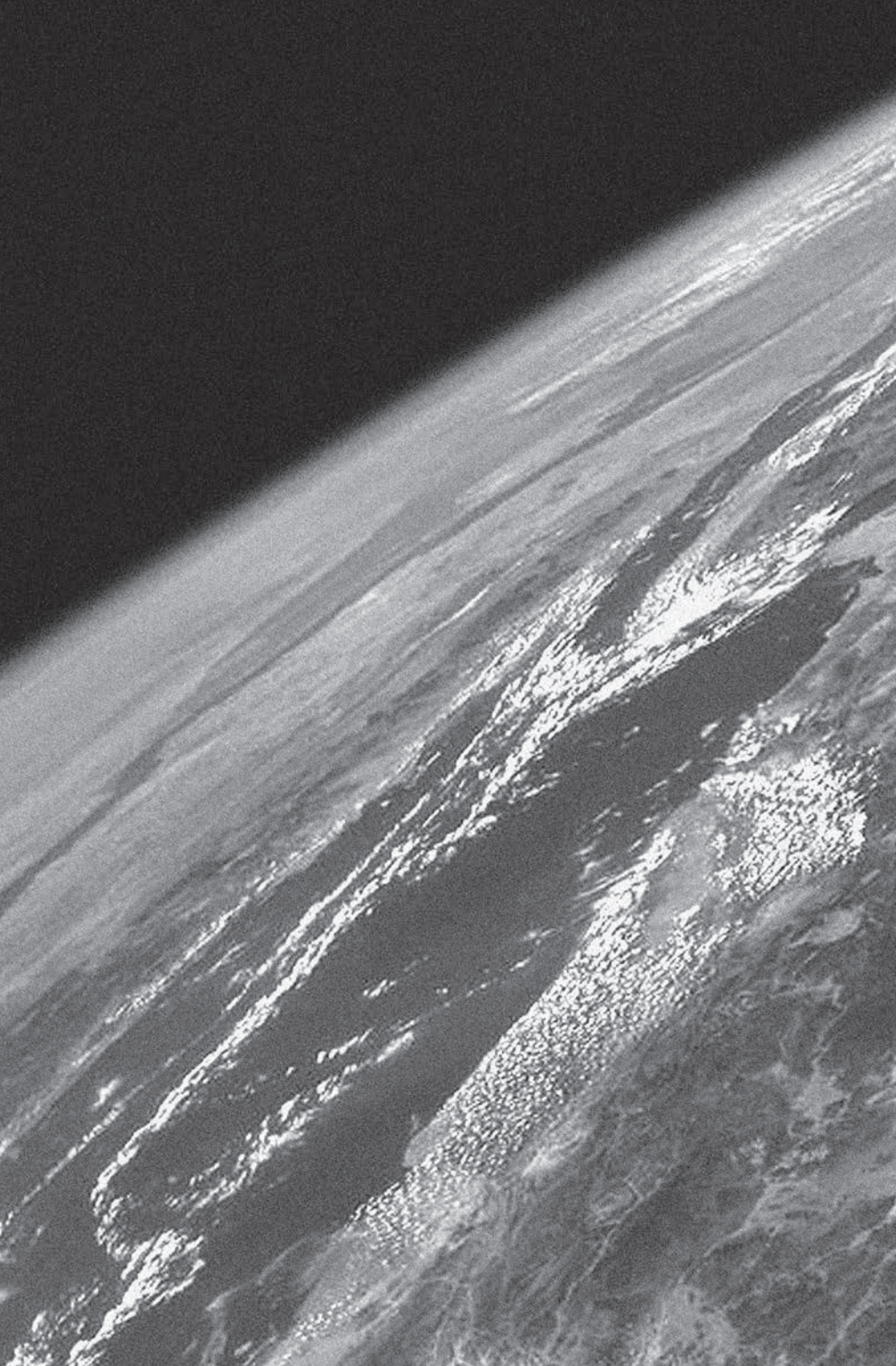
policy for the middle class.” If he and his chief advisers do not end the proxy wars and drone strikes around West Asia, they will be perpetuating a foreign policy that serves the superrich while pummeling some of the world’s most impoverished countries. The more that popular movements and independent media can call the administration to account for this devastating status quo, the harder it will be to sustain. 🗨️

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as the bottom 50 percent. Earning disparities have been particularly stark in the United States, where the income ratio of the top 10 percent compared to the bottom 10 percent has “increased in every decade since 1980, reaching 12.6 in 2018.” During this period, the average worker’s hourly compensation rose barely 12 percent, while productivity climbed by 70 percent. Facundo Alvaredo, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman (eds.), *World Inequality Report 2018*, WID.world: 40; Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik, and Rakesh Kochhar, “Trends in Income and Wealth Inequality,” Pew Research Center, January 9, 2020; Economic Policy Institute, “The Productivity–Pay Gap,” July 2019.







In the wake of Donald Trump's defeat by Democratic Party centrists, we should reassess the Green New Deal project.

It wagered that a working-class program — designed by professional-class academics and NGO activists — could capture state power before achieving working-class organization. But absent real leverage from labor, the program is more likely to be watered down and neutralized.

# Still No Shortcuts for Climate Change

Matt T. Huber

Donald Trump's election loss was good news for climate activists. On his first day in office, he took down the White House's climate policy web page and replaced it with his "America First Energy Plan." On his fifth day, he signed executive orders approving the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines, rolling back the modest gains of the climate and indigenous anti-pipeline movements. In a speech proclaiming what he called "American energy dominance," he excitedly announced that the country had "more than 250 years' worth of clean, beautiful coal."<sup>1</sup> He appointed fossil

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1 "Remarks by President Trump at the Unleashing American Energy Event," White House, June 29, 2017.

fuel industry hacks to his cabinet. He sold or leased public lands at an extraordinary scale. He unleashed an unprecedented wave of deregulation rescinding more than a hundred environmental rules for industry.

While no one on the Left will fondly remember the Trump era, we have to understand what his defeat means. Donald Trump's *offensive* environmental agenda — both offensive to the polite belief in science and offensive in the sense of actively pushing environmental destruction — created utter despair among environmental activists. Yet it also created a kind of delusion. The presence of “post-truth” Trump in office intensified the sense that environmental struggle is, at its core, a struggle over knowledge and science. For example, a movement of professional liberal activists organized a “March for Science,” explicitly disavowing politics. The organizers asserted the march “is not a political protest,” let alone a struggle over material control of resources.<sup>2</sup> There became a sense that if we could simply eject the “denier in chief” and install a Democrat who “believes science,” we could start to take the necessary action to solve the climate and ecological crisis. The election of Joe Biden as president is stoking these hopes.

But we've seen this movie before. When it comes to the climate crisis, offensive Republican environmental destruction is only slightly worse than enlightened Democratic Party environmental destruction. After eight years of a pro-fossil fuel George W. Bush administration, President Barack Obama announced in a victory speech: “This was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, if anything, the age

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2 Ed Yong, “What Exactly Are People Marching for When They March for Science?” *Atlantic*, March 7, 2017.

3 “Barack Obama’s Remarks in St. Paul,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2008.



of American energy dominance was not a Trump creation but a product of the Obama era. Beyond rhetoric, fossil fuel extraction expanded much more under Obama than under Trump.<sup>4</sup> The climate change believer even bragged about this in a 2018 public event: “Suddenly America is the largest oil producer ... that was me, people ... say thank you.”<sup>5</sup>

We are entering a kind of hamster-wheel cycle of environmental politics where new horizons of hope appear simply by removing a Republican from office. Today, as in 2008, a new set of deadlines are being discussed (2035 and 2050) that are far enough away to stall dramatic action and close enough to appear scientifically credible. Yet this cycle always delays what is obviously needed: confrontation with the powerful industries responsible.

When comparing the political possibilities of 2020 and 2008, there are some major differences. First, as predicted, the climate crisis has intensified to the point where no serious person denies something is very wrong. The wildfire-induced Black Summer of 2019–2020 in Australia was followed by yet another summer in North America marked by smoke-darkened skies and super-charged hurricanes. As I write this, even oil and gas companies are relenting under investor pressure to announce their plans to reach net-zero emissions by 2050.<sup>6</sup> These ongoing effects are merely the product of roughly 1.2 degrees of warming above preindustrial levels; experts think we will likely reach 1.5 degrees by 2030 and

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4 Oil production rose by 76 percent between 2009 and 2016, but only by 38 percent between 2016 and 2019. Energy Information Administration, “US Field Production of Crude Oil.”

5 Tyler Stone, “Obama: Suddenly America Is the Biggest Oil Producer, That Was Me People,” *Real Clear Politics*, November 28, 2018.

6 Myles McCormick, “US Oil Producers Begin to Follow Europe With Emissions Pledges,” *Financial Times*, December 6, 2020.

2 degrees between 2034 and 2052.<sup>7</sup> Frankly, the climate system does not care if the president believes climate science. We are approaching our last chance to ignite a massive transformation of our entire industrial and energy system.

Second, there is finally a policy program with the potential to generate the kind of mass popular support needed to achieve it: the Green New Deal (GND). The program aimed to solve inequality and climate change with a straightforward working-class program based on public investment, a job guarantee, and economic rights to health care, housing, and a living wage. While the Right has consistently used class-based appeals to mobilize opposition to environmental policies, the Left has finally come up with a class-based environmental politics.

