END TIMES FASCISM

AND THE FIGHT FOR THE LIVING WORLD

NAOMI KLEIN

ASTRA TAYLOR

ALSO BY NAOMI KLEIN

No Logo
Fences and Windows
The Shock Doctrine
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The Battle for Paradise
On Fire
How to Change Everything
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ALSO BY ASTRA TAYLOR

The People's Platform
Democracy May Not Exist, But We'll Miss It When It's Gone
Can't Pay, Won't Pay (co-author)
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Solidarity (co-author)
The Age of Insecurity

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In loving memory of Stephen Lewis
(1937–2026)

Here is where we meet.

—JOHN BERGER, 2005

Contents

Introduction:
Gated Cities at the End of the World

PART I: MESSIANIC DREAMS

1. The Spiral of History:
From Colonial Genocide to Antifascist Resistance

2. Rapture Ready:
Praying for a Bunker in the Sky

3. Real Crises and False Prophets:
How Symptoms Become “Signs”

PART II: ESCAPE TO THE CLOUD

4. Big Tech Summons Its Digital God—or Demon:
Betting It All on a Synthetic Future

5. Musk in Memphis:
From “I Am a Man” to I Am Alive

PART III: PREPPER NATION

6. The Bunkered State:
Fortressing the Border as the World Burns

7. For-Profit Fascism:
Cracks Appear in the Armageddon Industrial Complex

PART IV: LET’S STAY

8. Hereness:
A Neighborly Uprising

9. The Leavers vs. the Stayers:
Zohran Mamdani and the Antithesis of Fascism

Conclusion:
A New Disarmament Movement: The Fierce Urgency of Ending Impunity

Notes

Acknowledgments

Index

END TIMES FASCISM

Introduction

Gated Cities at the End of the World

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death, sadness, crying, or pain, because all the old ways are gone.
—REVELATION 21:4

My work is loving the world.
—MARY OLIVER

On a mountaintop in the dead of winter, a group of faithful men gathered an audience to share their vision. They had seen a gleaming city, the men said, bathed in golden light. It would rise forth from wastelands of rubble and rivers of blood.

The city would be filled with buildings so beautiful, they would seem to float above the earth, as if descended from heaven. The people would want for nothing: their bellies would be full, their bodies healed, their minds open to wonder, always under a loving and watchful eye to keep them safe.

There would be no weapons inside the radiant city, only riches beyond their wildest dreams, and gates at every entrance. Light and peace would flow from that city to every nation in strife.

One of the faithful men sharing his vision fought back tears as he gave thanks for the city to come.

Another, younger than the first, promised that the citadel would arise soon, in just two years, maybe three. He showed vivid and lifelike pictures of the prophecy. “Take faith,” he instructed the crowd, and give generously.

The vision already had a name, he said. It would be called New Gaza.

The story above is unembellished. The mountaintop in question was the resort town of Davos, in the Swiss Alps, during the annual summit of the World Economic Forum in January 2026. The faithful men presenting their Edenic vision for New Gaza—flush with food, “100% full employment,”

seventy-five medical facilities, and two hundred schools—were Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff, both US real-estate moguls and "deal guy" envoys for President Donald Trump to the Middle East (it was Witkoff who got a little emotional while making the announcement).

The vivid pictures, including one showing clouds parting with golden light shining down, were, of course, generated by artificial intelligence. They depicted a "master plan" to turn Gaza, pummeled by Israel with US bombs for two years straight, into a Dubai-like resort city for the superrich. It would have banks of luxury ocean-front hotels and condos (those were the futuristic buildings that seemed to float) because, as Trump explained in Davos, "I'm a real estate person at heart … look at this beautiful piece of property."

The pictures also showed a tidy housing development where Palestinian workers, presumably serving the people in the luxury buildings, would live—though there were suspiciously fewer units planned than there were surviving people in Gaza. As for the ever-watchful eye keeping everyone safe, according to leaked US military documents, a future home for Palestinians in Gaza would be accessible only through biometric and body scans, and all activities and purchases would be digitally tracked in this AI-optimized panoptical "smart" neighborhood, with data stored in nearby data centers. That it would be a gated city was obvious: the "master plan" was the next logical consequence of Israel's illegal military occupation of the Gaza Strip.

New Gaza was to be the flagship project of Donald Trump's "Board of Peace," which was launched at that same Davos event. The gleaming city, the US president explained, would be a model for the world to "forge a beautiful everlasting and glorious peace." It would start in Gaza but Ukraine could be next, or Venezuela or Cuba. ("New Mariupol"? "New Caracas"? "New Havana"?)

Trump unveiled these plans flanked by several hand-picked members of this novel entity, a selection of his favorite strongmen, dictators, and petro princes—though some invited members of the board, like Benjamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin, were not able to attend due to outstanding arrest warrants from the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes and, in Netanyahu's case, crimes against humanity. According to the board's charter, non-time-limited memberships were for sale for $1 billion "in cash," not unlike the private members' club Mar-a-Lago, from which Trump

has launched more than one foreign assault. They would pay, Trump felt sure, because it was the “most prestigious” club in the world.

Meanwhile, in actual Gaza, there were no signs of the rapturous future depicted in the Davos PowerPoint presentation. The skies opened only for ceasefire-breaking drone strikes, and for torrential rains that had been tearing through makeshift tents for weeks. Flooding was causing bombed-out buildings to collapse, at times crushing families that were seeking shelter in their ruins, and accelerating the spread of waterborne diseases, which Gaza’s deliberately destroyed health system could not hope to address.

Since Israel set out to make all of Gaza pay for Hamas’s horrific attacks on October 7, 2023, aid workers and United Nations experts, hardened by lifetimes of witnessing carnage, have struggled to find words to describe the conditions Palestinians were enduring in the wreckage of a live-streamed genocide. How do you capture the scale of untreated amputees, the hunger, the mass graves, the grief, the rubble mixed with corpses and unexploded ordnance?