As I will detail below, however, all the excitement around the GND was predicated on the idea of the Left occupying state power; a prospect that crashed on the electoral realities of 2020. We now face a neoliberal Biden presidency and the slimmest of Democratic margins in both houses of Congress. There are still far too many right-wing Democrats who can stall a GND agenda (not to mention Biden himself). What we need now is a sober analysis of the balance of class forces to understand what is and is not possible. We also need to recognize the ongoing danger of Biden and the Democratic Party — still staunchly a party of capital — assimilating the more radical GND coalition into the dead-end conciliatory politics of compromise and half measures. With the excitement of the Bernie Sanders presidential runs behind us, our only option now is to commit to strengthening working-class organization in the workplace and beyond, where durable political commitments and power can be built.

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7 Zeke Hausfather, "Analysis: When Might the World Exceed 1.5C and 2C of Global Warming?" *Carbon Brief*, December 4, 2020.

What follows is a narrative history of the climate stalemate over the last twelve years. We still need to understand the almost inexplicable level of *inaction* on what many describe as the greatest crisis humanity has ever faced. The last four years have built momentum toward real transformation, but the last year shows some concerning trends of movement conciliation before the fight really begins.

## **OBAMA'S ENLIGHTENED ALLIANCE WITH FOSSIL CAPITAL: 2008–2016**

It can be easy to forget the real sense of momentum in climate politics in 2008. Al Gore's 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* and the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007 created a clamoring sense of urgency. The planet was sending even more alarming signals: in 2007, the extent of Arctic sea ice reached a record low.<sup>8</sup> Like today's Sunrise Movement, there was a fresh activist group (350.org) organizing mass protests calling for action.

This momentum built steadily up until the fall of 2008 with two world-historic events: the largest financial crash since the 1930s and the election of an insurgent candidate as US president named Barack Obama. As many point out, the origins of the very notion of a Green New Deal can be traced to this period. The November 24, 2008 issue of *Time* featured an image of Obama superimposed over an image of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (headline: "The New New Deal"). In fact, what Kate Aronoff and coauthors call the "faux Green New Deal" was limited in ambition.<sup>9</sup> Yet we shouldn't forget that many on the Left were already calling for a more radical

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8 Henry Fountain, "Shift to a Not-So-Frozen North Is Well Underway, Scientists Warn," *New York Times*, December 8, 2020.

9 Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen, and Thea Riofrancos, *A Planet to Win* (New York: Verso, 2019), 16.

version of it. In October 2008, the *Nation* ran a piece by Van Jones rejecting what he called “eco-elitism” in favor of “eco-populism.” He advocated “building a New Deal coalition for the new century” that would include labor unions, environmentalists, students, faith groups, and social justice activists.<sup>10</sup>

By January 2009, with the economy in free fall and the Democrats in charge of the executive and legislative branches, one couldn’t imagine more favorable conditions for transformative change. Yet even before Obama took office, his commitment to a left program to rescue the economy and climate was already in doubt. His cabinet appointees were directly advised by a Citigroup executive.<sup>11</sup> Obama fought to limit the ambition of his stimulus package in order to attract Republican support. In the end, it didn’t even exceed \$800 billion. Although the stimulus contained significant money for renewable energy, emissions were basically flat during his eight years in office.<sup>12</sup>

In 2007’s *Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency* decision, the Supreme Court ruled that greenhouse gases should be regulated through the Clean Air Act, giving the Obama administration full executive authority to tackle the problem. Obama chose not to take this route. Instead, he proposed new legislation by compromising with Republicans and industry. The result was a neoliberal free-market policy: a cap on emissions combined with trading of emission credits (“cap and trade”). As Theda Skocpol shows in excruciating detail, Obama made no effort to mobilize the public but rather created a behind-closed-doors process of what

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10 Van Jones, “Working Together for a Green New Deal,” *Nation*, October 29, 2008.

11 David Dayen, “The Most Important WikiLeaks Revelation Isn’t About Hillary Clinton,” *New Republic*, October 14, 2016.

12 Environmental Protection Agency, “Data Highlights: Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks: 1990-2018.”

she calls “corporatist bargaining”: elite negotiation between state leaders and powerful interest groups.<sup>13</sup> At the core of this process was the US Climate Action Partnership — an alliance between the large environmental organizations like Environmental Defense Fund and polluting corporations such as Caterpillar and Duke Energy. The arcane market-based policy obviously generated no positive public enthusiasm. Instead, it emboldened an emergent Tea Party opposition, who deemed it “cap and tax.”<sup>14</sup>

Things went from bad to worse in 2010. In spring of that year, Obama announced a major offshore drilling plan as a fig leaf to industry to garner support for the doomed “cap-and-trade” legislation. On April 2, 2010, he boasted: “It turns out ... that oil rigs today generally don’t cause spills. They are technologically very advanced.”<sup>15</sup> Eighteen days later, the largest maritime oil spill in US history (Deepwater Horizon) occurred. Even worse, after narrowly passing the House, the cap-and-trade legislation failed in the Senate, and, after Obama’s drubbing in the 2010 midterm elections, climate legislation was considered “off the table.”<sup>16</sup>

Things were not any better in international climate negotiations. Again, we forget just how much optimism surrounded Obama’s election and the 2009 United Nations meeting in Copenhagen — called “Hopenhagen.” Yet it was climate believer Obama who hijacked the meeting:

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13 Theda Skocpol, “Naming the Problem: What It Will Take to Counter Extremism and Engage Americans in the Fight against Global Warming,” Harvard University, January 14, 2013, 121.

14 Osha Gray Davidson, “The Fate of the ‘Cap & Tax 8’ (and its Meaning for U.S. Energy Policy),” *Forbes*, November 4, 2010.

15 Brad Johnson, “Citing Katrina Myth, Obama Claimed ‘Oil Rigs Today Don’t Generally Cause Spills,’” *ThinkProgress*, April 28, 2010.

16 Katherine Ling, “Democrats Cling to Possibility of RES Bill This Session, Prepare for Next Year,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2010.

The key moment at Copenhagen was when President Barack Obama burst into a room where the leaders of all four BASIC [Brazil, South Africa, India, and China] were meeting in private, and together ... set aside the existing negotiating texts entirely and drafted their own deal.<sup>17</sup>

They argued a binding agreement was too “top down” and that they wanted a more flexible “bottom up” (grassroots?) approach.<sup>18</sup> In the end, Obama continued the United States’ long-standing role as the key *barrier* to international cooperation. The 2015 Paris Agreement — while historic — was simply a fulfillment of Obama’s Copenhagen vision of a purely voluntary agreement with no enforcement teeth.

After another crushing defeat in the midterm elections of 2014, Obama attempted to salvage his climate legacy by doing what he should have done on day one: using the Clean Air Act to directly regulate greenhouse gases. His Clean Power Plan was ambitious, but too little too late — it got held up in the courts before being repealed by the Trump administration. Meanwhile, Obama’s true legacy was the explosion of oil and gas extraction during his eight years in office. At its peak in 2015, crude oil production was up an astonishing 89 percent since January 2009.<sup>19</sup> Despite some notable victories to halt the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines, by the end of his term, “fossil fuel companies had added enough pipeline to encircle the globe almost *seven* times, all with the approval of the executive branch.”<sup>20</sup>

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17 David Cipllet, J. Timmons Roberts, and Mizan R. Khan, *Power in a Warming World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 65.

18 Cipllet et al., *Warming World*, 65.

19 Energy Information Administration, “US Field Production of Crude Oil.”

20 Kevin A. Young, Tarun Banerjee, and Michael Schwartz, *Levers of Power: How the 1% Rules and What the 99% Can Do About It* (London: Verso, 2020), 102.

This record should give us pause when considering the fledgling Biden administration. What explains Obama’s conciliatory deference to the fossil fuel industry? For an explanation, we have to look beyond the typical stories of corruption and contributions to political campaigns. As Kevin Young and coauthors argue, Obama’s subservience to the fossil fuel industry is more rooted in the “structural power of business.”<sup>21</sup> Their study shows how Obama was held hostage by a sustained “capital strike” — banks holding on to cash and industries refusing to hire. On the environmental front, transformative action was blocked by a “threat, constantly reiterated by energy companies, that aggressive regulations would trigger retaliatory actions by the polluters that would disrupt the flow of investments into the energy sector on which the economy depended.”<sup>22</sup> Given that we are currently experiencing another massive economic crisis — and that Biden actually received notable contributions from fossil fuel companies — the idea we can push Biden to the left through political lobbying and rhetorical persuasion is not likely.<sup>23</sup>

## **THE GREEN NEW DEAL MOVEMENT’S FAILED BID FOR STATE POWER, 2017–APRIL 2020**

In a case of silver linings, the election of a deranged reality star as president in 2016 emboldened the Left. Having united behind the nearly successful 2016 Bernie Sanders run, Trump’s victory — combined with Hillary Clinton’s incompetent campaign — felt like the death knell of Third Way neoliberalism. Frustration with the neoliberal center pushed left environmental movements to more

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21 Young et al., *Levers of Power*, 103.

22 Young et al., *Levers of Power*, 124.

23 Liz Hampton, “US Oil Majors Pitch More Campaign Cash to Democrats as Frack Battle Looms,” Reuters, October 16, 2020.

confidently distance themselves from standard market policies like carbon pricing. For much of the 2010s, the carbon tax was seen as common sense: it was included in Bernie Sanders's platform, and *Jacobin* ran articles promoting its policy advantages.<sup>24</sup> By 2017, it was clear that neoliberal market tinkering underestimated the scale of the crisis. As Aronoff put it in her formative essay "No Third Way for the Planet": "framing the carbon tax as a silver bullet for the planet's ills runs a deadly serious risk of obscuring how big the changes physics demands really are."<sup>25</sup> Additionally, carbon pricing could easily be framed by the Right as "costs" to everyday working people. On cue, the 2018 French "yellow vest" movement proved you can't implement a climate agenda through carbon taxes on the back of an already strapped working class.

A consensus formed on the climate left that we needed to construct political demands that were less about wonky market fixes and more about delivering real material benefits. In early 2018, climate activists were arguing that the GND could be the "Medicare for All of climate change."<sup>26</sup> The urgency was intensified by the famous October 2018 IPCC report, which suggested that limiting warming to 1.5 degrees required "rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society."<sup>27</sup>

The GND exploded onto the scene in mid-November 2018, when Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez teamed up with the Sunrise Movement to occupy the office of Democratic Party

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24 Suresh Naidu, "We need a Global Carbon Tax," *Jacobin*, September 21, 2014; James K. Boyce and Mark Paul, "Making Them Pay," *Jacobin*, December 5, 2016.

25 Kate Aronoff, "No Third Way for the Planet," *Jacobin*, May 10, 2017.

26 Alexander C. Kaufman, "The Surprising Origins of What Could Be the 'Medicare For All' of Climate Change" *Huffington Post*, June 27, 2018.

27 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Summary for Policymakers of IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C approved by governments," October 8, 2018.



leader Nancy Pelosi. This sit-in for a GND — with signs reading “Green Jobs for All” — created massive media attention and excitement in the climate policy community. It is notable that Ocasio-Cortez chose climate as her first policy intervention, just weeks before being sworn in as an elected member of Congress. She understood that the scale of the crisis contained all the elements of resurrecting a left working-class agenda: confrontation with corporate power, redistribution from the rich, and massive public investment based on a job guarantee.

After the sit-in, Ocasio-Cortez’s office, along with left think tanks like New Consensus, started working out the details of what a Green New Deal could look like. The official rollout came in February 2019, with the introduction of the nonbinding Green New Deal resolution, cosponsored by Ocasio-Cortez and Massachusetts senator Ed Markey. This rollout was, unfortunately, badly botched. Ocasio-Cortez’s office released an FAQ document to the media. The document — which appeared to be written by her then-chief of staff, Saikat Chakrabarti— was not only poorly written and sloppy but contained alienating environmentalist language like describing a long-term goal to “fully get rid of farting cows and airplanes.”<sup>28</sup>

Of course, the FAQ document was immediately taken up by Fox News to paint the GND as a liberal austerity plot by elite do-gooders to take things away from the working class. Congressman Rob Bishop from Utah held an event where he accused the GND of wanting to “control [his] life” and take away his right to eat hamburgers: “If this goes through, this [hamburger] will be outlawed.” He took a bite while his allies pleaded, “Pass it

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28 “Green New Deal FAQ,” [npr.org/documents/document.html?id=5729035-Green-New-Deal-FAQ](https://www.npr.org/documents/document.html?id=5729035-Green-New-Deal-FAQ). Curiously, in a recent interview, Chakrabarti said, “I have never thought of myself as a ‘left’ or ‘progressive.’” Zack Stanton, “Inside the Left’s New, ‘Mature’ Political Strategy,” *Politico*, December 10, 2020.

around!”<sup>29</sup> This event was specifically reacting to a comment by Ocasio-Cortez suggesting people could eat fewer burgers. While such a statement is undoubtedly true, it shows how difficult it is for the environmentalist left to maintain message discipline and highlight material gains. The typical scolding around what we must all give up plays directly into the Right’s hands.

Later in 2019, Bernie Sanders announced his own Green New Deal platform.<sup>30</sup> Many scientists immediately heralded it as the first presidential climate plan that matched the scale of the crisis.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, his apparent progressive rival Elizabeth Warren’s plan promised to green the military. Much of the pundit class focused on the plan’s price tag of \$16 trillion, but its most radical and distinctive aspect was Sanders’s proposal to expand publicly owned electricity. Taking its cue from a People’s Policy Project proposal for a green Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Sanders proposed expanding the TVA, in addition to a plan to “pour funding into the four existing ‘power marketing administrations’ that are overseen by the Energy Department.”<sup>32</sup> One *In These Times* headline read, “Bernie Sanders Calls to Seize the Means of Electricity Production.”<sup>33</sup>

Sanders’s plan was exceptional because — unlike much public power activism that focuses on local control or municipalization — it sought large-scale nationwide restructuring of the electricity

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29 Anthony Adragna, Twitter, February 28, 2019, [twitter.com/AnthonyAdragna/status/1100865258573447168](https://twitter.com/AnthonyAdragna/status/1100865258573447168).

30 “Issues: The Green New Deal,” [berniesanders.com/issues/green-new-deal/](https://berniesanders.com/issues/green-new-deal/).

31 Umair Irfan, “5 Things to Know About Bernie Sanders’s Aggressive Climate Strategy,” *Vox*, February 19, 2020.

32 Matt Bruenig, “Fighting Climate Change with a Green TVA,” People’s Policy Project, January 23, 2019; Gavin Bade, “Power to the People: Bernie Calls for Federal Takeover of Electricity Production,” *Politico*, February 2, 2020.

33 Johanna Bozuwa, “Bernie Sanders Calls to Seize the Means of Electricity Production,” *In These Times*, August 22, 2019.

industry toward public control and planning. This is exactly the approach we need, since we are not likely to “municipalize” individual utilities one community at a time. Neoliberals criticized this plan because it would create a public option for electricity that distorted the market. As Third Way energy expert Joshua Freed put it, “What the Sanders proposal would do is create an 800-pound federally owned power gorilla that would make it very hard for the existing generators to compete.”<sup>34</sup> Given that it is those very same generators who continue to burn fossil fuels to make profit for investors, isn’t that exactly the point? No other Democratic Party contenders, however, were willing to say this out loud.

As we know, Sunrise and the larger climate movement got behind the Sanders campaign — but it failed. This loss had unavoidable implications for the entire Green New Deal project that had gained such momentum between 2018 and 2020. I offer three critical appraisals. First, the GND was a breakthrough for environmental politics in its assertion of a working-class program.<sup>35</sup> Yet we should keep in mind a difference articulated by trade unionist Andrew Murray — and repeated by Leo Panitch and coauthors — between a “class-focused” and a “class-rooted” politics.<sup>36</sup> The recent resurgence of the Left — what Anton Jäger calls “left populism” — is clearly a politics *for* and not *of* the working class.<sup>37</sup> This was decidedly the case with the Green New Deal. It was a brilliant policy framework but still one formulated by

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34 Bade, “Power to the People,” *Político*.

35 Matt T. Huber, “Ecological Politics for the Working Class” *Catalyst* 3, no. 1 (2019): 7–45.

36 Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin with Stephen Maher, *The Socialist Challenge Today: Syriza, Corbyn, Sanders* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2020), 11.

37 My article, cited in footnote 35 above, literally framed “ecological politics for the working class.” Anton Jäger, “We Bet the House on Left Populism — and Lost,” *Jacobin* 35 (Fall 2019): 124–34.

academics, think tanks, and NGO professionals: a politics of the professional class for the working class. Perhaps most of the energy behind GND organizing was driven by aspirant professionals: high school and college students involved in the Sunrise Movement, Zero Hour, and the student climate strike. Although Sunrise boasts an army of young activists and employs militant language, it was itself born from the environmental NGO complex — its origins include a \$50,000 grant and office space from the Sierra Club Foundation in 2017.<sup>38</sup> It also runs a political action committee (PAC) that raised \$2.3 million in the 2020 election cycle.<sup>39</sup>

The professional-class base behind the GND allowed much of the activist language specific to this class to infiltrate the program. Although Sanders and the People’s Policy Project advanced a national public power plan, activists focused on more localist “community-owned, and community-accountable” visions of public power, like a small solar co-op in Brooklyn.<sup>40</sup> These not only fall into the trap of what Srnicek and Williams call “folk politics” — an emphasis on the small-scale, local, and grassroots against any large-scale vision of social change — but are obviously out of step with the *scale* of the climate crisis, which will not be solved one Brooklyn co-op at a time.<sup>41</sup>

Second, much of the organizing between 2017 and 2020 was predicated on the intoxicating promise of the Left winning state power — particularly at the executive level. Prior to defeat,

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38 Mark K. Matthews, Nick Bowlin, and Benjamin Hulac, “Inside the Sunrise Movement (It Didn’t Happen by Accident),” *E&E News*, December 3, 2018.

39 Sunrise PAC Profile, [Opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org).

40 Johanna Bozuwa and Mark Paul, “Can Public Ownership of Utilities Be Part of the Climate Solution?” *The Trouble*, September 16, 2019; Ashley Dawson, “Public Power in a Green City,” *Jacobin*, October 25, 2020.

41 Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015), 9.