Very often, the word that these experts have landed on is *apocalyptic*. This is a place so ravaged, even “death has died,” as the Palestinian scholar Abdaljawad Omar wrote recently, quoting a message from a friend in Gaza. He added: “What you call the end, we are already enduring.” Gaza is an apocalypse.

And yet to hear Trump and his envoys tell it up on that Swiss mountaintop, a gated paradise was about to emerge fully formed—not despite Gaza’s apocalypse, but because of it. “Let’s just plan for catastrophic success,” Kushner pronounced cheerfully.

We all know this story, of course. Some versions of it are told and retold in the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, though nowhere more vividly or violently than in the New Testament’s book of Revelation. Variations are sung in many of our national anthems and are etched in the place-names of many of our cities and states (New England, New South Wales…). The narrative arc is the basic plotline of a great many Hollywood action films and video games. First comes the horror, the mass death, battle of Armageddon—then, for the blessed survivors, a New Jerusalem, a pain-free utopia shining peace and light unto the world. A new chapter of human history in an Edenic world, at least for the favored, chosen remnant.

The story is so foundational that it lives deep inside of almost every one of us, whether we are conscious of its presence or not. Few can resist its seduction, since we all long for suffering to be redeemed. When understood as a metaphor for brighter days, the story of Zion and New Jerusalem has been a potent partner in struggles for liberation and equality. Through the centuries, that dream of a shining city has lent strength to enslaved people reaching for freedom, and it has inspired revolutionaries to wrench justice from monarchs and tyrants in order to become worthy of Christ's return.

When people with immense power take these stories literally, however, as templates for how deep change occurs in the real world, the same storylines become exquisitely dangerous. Why concern oneself with the hard work of cleaning up the messes made by your weapons, or atoning for harm, when a full system reboot is around the corner? ("Why polish brass on a sinking ship?" as the evangelical slogan goes.) Worse, if a battle of Armageddon is a necessary stage before humanity can reach paradise, then every atrocity and every disaster—even the ones you unleash yourself—can be cast as a felicitous "sign" that a shining new world is on the way.

Donald Trump and his envoys are not the first men to gaze across a sea of carnage and confuse the wreckage for a blank sheet of paper on which to write their master plans. This is an impulse we have tracked closely for decades, in its most profane as well as sacred guises. Almost twenty years ago, one of us wrote a book about it called *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. It explored the way states of shock and emergency—wars, terrorist attacks, coup d'etats, natural disasters—had been exploited by right-wing governments for half a century to push through wish lists of pro-corporate policies in the aftermath (from privatizations of land and state assets to massive tax breaks for the rich).

Today, a constellation of corporations and reactionary regimes have evolved their own shock tactics—and done the original practitioners of disaster capitalism one better by provoking and deepening the crises from which they benefit. Most crucially, unlike their predecessors, they don't see the shocks and disasters as exceptions to the rule, piercing an otherwise calm and non-shocking status quo. Rather, they foresee an apocalyptic future in which rolling chaos and carnage are the norm. A world where pandemics, climate emergencies, resource wars, and rogue tech are routine, and politics stirs the pot. A world where the growing masses of unruly poor

must be constantly tracked and contained, and where the fortunate few pay top dollar for both protection and escape.

Many of us feel this shift on a visceral level. We sense that we have entered a new paradigm, a world of perpetual upheavals in which stability is the exception and uncertainty the baseline. The big corporate and political players on the far right, meanwhile, are banking on this rocky future, provoking and preparing for it, and building it into their balance sheets and growth projections. As Alex Karp, the CEO of the AI-forward defense contractor and surveillance giant Palantir Technologies, once boasted, his company is "built for bad times … bad times mean strong finances internally."

These days, the smart money is on apocalypse, and it has been for some time. In 2016, after the UK voted to leave the European Union, triggering an economic crisis, Jeffrey Epstein sent a celebratory note to Karp's colleague Peter Thiel, the billionaire venture capitalist and the first Silicon Valley figure to go all in on Trump: "return to tribalism. counter to globalization. amazing new alliances.… as I said in your office. finding things on their way to collapse, was much easier than finding the next bargain." Trump's former chief strategist Steve Bannon reached out to Epstein soon after, eager to find ways to turn that "tribalism" into a global far-right counterrevolution—the one we find ourselves in right now.

Different countries serve as testing grounds for different parts of this emergent agenda, all feeding on collapse. The unending state-of-emergency prison complex is refined by Nayib Bukele in El Salvador; the anarcho-libertarian economy piloted by Javier Milei in Argentina; the playbook for breaking the press demonstrated early on by Vladimir Putin in Russia; the steady erosion of democratic institutions workshopped by the recently deposed Viktor Orbán in Hungary; the anti-immigrant neofascism spearheaded by Giorgia Meloni in Italy; the weaponization of trans identity as an electoral strategy test-driven by Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil; the mass stripping of Muslim citizenship attempted by Narendra Modi in India; all while Israel creates a laboratory for privatizing unending high-tech occupation and building a bunkered ethnostate, backed up by a relentless war on international law.

Meanwhile in the United States, the Trump administration seizes the leader of a foreign country and proudly states that it is after the oil—a commodity central to the escalating ecological crisis that is deepening every

other disaster. Why hide the baseness and brutality? As the White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller told CNN's Jake Tapper: "You can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else, but we live in a world, in the real world, Jake, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world."

How should we understand this fast-shifting political terrain? Is this the return of the fascism of the past? In some ways, yes. Where it was once controversial to point to the parallels between today's hard-right governments and the openly fascist regimes that attempted to cleanse Europe of its designated out-groups last century, today the continuities have become impossible to ignore. That this is fascism, at least in its early stages, is now taken for granted by many scholars of authoritarianism.