Panitch and coauthors excitedly described the Corbyn and Sanders movements: “Nothing like this has happened in at least three generations.”<sup>42</sup> They speculated about what a “socialist-led government” would face and suggested that much of the Left was still marked by a “failure to prepare adequately for the challenge of transforming state apparatuses.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Mike McCarthy, writing in *Jacobin*, warned that “our first 100 days could be a nightmare.”<sup>44</sup> Now, the nightmare is simply the harsh electoral realities. But the entire GND program had to be delivered through the state. This was so alluring because, as Christian Parenti and Andreas Malm rightly argue, it is hard to imagine such a scale of transformation being achieved without the coercive and fiscal power of the state.<sup>45</sup> After all, it was the state that delivered the original New Deal — much of which consisted of tremendous new investments in energy infrastructure.

Third, the theory of change was backward. Sanders had promised that, once in office, he would awaken the sleeping giant of the working class and build an extra-electoral mass movement to confront Wall Street, health insurance conglomerates, and the fossil fuel industry. It was unique that the “organizer in chief” understood that he alone could not implement his agenda.<sup>46</sup> Yet Sanders himself probably suspected that winning state power before achieving mass working-class organization is not how it works. The necessary hordes of formerly disillusioned working-class voters did not turn out in the primaries as we hoped.

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42 Panitch et al., *The Socialist Challenge Today*, 2.

43 Panitch et al., *The Socialist Challenge Today*, 99, 12.

44 Michael A. McCarthy, “Our First 100 Days Could Be a Nightmare,” *Jacobin* 36 (Winter 2020): 68–80.

45 Christian Parenti, “Why the State Matters,” *Jacobin*, October 30, 2015; Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate and Chronic Emergency* (London: Verso, 2020).

46 Meagan Day, “Bernie Sanders Wants You to Fight,” *Jacobin*, March 12, 2019.

Quite the opposite — the threat of Sanders led to a turnout surge among suburban liberals and people Matt Karp termed “Halliburton Democrats.”<sup>47</sup> Too much of the existing working class is still beset by apathetic cynicism, or what the late Mark Fisher called “reflexive impotence”: “[people] know things are bad, but ... know they can’t do anything about it.”<sup>48</sup>

It is clear that a working-class politics — let alone a “socialist-led government” — cannot be conjured from nothing. We will need to build capable working-class organizations *first* (e.g., strong unions, media, and other infrastructure), before we can expect to vie for state power. As Jane McAlevey asserts, there are still no shortcuts to building power.<sup>49</sup> The Green New Deal and Bernie Sanders’s campaign were always a shortcut. Given the intense timeline we are facing on climate change, they were a shortcut worth pursuing.

## **“A PHASE OF ALIGNMENT”? APRIL 2020–DECEMBER 2020**

In March 2020, the position of Bernie’s campaign went from front-runner to certain defeat in a matter of weeks — followed by the onset of COVID-19.<sup>50</sup> The GND activist base quickly recalibrated strategy, from building a movement around a candidate we wanted

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47 Matt Karp, “Bernie Sanders’s Five-Year War,” *Jacobin* 38 (Summer 2020): 57–74.

48 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hampshire, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 21.

49 Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

50 The entire GND policy idea was premised on waiting for similar crisis conditions akin to the Great Depression of the 1930s. COVID-19 represented a shock to bring it about. As such, many GND advocates were at the ready with a large-scale “green stimulus” proposal in April 2020. See “A Green Stimulus to Rebuild Our Economy,” Medium.com, March 23, 2020.

to “pushing” the candidate we were stuck with. In April, a coalition of neoliberal Democrats, large environmental organizations, Sunrise, and other GND leaders was announced called “Climate Power 2020.”<sup>51</sup> In May, Julian Brave NoiseCat, a staffer at Data for Progress, declared that the movement was ready to align with the Democrats: “We’re moving from a phase of contention and division within the party ... into one of alignment.”<sup>52</sup> Strategically, one could say these alliances were necessary to defeat Trump, but it was a jarringly rapid shift from militancy to assimilation.

The most notable collaboration was the Unity Task Force on Climate Change — one of six task forces intended to unite the Biden and Sanders wings of the party. This task force included Ocasio-Cortez and Sunrise cofounder Varshini Prakash, as well as establishment figures like John Kerry and conservative Democrats like Pennsylvania representative Conor Lamb. Out of the negotiations came Biden’s climate plan in July, which was heralded for its historic ambition. It featured a goal of spending \$2 trillion and completely decarbonizing the electric sector by 2035. The plan seemed to signal Biden’s endorsement of the Green New Deal, but two months later, both Biden and his vice presidential pick, Kamala Harris, refused to admit this on the debate stages.

Since Biden’s win, Sunrise and other GND advocates have been laser-focused on his cabinet appointments. Biden has created two new cabinet-level climate positions and wants to put climate at the center of all the cabinet agencies’ activities. The appointment of New Mexico representative Deb Haaland as interior secretary — an indigenous woman and a supporter of the Green New Deal and Medicare for All — was probably the most significant win on

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51 Adam Aton, “Democrats Bridge Climate Divide, Focus on Green New Deal,” *E&E News*, May 21, 2020.

52 Aton, “Democrats Bridge Climate Divide,” *E&E News*.

this front. But, overall, the *New York Times* reports, “Mr. Biden remains a centrist, establishment politician. And he is crafting a centrist, establishment administration.”<sup>53</sup> If Obama’s cabinet picks represented a right-wing administration handpicked by Citigroup, Biden promises a move to the center-right. The once-militant GND movement also shifted to less confrontational and choreographed rallies meant to “push” Biden left. As a journalist reported at a late-November rally, “Their posture was less confrontational than two years ago.”<sup>54</sup>

To give credit, the GND movement has clearly shifted the “Overton window” of what is possible in climate politics. From 2008 through 2016, the main policy debate was *between* neo-liberal market schemes — either carbon tax or cap and trade. It is quite impressive to see that Biden’s plan doesn’t even mention carbon pricing and focuses much more on public investment and “good union jobs.” Yet simply granting radical GND activists “a seat at the table” will in no way guarantee them the power to implement their agenda. The fact is that Biden’s \$2 trillion climate plan is just as unlikely to pass Congress as Obama’s cap-and-trade legislation was (even *with* the Senate). The Democrats’ Overton window only appears to shift what can be proposed, not what can be implemented.

Biden appears poised to reproduce Obama’s commitment to what Skocpol called “corporatist bargaining” — bringing all the stakeholders to the table, including the affected industries. As Jane McAlevey reminds us, this “confuse[s] access for power.”<sup>55</sup> It is this kind of bargaining that leads to industry-friendly half measures

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53 Lisa Lerer, “What Biden’s Team Tells Us,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2020.

54 Adam Aton, “Rallying for Climate, Progressives Pull Punches on Biden,” *E&E News*, November 20, 2020.

55 Jane McAlevey, “Why Unions Must Recommit to Expanding Their Base,” *Nation*, January 4, 2021.



like cap and trade or the Affordable Care Act. Even Janet Yellen, the former chair of the Federal Reserve and the new Treasury secretary — a pick that progressives have largely welcomed — is a founding member of the Climate Leadership Council: a collaboration with major oil and gas firms that remains committed to carbon pricing as the sensible approach to solving the climate crisis. Just recently, Biden’s pick for “climate envoy,” John Kerry, was quoted as saying about oil companies, “I’m reaching out to them because I want to hear from them ... I’m listening to what their needs are.”<sup>56</sup>

The main problem remains that the GND movement is still, at its core, based in professional-class activist networks in academia, NGOs, and think tanks. Take one of the key demands of the Biden plan emerging out of the Climate Unity Task Force: 40 percent of Biden’s \$2 trillion in spending was to be allocated to so-called frontline communities. This is the name for communities most at risk from climate disasters (e.g., coastal communities) as well as those directly exposed to risks from fossil fuel systems (e.g., black communities along the “cancer alley” of chemical production on the Gulf Coast). Sunrise’s Prakash called this a “huge” win for the GND movement, and it was seen as one of the main concessions to the task force’s “progressive” wing.<sup>57</sup>

Of course, any climate action should focus on those most directly affected by climate risks. But this is less of a real material pledge to these communities than it is a concession to the GND activists’ core moral sensibilities. Indeed, the language of justice, frontline communities, and centering the most marginalized — what I call “livelihood environmentalism” — is like moralistic catnip

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56 “As Climate Envoy, Kerry to Seek ‘Ambition’ With ‘Humility,’” NPR, December 10, 2020.

57 “Sunrise Movement: Dems Must Address Climate Crisis as DNC Drops Pledge to End Fossil Fuel Subsidies,” *Democracy Now*, August 10, 2020.

for this activist base.<sup>58</sup> While this language inundates grant applications and academic jobs, poor and marginalized communities continue to face the injustice of disproportionate environmental risks. They still lack the kind of broad-based coalition — that is, power — to take on capitalist energy firms that threaten their livelihoods. Moreover, the entire plan to devote 40 percent of spending to frontline communities would amount to means testing in practice. Who qualifies as “frontline”? Who speaks for particular communities? Biden’s plan calls for a “Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool to help identify these disadvantaged communities.”<sup>59</sup> I’m sure the communities deemed not “disadvantaged” enough by this tool will find it a fair process.

The most concerning part of the activist focus on “frontline justice” is that it reinforces the sense among most people that GND politics is *not for them*. Given that 57 percent of Americans believe climate change will not affect them personally, I doubt many consider themselves part of a “frontline community.”<sup>60</sup> This kind of policy would potentially ignite the same kind of class resentment that is aimed toward targeted state benefits, while the majority are left to languish. We want the kind of political power to *deliver* climate action that addresses those most affected, but in order to *win*, we need a program that appeals to the broadest base possible. It seems GND activists should go back to the basics on the posters they brandished in Pelosi’s office: “Green Jobs for All.”