Revolutions are often uprisings of the weak and downtrodden. Fascism, in contrast, is a revolt of the strong or relatively strong and injured that, while antidemocratic, taps into powerful popular passions and resentments. Its leaders have frequently been military veterans who recently lost on the battlefield, working with business owners facing threats to their bottom lines and, at times, conservative religious leaders. In moments of widespread economic crisis and social turmoil, fascists build mass movements by fusing and equating elite experiences of injury and lost status with the more widespread pain of working people, particularly men who are struggling with their own feelings of injured pride. Unlike workers' revolutions, which have the goal of transforming and remaking societies from below, fascist movements claim to be defending powerful institutions —the nation, the market, the military, the family—from internal and external pollutants. In the logic of fascism, the task of defeating those threats, and reimposing order, requires emergency measures, often destroying many of the very institutions fascists claim to be defending.

As the scholar of tyranny Robert Paxton put it in his 2004 work *The Anatomy of Fascism*, "Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and

without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion."

Today, as we'll see, many of these familiar traits of fascism are in place. But we did not write this book to simply say, "it is happening again"—the fascist purges, the public sadism, the use of democracy to destroy democracy, the shock exploitation and scapegoating. Nor will we be matching up the ways Trump's activities fit a model set by the murderous authoritarian regimes in the twentieth century. We believe that work is important, and that it is being done well by others.

The story we are exploring is not one of return: an ominous evolution is under way on the internationally networked hard right, a shift related to the reality that humanity has entered an era of unprecedented, global-scale existential crises. Instead of seeking to address those crises, the new fascist right has made peace with the prospect of permanent shocks, and is waging a supremacist war over who is going to survive the future—a war powered by technological tools with hitherto unimaginable powers to both make synthetic worlds and break the real one. What unites this emerging, fractious, and often contradictory movement is a shared conviction that our common world is coming to an imminent end, so the chosen—whether selected by their wealth, or their faith, or their ancestral claims to particular pieces of land—must usher in the next phase of human history.

Put bluntly: we are not going back to somewhere our species has been before, we are off the map. This book is an attempt to chart this new territory, to outline what we call the politics of end times fascism.

We see end times fascism in the rapid approach of history's first trillionaire, and that man's central role in cheerfully depriving the poor of billions in life-saving food and health assistance as he boasts of plans to colonize other planets. We see it in the constant sorting of people—the in from the out, the damned from the saved—by armed immigration agents in US cities and armed settlers in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. We see it in the glowing screens of the tools used to identify, track, lock in, lock out, and, when desired, kill those on the wrong side of this sorting.

We see it in the race to dig up every drop of world-burning oil, in the private firefighters saving the mansions of the rich, and in the evisceration of services to save whole communities from floods and fires—or to even alert them when those disasters are coming.

We see it in presidents and prime ministers openly claiming that they have been chosen by God, and in the US army commanders telling their troops that the carnage they are unleashing in Iran is a sign of Jesus's imminent return. We see it in tech CEOs playing God with AI, and in a venture capitalist musing that a young environmentalist getting in their way could be the Antichrist. We see it in the identical soulless architecture of the data center and the immigrant detention camp. We see it, too, in the long lines to become ICE agents and the even longer lines for food banks.

And we feel the sadistic winds blowing: a Hitler salute in a stadium, a beloved nurse shot in the street, an AI "nudification" feature to undress women and girls, the tiny graveplots after a school is targeted from the air, an "accident" that inspires no trace of remorse. And we see it in the rich rewards for constructing this cruel world, with every part of its machinery built for profit: the bombs and drones, the facial recognition and killer apps, the camps and guards, the camp merch you can buy to amuse your friends, and the dehumanizing memes. And, of course, we see it in the shimmering luxury resorts planned over mass graves.

We should believe our eyes. The most powerful people in the world are preparing for the end of the world, an end they themselves are frenetically accelerating. Indeed, in a strange twist on the Old Testament tale, the oligarch class, having arrogated godlike powers to themselves, aren't content to just build the arks. They appear to be doing their best to cause the flood.

End times fascism is a fascism embedded in an understanding that something immense is ending, and it responds to this discomfiting truth with unabashed cruelty. Rather than alter the human-created economic and social systems driving crisis and collapse, its progenitors insist that it is the human story itself that has hit a wall and that only a small, deserving group of humans will survive the coming cataclysm—whether in their bunkered city in the sky, or their bunkered corporate city, or their bunkered nation-state, fortressed against alien invaders. It is a story rooted in that old seductive dream of the chosen few ascending to a gated paradise, while the rest of us are abandoned to the floods and fires of the damned.

The Clock Strikes (Nearly) Midnight

Five days after Donald Trump ripped through Davos with his promises of war and peace, a distinctly less glitzy presentation took place in

Washington, D.C.

It was the annual setting of the Doomsday Clock, staged by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*' experts on planetary risks, including eight Nobel laureates. Alexandra Bell, the *Bulletin*'s president, advanced the minute hand of the stylized clock by four seconds. It was now, she announced, "Eighty-five seconds to midnight, the closest the world has ever been to midnight."

The *Bulletin* was founded in 1945, after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Albert Einstein, along with J. Robert Oppenheimer and other scientists who had developed the weapons as part of the Manhattan Project, created it as a forum to discuss the dangers of the atomic age. In 1947, they launched the Doomsday Clock to help the public visualize this new scale of menace: humans now possessed the power to destroy the habitability of the entire planet and, in the most apocalyptic scenario, could cause our own extinction.

Every year since, the *Bulletin* has offered its estimate of how close we are to that kind of "midnight." As an array of speakers explained at the 2026 Doomsday Clock announcement, old and new existential risks had recently increased in alarming ways. Governments were spending tens of billions on building up their nuclear arsenals; the United States was kicking off an arms race in space with Trump's "Golden Dome"; both Russia and Pakistan had threatened to use nukes for "not only deterrence but for coercion"; Earth's climate "fever" was spiking; and dangerous and poorly controlled research was taking place into biological weapons and synthetic biology. Then there was artificial intelligence, which was being embedded into the weapons systems of nuclear-armed states, including the United States, China, and Russia. ("Advanced AI models appear willing to deploy nuclear weapons without the same reservations humans have when put into simulated geopolitical crises," *New Scientist* recently reported.)

These escalations were alarming enough to the *Bulletin* experts. Worse was the fact that, on every front, the most powerful government on Earth seemed to be looking these existential risks in the eye and asking itself: Yes, but how can we make this much worse? The last nuclear nonproliferation agreement between the United States and Russia was expiring in less than two weeks, with no plans for renewal. The Trump administration had already ditched the United Nations climate convention and "essentially declared war on renewable energy and sensible climate policies, relentlessly

gutting national efforts to combat climate change." And the United States was markedly less prepared for the next pandemic, since Trump had slashed funding to the Centers for Disease Control, left the World Health Organization, and put a parade of discredited conspiracy theorists in charge of public health. As for the mounting threats posed by automation, "Trump revoked Biden's AI safety initiative and banned states from crafting their own AI regulation, reflecting a 'damn the torpedoes' approach to AI development." Even before the 2026 war on Iran, it seemed the Trump administration was striving to move the Doomsday clock faster ahead.

Thirty years ago, the Italian philosopher and theorist Umberto Eco—who survived Mussolini's reign in Italy—observed that fascism always has "an Armageddon complex," explaining that "since enemies have to be defeated, there must be a final battle, after which the movement will have control of the world." But while the violence European fascists inflicted on their internal out-groups and external enemies was indeed apocalyptic, they were not typically imagining the actual end of the world so much as the destruction of particular parts of it. At least some of them foresaw a future where the wars came to an end, and a purified, wealthy, stable national body emerged. That promise of a stable future was not just for the rich, but for the working-class base as well. The Nazis promised their Aryan followers a patch of farmland they had stolen from Slavs, and a house they had stolen from Jews, connected by new and robust public infrastructure built through massive public works. It was a hideous and blood-soaked dream, but for the in-group, the benefits were tangible.

This is where Trump and the other far-right leaders in his orbit depart sharply from their predecessors. Yes, during election campaigns, there are various visions of a golden age dangled in front of the base—a return to 1950s industrial jobs, with trad wives and obedient children waiting at home, or the hope that crypto will unlock the dream of economic freedom. But the politicians driving end times fascism are too kleptocratic, too focussed on hoarding for themselves and their class, to deliver on their vague campaign promises of better days. In this way, the Armageddon complex—always a feature of fascism—has become its unifying and guiding principle. End times fascism does not offer an end to apocalyptic violence and turmoil, only the chance to believe in one of its visions of bunkered survivalism as the human project goes down.

These shifts should not be surprising. Mussolini and Hitler both died in April 1945, four months before the United States dropped the first nuclear bombs. They did not know a world with nuclear weaponry in it, or a world measurably hotter and more dangerous because of the day-to-day activities of capitalism, nor did they live amid increasingly perilous forms of artificial intelligence. Planetary-scale apocalypses were not tools in the human toolbox when they devised their murderous cleansings.

As the Doomsday Clock reminds us, we are the first cohort of our species to ever contend with so many overlapping and intersecting ways that the human project could potentially come to a terrible close. And this harrowing knowledge has shaped all of us who are alive today in fundamental ways, some conscious, many not. It has shaped the art we make and consume, altered our nervous systems, and infiltrated our dreams. And it has shaped the kind of fascism we must now fight.

By describing today's fascism as "end times" we are not saying that Donald Trump, Benjamin Netayahu, and Vladimir Putin are more evil or dangerous than Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Francisco Franco. We are saying that our world is more dangerous than their world: its weapons deadlier, its technologies vastly more potent, its media more connected, its climate more unstable, its concentrated wealth more global in reach than at any point in human history. Writing in the 1950s, Gunther Anders, a German Jewish philosopher who fled the Nazis, reflected on how the advent of the nuclear bomb augured a new age of previously unimaginable existential risk. "All these other supremacies had only ever posed a partial threat; they only ever annihilated individual entities: 'only' humans, 'only' cities, 'only' kingdoms, 'only' cultures—but we continued to be spared (if this 'we' is understood to mean humanity)." Today there are no such guarantees. "Because we are the first humans in charge of the apocalypse, we are also the first to live under its threat."

This is the new knife-edge world we all inhabit, and it is in this context that the governing ideology of the far right has become a monstrous, supremacist survivalism.

"They are quitters." That is how Marisa Franco, co-founder of the immigrant-rights group Mijente, describes today's fascists. It's an apt description: through a series of intellectual acrobatics, they have found a way to quit caring about the fate of the world and the vast majority of its people.

Trapped in Bad Fiction

The late urban theorist Mike Davis grasped these hazards earlier than most. Shortly before his death in 2022, he observed, “We are living through the nightmare edition of ‘Great Men Make History.’ Unlike the high Cold War when politburos, parliaments, presidential cabinets and general staffs to some extent countervailed megalomania at the top, there are few safety switches between today’s maximum leaders and Armageddon. Never has so much fused economic, mediatic and military power been put into so few hands.”

One of the most dangerous aspects of the concentration of all that military, monetary, and technological power is that it can make the trajectory toward Armageddon feel unstoppable. It can even convince us that the end times fascists might be right—maybe the human project really is coming to an end. While it’s a fringe position, we’ve even heard some on the left urging us to welcome that end, to give the planet a chance to recover.