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58 Huber, “Ecological Politics.”

59 “The Biden Plan to Secure Environmental Justice and Equitable Economic Opportunity,” [joebiden.com/environmental-justice-plan](https://joebiden.com/environmental-justice-plan).

60 “Yale Climate Opinion Maps 2020,” Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, September 2, 2020.

## DECADE OF THE GREEN NEW DEAL?

The GND movement claims we are now entering the decade of the Green New Deal — but we have nowhere close to the power to do so. Could we? I close by enumerating three strategic avenues to building this kind of power. First, the Left has largely lost its bid for state power, but we cannot abandon the state. Now that the Democrats run both houses of Congress, the terrain will shift slightly in our favor. Many on the progressive left are laying out specific executive-level policies that a Biden administration can deliver. For example, New Consensus proposes that the Federal Reserve could inject liquidity into actual regional investment projects to solve the climate crisis.<sup>61</sup> We should push this kind of agenda as far as we can. Moreover, socialists have had most success winning state and local office; how this cadre attempts to deliver a working-class agenda in the face of devastating budget austerity will likely be the decisive battle of the year ahead.

We need to be clear that the Left's failures in 2020 are mostly due to the fact that the vast majority of people still don't believe the politics we are selling. For good reason, most remain cynical about what to expect from the state. Winning power for the Left out of the wreckage of neoliberalism must start by recuperating the very idea of the public. For the climate movement, a litmus test for our campaigns must be: Does the policy decarbonize by delivering material gains in the name of public goods? Only by actually delivering results can we start to resurrect the kind of mass politics needed to transform society. While much of the climate policy community has become oddly obsessed with a wonky regulatory fix — something called a “clean energy standard” — these kinds of

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61 New Consensus, “Memorandum: Building Back Better with or without Senate Majority,” November 17, 2020.

technical fixes will never generate the mass popular enthusiasm we need. In fact, the Right could easily paint this policy as a liberal scheme to raise electricity costs for everyday people.<sup>62</sup>

Second, history shows that large-scale political transformations only happen through extra-parliamentary disruption.<sup>63</sup> This was recently proven in 2018 during the West Virginia teachers' strike. Teachers could have attempted to pass their reforms by running progressive candidates and proposing legislation. Instead, they organized popular support, shut down schools, and won their demands in about two weeks. The radical climate movement — especially Sunrise — is still an almost entirely electoral movement. It marshaled tremendous volunteer capacity to get out the vote for Biden and other candidates, but what will happen to this energy when Biden and the Democrats predictably fall short?

The environmental movement must think harder about strategic disruption. As the case of West Virginia shows, if you don't have the public on your side, disruption is easily maligned. Environmental direct-action protests have long alienated workers and unions in the targeted industries. Extinction Rebellion famously shut down a working-class commuter train in London, facing public backlash and ridicule. The climate movement has continually engaged in polite, explicitly nondisruptive protests (e.g., the 2014 People's Climate March). It is encouraging to see the youth movement reclaim the language of the strike, but the 2019 Global Climate Strike was purely voluntary. The activist call for the strike openly admitted that it lacked any teeth: "We are well aware that ... this strike ... won't change the course of events."<sup>64</sup>

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62 David Roberts, "At Last, a Climate Policy Platform That Can Unite the Left," *Vox*, July 9, 2020.

63 Young et al., *Levers of Power*.

64 Naomi Klein et al., "We're Stepping Up — Join Us for a Day to Halt This Climate Crisis," *Guardian*, May 24, 2019.

Socialists know there is one form of disruption that has the strategic capacity to force elites to respond to radical demands: labor strikes. As Jane McAlevey argues, “There’s just no better way to create a crisis than a 100 percent withdrawal of labor.”<sup>65</sup> The Massachusetts Teachers Association called for a national teachers’ strike for a Green New Deal in the summer of 2019.<sup>66</sup> Calling for such a strike is very different than organizing one, but this is the kind of action we need to think about taking.

Third, if the GND movement is going to move beyond its professional-class activist spaces, it will need to begin building organization and consciousness directly in working-class communities — starting in the trade union movement. It is quite disturbing to consider how many unions came out *against* the GND; a platform based on economic justice and combating inequality.<sup>67</sup> One basic problem is that the GND architects didn’t consult with unions in the formation of the core ideas and policies. A union-based climate movement should recognize what the labor movement has always understood: certain sectors of the economy are strategic to organize in. Jane McAlevey recounts how the CIO focused on steel and coal in the 1930s, and today, she proposes health care, education, and logistics.<sup>68</sup> For climate, it is clear that any rational pathway to 100 percent decarbonization goes through the electric utility sector. This “electrify everything” strategy means cleaning up electricity and electrifying residential heating, transportation, and industrial heat. Yet few GND activists have pointed out that the electric utility sector is already one of

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65 Eric Blanc and Jane McAlevey, “A Strategy to Win,” *Jacobin*, April 18, 2018.

66 “Massachusetts Teachers Union Calls for Strike for the Green New Deal,” Labor Network for Sustainability.

67 Umair Irfan, “The Green New Deal is Fracturing a Critical Base for Democrats: Unions,” *Vox*, June 19, 2019.

68 McAlevey, *No Shortcuts*.

the most unionized in the entire economy — in fact, the electric power generation, transmission, and distribution sector has 26.3 percent union membership.<sup>69</sup> These workers are represented by unions like the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and the Utility Workers Union of America. The GND movement could try to win these unions to their side in order to transform the very sector at the core of the problem. One IBEW member has already proposed a rank-and-file strategy for a Green New Deal.<sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, the renewable energy industry, specifically solar and wind, are notoriously nonunion — at 4 percent union density for solar photovoltaic technology and 6 percent for concentrated solar and wind — and almost entirely run for profit by private capital.<sup>71</sup> The GND movement needs to engage with the electricity unions, arguing that unless a long-term strategy ensures the energy transition is controlled by project labor agreements and union labor, it will be destroyed by a form of “green capitalism.”

## CONCLUSION

The tenor of the moment is to say “we’ve only got five or ten years left” because of the depth of the climate emergency. That kind of slogan was designed to get people to see how serious things are. But as a political strategy it is a dead end. We can’t think in those terms, no matter how desperate the climate situation. We have to be able to think in terms of ten, fifteen or

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69 Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson, “Union Membership and Coverage Database from the Current Population Survey,” [unionstats.com.unionstats.gsu.edu](http://unionstats.com.unionstats.gsu.edu).

70 Ryan Pollock, “The Case for an Ecosocialist Rank & File Strategy in the Building Trades,” *The Trouble*, November 28, 2019.

71 National Association of State Energy Officials and the Energy Futures Initiative, *2020 U.S. Energy and Employment Report*, 59, 62.

twenty years. There is fundamental class and organisational rebuilding to be done. It takes time.