The ubiquity of postapocalyptic entertainment—all the shows, films, and video games set in radioactive, ravaged worlds—traps us deep in this story. We have imagined our collective demise so many times that it almost feels as if it has happened already. Doomsday weapons and hidden lairs? Tech zillionaires determined to destroy the living world to summon a digital god who might take over the nukes? Space colonies so a handful of people can repopulate the species when Earth is uninhabitable? These futures somehow manage to seem inevitable and far too hackneyed to take seriously.

We have learned to be suspicious of this sense of unreality. After all, if someone had predicted twenty years ago that Donald Trump would be president of the United States, we would have reacted similarly. Because it seemed too unbelievable, many of us waited too long before taking him seriously as a threat. And yet here we are, again.

The good news, to quote *Andor* (the best offering of the genre), is that we “have friends everywhere”—including where we may least expect to find them. The fact that Trump and his cohort have opted to betray huge numbers of their own voters by aligning themselves with tech billionaires and religious fanatics who have given up on a shared future on this planet has created huge vulnerabilities for them. Because end times fascists—though undeniably powerful—are a minority, even on the right.

While he has cowed many powerful people and companies with threats of retaliation, Trump does not have the backing of the entire corporate class. A great many devout or conservative Christians are also highly uncomfortable with the Christian Nationalist drive for a racially and ethnically purified citizenry. At the same time, most working-class people who cast ballots for politicians like Donald Trump did not do so in the hopes of accelerating an apocalypse. Many merely wanted to shake up a broken status quo, believed the promises of better jobs and cheaper food, and thought stronger borders really would make them safer and richer. They have discovered that the nonstop spectacle of cruelty hasn't brought the price of groceries down, and that many of the new jobs are in pointing guns at their neighbors, or building data centers, which, according to the corporations behind them, will soon wipe out entire professions and decimate employment. Meanwhile, the ravaging of basic government services—from healthcare to disaster response—hurts everyone who isn't rich, regardless of how they voted.

Trump and Vance have also broken the public's trust with their incessant warmongering and belligerence. Trump has authorized more military strikes and targeted more foreign countries than any other twenty-first-century president, despite running as the self-professed peace candidate. After joining with Israel to launch an illegal and disastrous war on Iran, Trump officials claimed their actions were justified because the country is controlled by religious zealots, reviving an old refrain that gained force during the War on Terror. Islam has long been stereotyped and vilified, with the apocalyptic tendencies of some strains and sects projected onto the entire faith tradition. Parts of Iran's ruling Shia elites are indeed steeped in dangerous end times theology. This book, however, focuses on the mounting apocalypticism closer to home, about which mainstream pundits have been far less attentive. When, a month into the conflict, the secretary of war Pete Hegseth denounced Iran's "Islamist ideology" as "violent, messianic," and "chasing some sort of apocalyptic endgame," he could have been describing the sort of theocratic and prophecy-obsessed Christianity he has personally foisted on the Pentagon. Similarly, when the secretary of state Marco Rubio told Fox News that Iran is "led by people who believe it is their calling and their purpose in life to usher in the end of the world," many noticed that those words were an apt description of the administration in which he serves.

And like Gaza before it, the effects of the joint US–Israeli war increasingly looked apocalyptic, with Tehran choked by toxic black smoke and brutal shock waves jolting global supplies of fuel, fertilizer, and food. Some MAGA diehards cheered Trump's threat to bomb Iran to the point that its people would be "living in hell," or worse, wiped from the face of earth. "A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again," the U.S. president posted. But a good number of prominent right-wing figures and ordinary Republican voters responded with indignation, disgusted by these genocidal ravings. Here was precisely the kind of foreign entanglement Trump and his VP had promised to avoid, and as the projected cost of the doomed excursion soared, angry observers rightly pointed out that the money could be better spent at home. Rather than galvanizing the country around a common enemy, as wars often do, Trump's approval plunged below 40 percent. Popular podcasters including Alex Jones and Candace Owens seized the moment to call for Trump's removal from office, while the faux-populist Tucker Carlson insinuated that the president might actually be doing the bidding of the Antichrist by seeking supreme power and aiding the Israelis in their quest to control the Holy Land.

Despite this ideological mayhem, it's far too early to write MAGA's obituary. Though he might like to be, Trump will not be the movement's leader forever, and replacements lurk in the wings who would take the United States to an even more violent and openly supremacist place. To be clear, conspiracists who call for mass deportations and oppose basic gender equality are not our allies in the fight for democracy. The fracturing of the MAGA coalition, however, does create powerful possibilities for a new, more hopeful politics, one that addresses the very real unmet needs that fascists exploit so expertly, whether the need for economic security or the need to belong to something large and inspiring. As more people come to understand the apocalyptic quality of today's far right, they are finding new solidarities with one another, across old political divides, and forging unexpected and robust coalitions.

In short, end times fascism is not yet dominant, and as a result, it can still be defeated. However, if we wait until this violent and nihilistic project has colonized every part of the right before we confront it directly, it will indeed be too late.

Three Bunkers, Only One Home

Scholars of fascism often point out the word derives from the root *fascis*, Latin for bundle, which speaks to the movement's ability to bind disparate, even clashing, elements. As Paxton writes, "Fascism in power is a compound, a powerful amalgam of different but marriageable conservative, national-socialist and radical Right ingredients, bonded together by common enemies and common passions." This holds for end times fascism: rather than a monolith, it is an alliance of very different groups, each one racing toward a different but related apocalyptic dream, sutured together in common cause. In this book, we will examine the alliance's three most significant components—the religious end timers, the tech end timers, and the ethno-nationalist end timers. Then we will move on to the antifascist alliances that are already taking them on.