— Leo Panitch, March 2020<sup>72</sup>

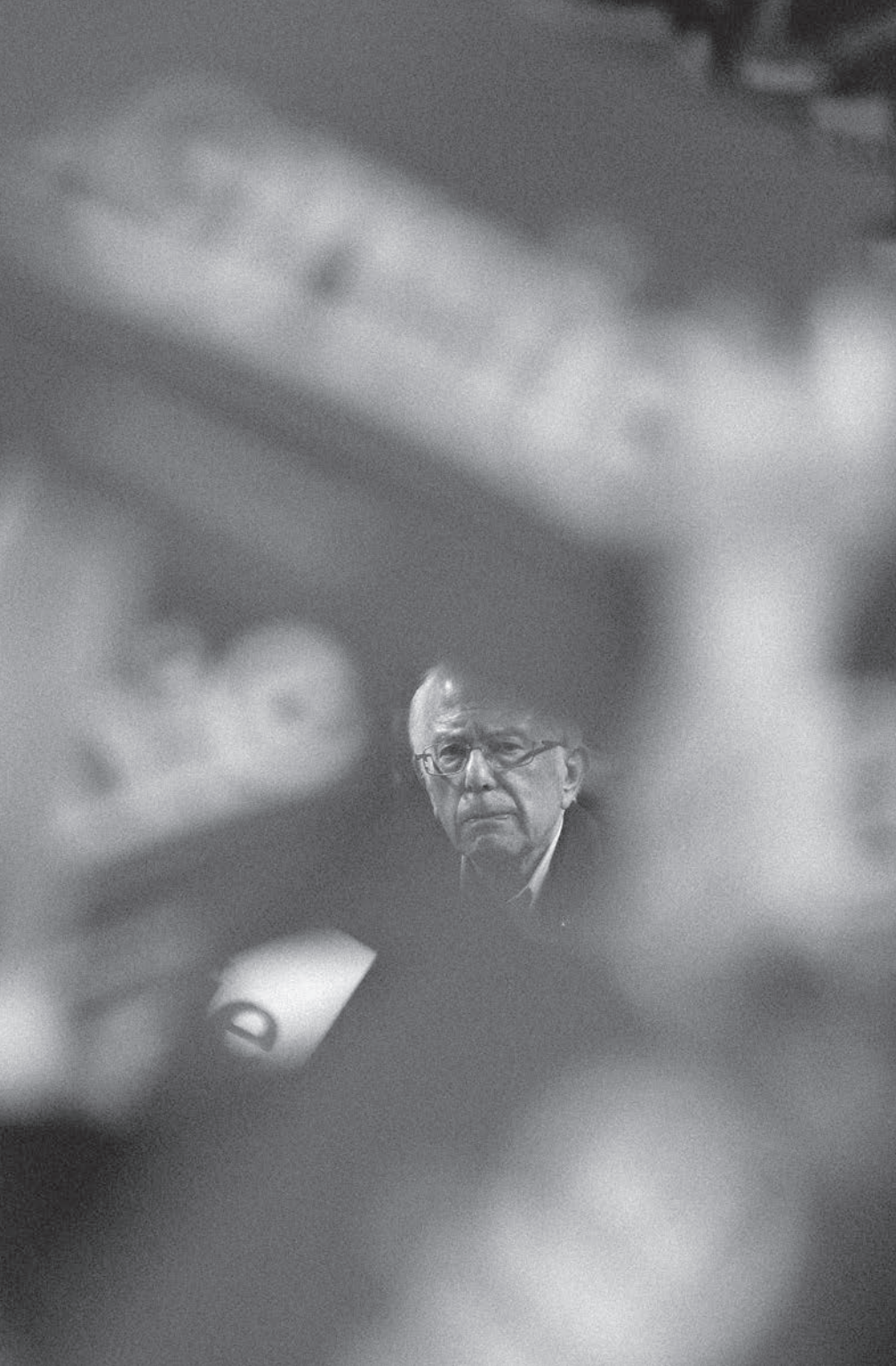
Leo Panitch tragically passed away while I was writing this article. The above statement is, characteristic of his work, as incisive as it is sobering. As much as we *need* a shortcut in the face of the climate crisis, this is not how class struggle works. Much of the energy around the Green New Deal was based on a kind of magical thinking: by insisting on the scientific urgency, large-scale social transformation could come *before* working-class organization. One would only need to look at the original New Deal to see the falsity of such a hope. In 1933, FDR came to office as a stalwart ally of the capitalist class. By 1936, after socialist organizers and militant union activists in the CIO “created a crisis” through a nationwide strike wave, FDR was welcoming the hatred of capital and passing the most transformative working-class agenda in US history. In 2021, the real danger is moving backward rather than forward by assuming that Joe Biden can be effectively pushed left through closed-door corporatist bargaining sessions. The only thing that can and will push Biden, and the state in general, is working-class organization and disruption. We are out of shortcuts to do this hard work. ☞

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72 Leo Panitch interviewed by Ronan Burtenshaw, “A Decade on the Left,” *Tribune*, March 7, 2020.







Seth Masket's book *Learning From Loss: The Democrats, 2016–2020* draws important lessons from Democrats' postmortem of their 2016 electoral defeat. Chief among these is that, given the party's dependence on white suburban voters and the threat of resurgent Trumpism, they will most likely double down on their risk-averse 2020 strategy, thereby inviting further working-class defections.

Seth Masket, *Learning From Loss: The Democrats, 2016–2020*  
(Cambridge University Press, 2020)

# Have Democrats Learned Anything?

Jared Abbott

Despite Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election and the Democrats' razor-thin margin of control over the US Senate, the party's underwhelming showing in down-ballot races — both at the federal and state levels — has put it on course for an internal reckoning. What lessons will the Democrats learn from their losses in the House, their near-failure to capture the working Senate majority required to pass any meaningful progressive legislation over the next two years, and their forfeiture of multiple state legislative chambers leading up to a crucial redistricting year? And what are the implications of the Democrats' internal postmortem for progressive electoral politics? While not written to anticipate the contours of post-2020 Democratic politics, Seth Masket's

masterful *Learning From Loss: The Democrats, 2016–2020* provides a wealth of useful insights for understanding the Democrats' likely trajectory over the coming years, as well as the strategic decisions progressives must grapple with as they seek to expand their influence on Democratic Party politics.

First, *Learning From Loss* makes a forceful case that the Democratic Party is both better organized and, paradoxically, more porous than most commentators on the progressive left allow. In particular, Masket argues that Biden's victory in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary had much less to do with a concerted effort by Democratic leaders to tip the scales against progressives, and much more to do with a hyperfocus on electability among the party's base, combined with a powerful (if empirically questionable) assumption that progressive presidential candidates are simply not electable. These findings should cast serious doubt on claims that progressives are structurally incapable of wielding influence within, or even taking control of, the Democratic Party, even as the medium-term prospects of doing so appear weaker in light of the 2020 election results.

Next, Masket makes a series of important contributions to understanding the legacy and potential future of the Bernie Sanders wing of the Democratic Party. Through a detailed analysis of Democratic donor patterns and candidate staff reshuffling between 2016 and 2020, he shows that, although the democratic socialist faction of the party was unable to expand its 2016 ranks significantly in 2020, it has become a distinct and stable force within the party that is not likely to dissipate in the near future. At the same time, however, Masket's findings suggest that there is no obvious path forward for Sanders's coalition to meaningfully expand its ranks within the party over the coming years (at least not outside of heavily progressive areas of the country). This poses a major challenge to democratic socialists in Congress and in state

legislatures who have experienced impressive gains in recent years (including in 2020) but who appear to be edging ever closer to a relatively low electoral ceiling.

Finally, Masket's rich analysis of Democratic Party activists' interpretation of Hillary Clinton's 2016 loss offers insight into the debates we are likely to see unfold within the party over the coming months and years: Was the Democrats' weak showing in 2020 a product of poor campaign strategy and messaging (particularly around identity politics), poor candidate selection, exogenous factors related to COVID-19 and the accompanying economic and health crises, or some combination of these factors? To what extent will party activists reevaluate previously held assumptions about the relative competitiveness of progressive candidates against centrist candidates, white male candidates against female candidates and candidates of color, and campaign strategies targeted to working-class voters, voters of color, and wealthy suburban constituencies within the party?

*Learning From Loss* suggests that post-2020 intraparty debates are likely to mirror — and ultimately produce a similar outcome to — the party's post-2016 debates. The party will remain highly risk averse and will have few incentives to update its post-2016 belief that centrist candidates tailored to the median white suburban voter remain the key to party success. I close this essay with reflections on the strategic liabilities of repeating the lessons learned in 2016, which are based on the assumption that any progressive messaging is a political liability for Democrats in red and purple states. To the contrary, I suggest that economic populism remains a potentially powerful, if largely untested, strategy — not only for progressive success but also for Democratic Party success writ large.

## SANDERS WASN'T ROBBED, HE JUST LOST

*Learning From Loss* sets out to explain how the Democrats' collective assessment of Clinton's 2016 loss set the stage for, and in many ways determined the course of, the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries. Its core thesis, based on a range of survey evidence and interviews with Democratic Party activists between 2017 and 2020, is that post-2016 political conditions significantly increased the likelihood that a candidate like Joe Biden would end up securing the nomination. Contrary to many analysts on the progressive left, Masket makes a strong case that Biden's victory over Sanders was not the result of a concerted effort by party insiders to stop a democratic socialist insurgency. In fact, he argues that conditions within the party in 2020 were as amenable to outsider challenges as perhaps they ever had been.

Masket identifies three factors that made the Democratic Party in 2020 more favorable to Sanders than in 2016. First, Sanders's capacity for successful fundraising based almost entirely on small-dollar donations significantly limited large donors' and party elites' control over the primary process. Second, the role of superdelegates was weakened compared to past primaries — in large part thanks to reforms insisted on by Sanders and his allies in the wake of the 2016 primaries. Further, Masket points out that, far from attempting to reign in such reforms, Democratic National Committee (DNC) chair Tom Perez was excoriated by Sanders opponents who accused him of pushing too hard in the direction of Sanders-friendly reforms. In short, the party took all realistic steps possible to ensure the 2020 playing field would be more even than in 2016. Finally, the 2020 Democratic primary field included an unprecedented number of plausible mainstream candidates who served to split the primary vote, thereby increasing Sanders's chance of victory.

All that being said, however, Democrats did ultimately circle the wagons around Biden in early March 2020, demonstrating an impressive level of coordination and organizational strength. Was this, as many Sanders supporters have argued, evidence that the party was in control of the process all along and would never have let a candidate as far to the left as Sanders secure the nomination? Masket argues to the contrary, suggesting that two interrelated factors explain why Biden prevailed. In the first place, even before March, the party base had largely decided both that Sanders was their least preferred candidate and that Biden was an acceptable alternative to whoever they had initially supported in the primaries. In polls of Democratic primary voters, Sanders was consistently ranked as the most unpopular candidate in the field (i.e., the largest number of respondents reported that he was their least favorite candidate), while Biden consistently ranked as the most popular candidate (he was the top choice of the largest number of respondents) *and* the least unpopular candidate. As a result, when it became clear that Sanders and Biden were the only two remaining viable candidates, it should not have come as a surprise to anyone that the rest of the party continued to dislike Sanders and opted to support Biden.