The end times alliance is fractious, riven with disagreements. There are fights about whether a purified nation-state is the pinnacle of humanity or whether countries are obsolete and ripe for disruption; about whether AI is demonic or a conduit to a new deity; about whether the road to Christ's return runs through "Greater Israel" or whether that status has been usurped by the United States. There are fierce arguments about whether tech oligarchs are destroying Christian Nationalism—or whether that work is being done by the Jews (Bannon for one loves to denounce "the psychopath, sociopathic overlords from Silicon Valley"). There is growing disagreement about whether Donald Trump is an instrument of God or a deceitful tool of the "Epstein Class." Some of these fractures are so deep, they threaten to break the jerry-rigged coalition apart.

Yet for all these discordances, the belief that the end of the world as we know it is nigh is never far from the surface. Apocalyptic faith fuses the end times fascist bundle, whether the coming cataclysm is imagined as the manifestation of biblical prophecy, a man-made Armageddon sparked by a confluence of the risks measured by the Doomsday Clock, or by what many imagine as the existential threat of immigration and cultural replacement. Whatever is driving this perceived collapse, end times fascists are determined to be among the chosen few who survive the cataclysm, safely ensconced in impenetrable gilded bunkers, or behind fortressed borders, or escaping Earth altogether—their souls raptured to heaven, their minds uploaded to the cloud, their bodies hurtling in rockets to the stars.

In Part I, "Messianic Dreams," we'll go to the source material for all these stories and meet the religious end timers. These are extremists—

present in every country but strongest in the United States, in Israel, and in Latin America—who are convinced that we have entered the biblical end of days. For them, every real-world disaster is an exciting sign to be celebrated—proof that they are nearing the moment when all the faithful will be saved and suffering will end.

Since Trump's first term, a powerful alliance between Jewish and Christian supremacists has moved from the political margins to the centers of political power in both the United States and Israel. They are fixated on building the prophesied Third Temple in present-day Jerusalem, which they are convinced will usher in the messianic age. To make their dreams come true, they are willing to actively court World War III, an impulse that has been in full view since the start of the 2026 war on Iran.

In Part II, "Escape to the Cloud," we move to the tech titans, examining the ways that the so-called AI arms race has transformed into its own kind of faith-based religion with its own eager accelerationists. In 2013, Sam Altman observed, "The most successful founders do not set out to create companies. They are on a mission to create something closer to a religion, and at some point it turns out that forming a company is the easiest way to do so." Two years later, he founded OpenAI.

As we will see, large-scale generative AI is in a completely different league from Silicon Valley's previous disruptions, bubbles, and booms. It's not about connecting us, or making it easier to work from home, or to get sushi without speaking to anyone. This is a technology that has the potential to disrupt not only whole industries and lifestyles but the nature of life as we understand it.

And just as religious extremists are willing to let this world burn to bring on the next, the tech oligarchs leading this race are proving all too willing to sacrifice the habitability of the planet in order to feed their ravenous machines a boundless supply of energy, water, and minerals. Convinced they are on the brink of summoning a digital superintelligence destined to supersede flesh-and-blood humanity, they fully understand the chaos they are courting, but seem to sincerely believe that their wealth, and the various high-end bunkers it buys, will protect them from the hell they are unleashing on the rest of us.

We will show that this drive—dizzying in both its profitability and its appetite for risk—is the primary reason so many of the world's wealthiest individuals and companies have chosen to align themselves with a mad king

like Donald Trump. Silicon Valley's affinity with fascism, as we will see, is no mere relationship of convenience. It's a full-blown marriage of urgent necessity.

In Part III, "Prepper Nation," we move to the part of the fascist alliance that believes the nation-state itself can become a kind of purified bunker—if enough people are kicked out, locked up, and locked out (and if enough patriots buy enough gold and guns to prep for the coming collapse). This is the violent goal of the Christian Nationalists whose dogmas are now found far beyond US borders.

In the past, fascism has been animated primarily by hatred of fellow citizens—those of a different ideological persuasion, religion, skin color, or sexual orientation—as well as of enemy nations. Today, these rages persist, but it is the figure of the migrant, the noncitizen "invader," that unites MAGA and most binds together the global far right in common hatred and fear, from Norway to Australia, Canada to Chile. The centrality of migrant hatred is inextricable from the end times quality of today's fascism. Migrants are the contemporary monster precisely because so many millions of people on this fast-warming and war-ravaged planet are on the move—and so many more are projected to move to seek safety and survival in the coming decades.

The planetary crises driving this mass migration of humanity are rarely acknowledged explicitly, but they are nonetheless omnipresent. The global state of crisis is the *reason* this part of the fascist coalition must remain in a perpetual apocalyptic posture, with the nation imagined to be under existential threat of invasion from without and within. In the face of these threats, the goals of this arm of the alliance are threefold: to ethnically cleanse the bunkered nation of the people they blame for their troubles; to stockpile resources seized from other nations to survive the coming turmoil; and to fortress national borders against the coming Black and brown hordes. At its core, this is supersized prepperism, with the nation itself imagined as the bunker. But one contradiction, as we'll see, is that the leading figures of this exclusionary movement are so immersed in the hypercompetitive attention economy, and so desperate to profit from conflict and catastrophe, that they cannot even agree on who should ultimately be allowed to exist inside the national bunker and who should be cast out.

These three bunkered visions, though laden with contradictions, are nonetheless bound together by their common abandonment of the very

possibility of a stable future. Once we understand this simple if chilling fact, a great deal else begins to make sense. The attacks on basic human equality and universal rights—even on empathy itself? Equality and empathy cannot survive the brutal world of social Darwinism that end times fascists are building. The culture of constant transgression, including attempts to make Hitler cool again, to strip eugenics and race science of their well-earned stigmas, and to treat women as interchangeable body parts to be traded and deepfaked at scale? Those supremacist symbols and beliefs are the tools needed to justify the human culling and domination required to make their various bunkered dreams thinkable.