In turn, Democrats perceived the stakes of the 2020 election as being higher than any previous election in memory, making them particularly risk averse during the nominating process. To drive this point home, Masket points out, for instance, that Donald Trump's approval rating among Democrats was even lower than Barack Obama's among Republicans. Further, in previous election cycles (and as recently as 2019), Democratic voters reported valuing policy congruence with candidates more highly than candidate electability. Democrats' calculus of electability and policy congruence changed dramatically in 2020, as they viewed defeating Trump as a higher priority than any other objective. As Masket's

interviews with party activists show, many Democrats expressed a willingness to compromise on important policy goals in order to defeat Trump. In this context, Biden, viewed as the most electable candidate in the field by Democratic voters, had a major advantage over his rivals. This created an insurmountable obstacle for Sanders, whose explicitly democratic socialist ideology and far-left policy agenda were easy fodder for his opponents when trying to make the case that he was unelectable. Masket also shows how electability posed major challenges for other candidates, particularly female candidates and candidates of color, who are often perceived (erroneously) by voters as being more politically extreme and therefore less electable than white male candidates.

Masket's analysis of why Biden prevailed over Sanders has important strategic implications for progressive electoral politics. It helpfully dispels the notion that progressive, and even democratic socialist, insurgencies within the Democratic presidential primaries are doomed to failure by the supposed class character of the party. Sanders fought in 2020 on a relatively equal playing field — but, given the centrality of electability to voters and party activists, as well as the broadly held belief across the party that Biden was more electable, Sanders simply lost. That fact does not indicate that future progressive insurgents would meet the same fate under conditions where electability was less important in voters' electoral calculus. Given the likelihood that electability will remain a top concern for Democratic voters in 2024 (especially if Trump seeks the presidency again), and since there will likely be strong support for vice president Kamala Harris's candidacy if Biden does not stand for reelection, the short-to-medium-term prospects of insurgent success in the Democratic presidential primaries are limited.<sup>1</sup> That said, there is little reason to conclude that progres-

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1 No sitting vice president running against a non-incumbent in a major party presidential primary has lost since Thomas R. Marshall in 1920.



sives should abandon contests for power within the Democratic Party, even (and perhaps especially) at the national level.

## **THE SANDERS FACTION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY WILL ENDURE, BUT IT MAY NOT GROW**

Another important contribution to debates around progressive electoral strategy is *Learning From Loss's* empirical demonstration that Sanders's wing of the Democratic Party is a coherent faction that has sustained itself over multiple election cycles. A party faction, according to political scientist Daniel DiSalvo, has four primary characteristics: ideological consistency, organizational capacity, persistence over time, and intent to affect a party's political orientation.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the Sanders wing of the party is ideologically consistent (at least compared to other party factions) and intends to affect the Democrats' political orientation. Masket explores whether it can also effectively influence a range of electoral contests, and if it has the capacity to do so over time. His analysis helps us to understand how likely the Sanders faction is to both endure and play an influential role in Democratic Party politics now that Sanders himself is no longer a candidate.

Masket finds clear evidence that the Sanders faction is enduring across election cycles as well as organizationally competent. To demonstrate factional endurance, he first examines donor data across the 2016 and 2020 Democratic presidential primaries.<sup>3</sup> He finds that there was remarkable consistency in

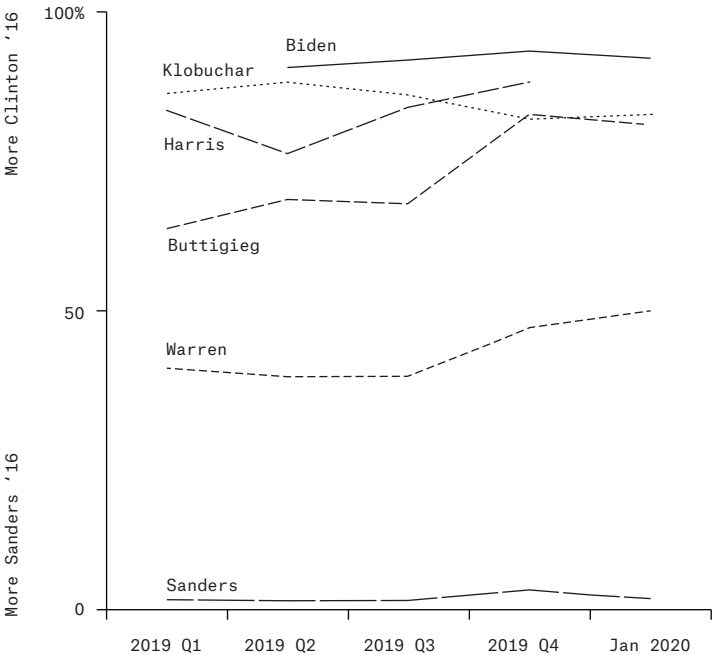
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2 Daniel DiSalvo, *Engines of Change: Party Factions in American Politics, 1868–2010* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

3 Masket provides suggestive evidence that the Sanders coalition preceded the 2016 presidential primary contest. He shows, for instance, that 99 percent of donors who supported Zephyr Teachout in the 2014 New York Democratic gubernatorial primary supported Cynthia Nixon in the 2018 primary.

Sanders’s donor patterns. As shown in figure 1 below, among donors who gave in both the 2016 and 2020 Democratic presidential primaries, virtually none who gave to Sanders in 2020 were Clinton donors in 2016, and, with the exception of those who gave to Elizabeth Warren in 2020, the overwhelming majority of 2016 Sanders donors backed Sanders again in 2020. Warren, interestingly, drew more support from Sanders’s 2016 donors than from Clinton’s 2016 donors — but, given the perceived ideological affinity between Sanders and Warren among many Democratic voters, this is not particularly surprising.

**Figure 1.** Candidate’s Share of Clinton Donors from 2016



Source: The lower the number, the more the candidate drew from Sanders’s 2016 donors, and the higher the number, the more the candidate drew from Clinton’s 2016 donors. Source: Masket, *Learning From Loss*, 179.

Masket next examines staffing patterns among 2016 and 2020 Democratic presidential candidates, based on a data set consisting of 260 staffers who worked for Democratic presidential campaigns in both 2016 and 2020. He finds that, while Clinton's 2016 staffers dispersed across the field of 2020 presidential candidates other than Sanders (with the plurality joining Warren's campaign), the overwhelming majority of Sanders's 2016 staffers (79 percent) returned to his 2020 campaign, with around 12 percent moving to Warren's and a small handful shifting to other candidates.

Masket finds not only that Sanders activists were consistent across election cycles but also that Sanders-aligned organizations — particularly Our Revolution — had a major impact on donation patterns in 2017–18 gubernatorial races. Specifically, in primaries where Our Revolution endorsed a gubernatorial candidate in 2017 or 2018, Sanders's 2016 donors were 50 percentage points less likely than Clinton's 2016 donors to support mainstream party candidates. He shows, additionally, that giving patterns of Sanders's 2016 donors in 2017–18 contests changed significantly after Our Revolution endorsements were made. This indicates that the endorsements themselves, rather than Sanders supporters' predisposition to self-select into progressive gubernatorial camps, drove 2017–18 donor patterns among Sanders's 2016 supporters. Such evidence suggests that the Sanders faction has sufficiently strong organizational capacity to meaningfully influence Democratic primary politics in contests where Sanders himself is not a candidate.

Yet the same evidence Masket offers to demonstrate the strength of the Sanders faction also points to important weaknesses. The Sanders faction's experiences between 2016 and 2020 make it clear that a well-organized and ideologically consistent progressive minority faction can impact the contours of Democratic politics. This can be observed from a range of data points, from the emergence of Medicare for All and the Green New Deal as litmus

test issues early in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries, to Sanders supporters' influence in the DNC's 2017 Unity Reform Commission and the 2020 Biden-Sanders Unity Task Forces. For this influence to translate into a successful presidential nomination, large blocs within Democratic legislative caucuses, or significant policy wins outside of heavily progressive states like New York, however, the faction will need to grow. To date, there is little evidence that the Sanders faction can surpass a significant but still relatively low ceiling of support within the Democratic Party. For instance, Sanders was extraordinarily unsuccessful at wooing 2016 Clinton donors in 2020, relying almost exclusively on his own 2016 donors to sustain his 2020 campaign. Further, consistent with Sanders's polling numbers throughout the 2020 primary season, Masket's donor data show that Sanders's share of Democratic primary donors never surpassed 30 percent,<sup>4</sup> and that, among strong Democratic partisans, he never reached 10 percent support.<sup>5</sup>

There are only two obvious paths to growth, and neither appears particularly likely, at least in the short term. On the one hand, the mutual hostility between the Sanders faction and the rest of the Democratic Party has made building allies within the party exceedingly difficult. On the other hand, Sanders's failure to significantly expand the Democratic primary electorate among low-propensity working-class voters in 2020 makes attempts at a hostile takeover appear similarly unlikely. It is possible that a future progressive outsider candidate running in an election where electability is less salient could be more successful, but that would require either building stronger bridges to the rest of the party or offering a political program or campaign style that

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4 Seth Masket, *Learning From Loss: The Democrats, 2016-2020* (Cambridge University Press, 2020): 177.

5 Masket, *Learning From Loss*, 178.

appeals more broadly to low-propensity voters who could make up for the candidate's weakness among traditional Democrats.