The three parts of the alliance are also united by an increasingly open disdain for democracy, even if their justifications differ. For the religious end timers, no earthly law can ever be as important as doing's God's bidding; for the tech end timers, mere humans have no business interfering with the quest to bring on the next phase of AI-enhanced evolution; and for the nationalist preppers, nothing is as important as defending the homeland (and the West) from imminent demise. Besides, it's only the "heritage" citizens whose voices really count.

These claims provide the ready-made justification for every possible cruelty and crime, including the crime of interfering with elections or attempting to overturn their results. They also fuel a shared sense of impunity, a sense of being outside the law that is evident everywhere from ICE's urban rampages to the brazen abuses on display in the Epstein files to the multipronged attacks on the United Nations. It's a worldview perfectly encapsulated in the person of Donald Trump, who mused after the attack on Venezuela that there is "only one" thing restraining him on the world stage: "My own morality. My own mind. It's the only thing that can stop me."

In Part IV, "Let's Stay," we focus on the growing movements not only resisting end times fascism but forging new ways of doing politics that we understand to be fascism's antithesis. We'll meet the people braving tear gas and murderous men with guns to protect their schools and streets from ICE raids. We'll ride along with the exploding global movement against data centers, which is already clocking wins against the tech giants and turning uncontrolled AI into an election issue, and we'll hear from Venetians who took their city back from Jeff Bezos's wedding planners. We'll also go behind the scenes in the successful campaign to elect Zohran Mamdani

mayor of New York City and find out how he turned a meaningful slice of Trump voters into advocates for free public transit and universal childcare.

At every turn, this emergent new politics is rooted in an expansive, open-armed sense of neighborliness, one that transcends borders, race, and political partisanship. It is also rooted in a profound love of place. Love for our boisterous and diverse cities, and love for our imperiled rivers and forests and endangered species. It's a politics not based on wanting to escape this earthly realm or our animate bodies, but on a deep desire to stay, and protect all that is irreplaceable and alive. Inspired by the antifascist Jewish labor bund of the early twentieth century, we call this the politics of "Hereness."

The human networks that neighbors are building, block by block, group chat by group chat, are about more than refusal. In our time of serial shocks and intersecting crises, they are also the basis for a different kind of survivalism. But while the various strains of fascists build bunkers for the few, these are survival networks grounded in the principle that every one of us, without exception, deserves to live and thrive. They are also bound by a belief that keeping one another safe when the inevitable shocks arrive is a sacred duty.

At its core, end times fascism is a crisis of rampant impunity born of concentrated power and wealth. Far too much money, information technology, and weaponry have been allowed to concentrate into the hands of the few, and that unchecked power has deranged our elites, goading them to take risks that put our societies and countless species in existential peril.

To fight this, we will need to be clear that it is not the people themselves who are the root of the problem, but rather the systems that concentrated so much power and wealth in the first place. For these reasons, we end this book with ideas for a new kind of disarmament movement, one that would diffuse and dismantle these dangerous pools of concentrated power. There is no other way to turn back the hands of the Doomsday Clock.

We are under no illusion that this task will be easy to achieve. Together, we have decades of experience inside social movements that have been fighting for systemic change, from joining Occupy Wall Street to founding the Debt Collective to organizing for a Green New Deal. We have written books about democracy and its enemies and taught courses on the history of fascism. We are all too familiar with the challenges of mass organizing.

But we also know that mass movements have toppled dictators. And that from South Korea to Brazil, they have recently succeeded in pushing would-be fascists from power. One thing these precedents teach is that to fight fascism, we must know where it comes from. That, then, is where we will begin.

PART I

MESSIANIC DREAMS

1

The Spiral of History

From Colonial Genocide to Antifascist Resistance

Every age has its own Fascism, and we see the warning signs wherever the concentration of power denies citizens the possibility and the means of expressing and acting on their own will.
—PRIMO LEVI

Let us be reminded that before there is a final solution, there must be a first solution, a second one, even a third. The move toward a final solution is not a jump. It takes one step, then another, then another.
—TONI MORRISON, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*

Most of us grew up thinking that we knew exactly what fascism was, and that we would recognize it easily if it ever attempted a comeback, and quickly move to crush it. How could we not? The period when the extreme right very nearly conquered Europe is the most closely studied chapter in modern history.

Several lifetimes can be spent with the books, films, and museums devoted to illuminating the precise conditions under which European fascism rose up in the injured aftermath of World War I. More lives can be spent immersed in the literature exploring Benito Mussolini's egomaniacal rise to power, Francisco Franco's enduringly repressive regime, and Adolf Hitler's hideous and methodical cleansings of the Nazi's despised out-groups: Communists, Roma, disabled people, gay people, and, on an unfathomable scale, Jews. We are supposed to have learned the basics in school, alongside the rules and frameworks that were going to prevent these atrocities from ever happening again.

And yet it seems fair to say that something about these lessons failed. Because, well, here we are. Fascism's resurrection caught a great many of us off guard, and now that it is surging again, many seem equally unclear about how to effectively combat it. That could well be because most of those lessons about World War II were missing large parts of the story about

how and why fascism rises—and they excluded important voices with firsthand experience. Listening to these voices isn't just key to understanding the conditions that give rise to the far right and having a more accurate picture of this critical history. It is also essential to understanding the kinds of social movements and societal transformations that defeating fascism demands of us.

Rupture—or Throughline?

In Europe and North America, the initial outbreak of fascism is usually treated as a rupture or aberration that interrupted an otherwise progressive civilizational project based on liberal democracy and free markets. Due to a variety of extraordinary circumstances—among them, the carnage of World War I and perceived national humiliation in its wake, as well as social turmoil and poverty deepened by the market crash of 1929—large parts of Europe abandoned their prior commitments to enlightened progress and began devouring their own people and institutions. In the most common story, the Nazis' monstrous crimes, especially the industrialized slaughter of six million Jews, emerged from this historical context but are also lifted out of it. To this day, the Nazi Holocaust is frequently regarded as so unique and so far beyond the horrors that humans had inflicted before or since that the mere act of drawing historical comparisons is treated as a kind transgression, perhaps even an insult to the dead.