## **LESSONS FROM 2016'S LOSS WILL SHAPE DEMOCRATS' RESPONSE TO 2020'S SETBACKS**

I turn now to the broader implications of *Learning From Loss* for the future of Democratic Party politics. Masket's analysis of post-2016 intraparty debates provides useful insights for understanding the party's likely trajectory in the wake of its inevitable 2020 post-mortem. In particular, he documents a widespread perception among Democratic Party activists<sup>6</sup> and Democratic primary voters<sup>7</sup> that Hillary Clinton was too focused on identity politics and unable to connect with white working-class voters, and that Clinton was a weak candidate, at least in part due to her gender. In turn, Masket conducted two survey experiments examining the extent to which exposure to identity politics narratives (narratives suggesting that identity politics are a political liability for Democrats) affects Democratic voters' views of presidential nominees. With important differences across race and gender, Masket finds evidence that identity politics narratives make many Democrats less supportive of female candidates, candidates of color, and candidates supporting policies aimed at redressing group-specific inequities (such as combating workplace discrimination against women and people of color), while increasing their support for moderate white male candidates.<sup>8</sup> Though he is careful to note that no consensus view emerged among Democrats to explain Clinton's loss, Masket's findings suggest that the combination of pervasive narratives around identity politics and a laser-like focus on electability convinced

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6 Masket, *Learning From Loss*, 87.

7 Masket, *Learning From Loss*, 99.

8 Masket, *Learning From Loss*, 202.

many Democrats that their best bet in 2020 was a “safe” candidate — specifically, a centrist white male candidate.

The results of the 2020 general election, as well as early reactions by Democratic politicians, suggest that similar dynamics will characterize intraparty debates over the coming months and years.<sup>9</sup> That is, the party’s strategic orientation in 2022 and 2024 will likely evince a similar logic to its post-2016 orientation. Biden’s victory, on the back of his remarkable success among suburban white voters — combined with his stronger showing compared to many (often more progressive) down-ballot candidates in red and purple states — is likely to confirm the wisdom of the party’s decision to nominate a centrist white male presidential candidate. This is especially likely given that electability will remain a central concern of Democratic voters in the post-Trump (and potentially future-Trump) era. To be sure, Biden’s choice of Kamala Harris as vice president, and his commitment to gender and racial diversity in his cabinet, demonstrate the competing pressures party leaders face to deliver for key constituencies in the Democratic coalition (especially women and African Americans). Overall, however, the 2020 election will likely be viewed by most Democrats as a vindication of the party’s risk-averse electoral strategy in 2020.

*Learning From Loss* studiously avoids the question of which post-2016 loss narratives were the most or least accurate. Indeed, Masket emphasizes that political science models of the election highlighting economic growth, international security, and party incumbency suggested the election would be a toss-up.<sup>10</sup> As a result, he cautions against placing undue causal weight on any contingent factors related to candidate characteristics or campaign

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9 Elaine Godfrey, “The Democratic Truce Is Over,” *Atlantic*, November 10, 2020.

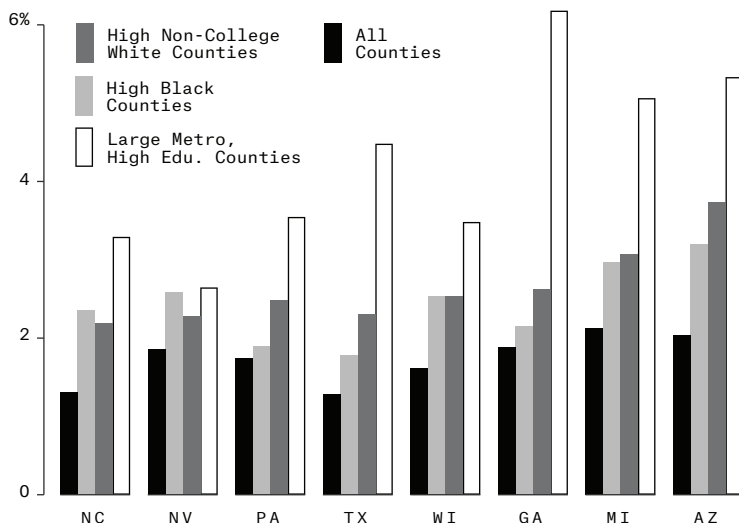
10 James E. Campbell, “Introduction,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49, no. 4 (2016): 649–54.

messaging. Nonetheless, many of the intraparty debates sparked by Clinton's loss remain central strategic questions for the party, and it is worth briefly considering their empirical merits in light of the Democrats' (at best) disappointing electoral performance in 2020.

For instance, Masket recounts debates between progressive members of the DNC's 2017 Unity Reform Commission (tasked with proposing changes to the party's rules and procedures that would address complaints raised by Sanders and his supporters during the 2016 presidential primaries) about the relative utility of focusing on bringing white working-class voters back into the Democratic coalition versus mobilizing people of color who did not turn out in 2016. With the dust settling from the 2020 presidential election, it is increasingly clear that *neither* of these strategies has been particularly effective. Indeed, despite impressive turnout gains in communities of color during the Georgia Senate runoff elections of January 5, 2021, Democrats' most important support gains in 2018 and 2020 came from the ranks of affluent suburban voters. As figure 2 shows, across key battleground states, Biden's advances over Clinton in wealthy suburban areas were consistently higher compared to areas with a large African American population.

The implication is clear: not only are Democrats likely to believe they should double down on centrist candidates who can appeal most successfully to the median white suburban voter, but they appear to be objectively correct in that assessment. Yet, as many commentators have pointed out, the prevalence of split-ticket voting in the suburbs suggests that much of Biden's support in these areas reflected a rejection of Trump, not an endorsement of Democrats. With Trump off the ballot in 2022 and potentially in 2024, will a red-state and purple-state strategy based on minimizing programmatic differences between the parties be enough to hold erstwhile conservatives in the Democratic fold? Beyond this, will the strategy be up to the task of defeating vulnerable

**Figure 2.** Shift in Clinton – Biden Vote share by County Type (Counties where Biden outperformed Clinton)



Source: Author's calculations. Electoral data from Dave Leip's Atlas of US Presidential Elections ([uselectionatlas.org](http://uselectionatlas.org)); demographic data from the American Community Survey.

Republican senators and defending the Democrats' House margin in 2022, when it was barely able to do so in 2020 with Biden at the top of the ticket? Perhaps not — especially if Republicans can effectively weaponize connections between prominent members of the party's left flank and centrists struggling to hold on in competitive congressional districts.

Despite these problems, it may be the case that Democrats simply have no promising strategic options in the short term, and that repeating the lessons learned from 2016 in the post-2020 period amounts to the least bad alternative. I want to suggest, however, that there is one approach the party has largely bypassed, and that such an approach might be an effective response to the supposed



trade-off between progressive policy and electability explored in *Learning From Loss*. There is substantial evidence that candidates perceived by voters as being extreme tend to underperform candidates perceived as moderate, but it is less clear how voters' perceptions of extremism vary across different policy positions and message framings offered by candidates.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the results of Masket's survey experiments suggest that many voters perceive progressive policies aimed at addressing group-based inequities as being more extreme than, say, a non-group-based policy to increase high-paying jobs through economic growth, and subsequently punish candidates who hold the more progressive position.

While not tested in Masket's experiments (since supporting economic growth is not an unambiguously progressive policy), a progressive economic policy platform presented in relatively neutral terms — and one that is relatable to different working-class constituencies (urban/rural, white/black/Latino) — could be perceived as less extreme compared to alternative progressive platforms.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, such a platform could be more effective in appealing to disaffected white working-class voters as well as low-propensity working-class voters from all demographic groups. There is little doubt that large majorities of voters — including in red and purple states — support a wide range of progressive economic policies, from free universal health care to a \$15 minimum wage.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as the decisive victory of progressive ballot initiatives in states carried easily by Trump in 2020 suggests, Democrats are not effectively translating these preferences into votes.<sup>14</sup> Part of

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11 Andrew B. Hall, "What Happens When Extremists Win Primaries?" *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 1 (2015): 18–42.

12 That is, a platform presented in terms that do not strongly signal a connection to a broader progressive agenda.

13 "Progressive Strategies for Rural Engagement," 2020, RuralOrganizing.org.

14 Will Peischel, "The \$15 Minimum Wage Wasn't the Only Progressive Ballot

the explanation for this is likely attributable to the fact that many voters associate Democrats with progressive policies they perceive as less appealing than bread-and-butter economic policies. Alternatively, some voters may not trust Democrats' progressive policy commitments because they associate Democrats with elite interests opposed to those of ordinary Americans.<sup>15</sup>

A fascinating recent report on public opinion in rural America suggests that part of the Democrats' problem reaching working-class voters lies in messaging and style. The report tests the appeal of different messaging frames on rural voters' political preferences. It finds that, by relating progressive policy items to the experiences and values of working-class communities (in this case, rural communities), progressives might garner higher levels of support among constituencies they would otherwise struggle to reach — without losing support among their traditional base constituencies.<sup>16</sup> Future research (and future electoral campaigns) are needed to better understand which types of policies and messaging frames can be deployed most successfully by progressive candidates among working-class voters, but there is reason to believe that the trade-off between progressive policy and electability may not be as stark as it is presented in *Learning From Loss*. Democrats in general, and progressives in particular, may yet have a path to electoral success in red and purple states that does not depend primarily on sustaining and growing their support among affluent suburban voters. ❧

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Measure That Passed in Conservative States," *Mother Jones*, November 6, 2020.

15 Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Jennifer M. Silva, *We're Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

16 "Progressive Strategies for Rural Engagement," 2020, RuralOrganizing.org.

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Articles submitted to *Catalyst* should be written in simple and clear language, avoiding unnecessary jargon. Although technical language is sometimes necessary, it should be kept to a minimum, as should footnotes and tables.

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