In this telling, the standard one in North American schools, fascism is fixed and static, something that was done by one group of people in Europe to another group of people in Europe. But because it happened once, we are also told that it could happen again. So we should stay vigilant for any telltale signs of the goosestepping monster's return.

That was never the only understanding of what fascism was, however. From the start, there were voices who rejected the idea of a rupture, and instead placed Nazism firmly inside the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and pointed out that fascism had clear precedents. This perspective came mainly from people in countries living under the boot of European colonial control, and from Black and Indigenous peoples living in countries that were founded as settler colonies and plantation economies. One of the earliest voices making this point was Jawaharlal Nehru, future prime minister of India. In 1938, he traveled to Europe and witnessed fascism's rise for himself. Speaking to students at Allahabad University on

his return, he observed, “Fascism is only employing in Europe the methods employed by imperialism in other continents. Fascism is a mirror to the past, and to a certain extent the present, of imperialism.”

Politicians and intellectuals in the Global South, as well in Black liberation movements in the United States, would draw similar parallels. They traced the roots of Hitler’s race science, fetish for force, and vicious ghettoization and extermination methods to the Jim Crow race laws, colonial concentration camps, and to the genocide of and brutal Indian reservation system for Indigenous peoples across the Americas. As the US intellectual and civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in *The World and Africa*, published at the close of World War II, “There was no Nazi atrocity —concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood—which Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world.”

Yes, the Nazis sped the process up, applying modern technologies to the business of mass slaughter, but the impulse to exterminate long predated them, even if it didn’t call itself fascism. In this telling, fascism was not an event, fixed in time and place. Rather, it was a throughline in the history of modern capitalism: a set of brutal methods and strategies that moved through space and time, rising to the surface when the powerful felt injured, and when the interests of wealth and capital were under great threat from below. In this analysis, a country could be ruthlessly fascistic in its colonies, but liberal and democratic at home; it could be fascist against one group, but not others; and it could be fascist in some parts of a country, but not others. In short, fascism is not all or nothing. It can be uneven—partial, incipient, not always dominant or totalizing.

A few Europeans were able to see these continuities, even when they were trapped in fascism’s tightening vice. Among them was the great German Jewish writer Walter Benjamin. In his final work, *On the Concept of History*, he described the horrors inflicted by modern nations in the name of “progress” not as “a chain of events”—separate and unconnected—but rather as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.” Benjamin wrote the essay in 1940, shortly before taking his own life, fearing capture by the Gestapo.

None of these writers were saying that Nazism was an exact repetition of earlier colonial and imperial crimes. History isn't linear but it also doesn't repeat on a loop, circling back to the same place over and over again. Rather, it moves in more of a spiral, pushing to places that feel familiar but are fundamentally different. The accumulated weight of what came before collides with new, unpredictable developments.

If we think of the history of fascism as a downward spiral—like a tornado or a whirlpool—it means that every go-round pulls us in new perilous directions, each spin leading us further into a novel vortex. Today's fascism carries the wreckage of the past into the present, dispensing with previous elements while picking up new tricks, adapting and shape-shifting as the world changes. Conceiving of fascism in this way helps explain why so many of us missed the early signs: we were looking for a rerun, but what we got was a sequel.

That means we cannot understand today's version of fascism exclusively through the rearview mirror, because it has changed as we have changed. For example, the people advancing fascist goals today are far more individualistically entrepreneurial than their predecessors. The supremacy they believe in most is the superiority of extreme wealth, a eugenics of markets. They are billionaires with cult followings whose *Lebensraum* is in space and beneath Greenland's melting permafrost; they are online influencers trying to sell us crypto and energy drinks; and they are politicians who are masters of meme warfare. Fascists today lack all discipline: they go to war with one another to chase clicks, then come back together for much-hyped collabs to double their reach. If we expect the trains to run on time, we'll miss that they care neither about chaotic trains nor chaotic airports—after all, today's fascist leaders fly private.

In short, fascism today doesn't look like the ordered and industrial past. It looks like the frenetic, always online, never-stop-monetizing, bot-ravaged present. If we are waiting for soldiers goosestepping in formation, we'll miss the venture capitalists and their autonomous weapons. If we are looking for yellow stars, we'll miss the facial-recognition databases and the algorithmic threat ratings. If we expect only white Christians, we'll miss the way historical trauma can jump from host to host, with fascism's past victims mimicking their victimizers and calling it freedom, or justice, or just their turn.

Last century's tyrants sought to fuse with the nation-states they controlled, using state power to exert total dominance over their people, laws, and industries. End times fascists are also obsessed with grabbing state power, but as we'll see time and again in these pages, that is not their only goal. Whether religious fanatics or tech oligarchs or white nationalists, seizing the state is often a stepping stone toward something more ambitious and more final. In different ways, they are all chasing an intoxicating messianic fantasy: an exit to a parallel gated city, a fortressed Zion, whether in the sky or here on earth. They are plotting their escape from our shared world, unconcerned about the fates of those who aren't among the chosen.

Fascism, Crisis, and Counterrevolution

By saying that fascism is a throughline in the history of capitalism, we are not saying that socialist governments are incapable of their own bloody purges and cleansings. Indeed, history certainly tells us otherwise, and an immense amount of suffering was caused by the left's own tragic legacy of messianic thinking, including a blinkered and deadly faith that the motor of history ineluctably leads to a certain kind of earthly utopia. Nor are we saying that every capitalist democracy is always on the brink of flipping fascist. Long periods go by without the kind of sweeping, supremacist spasm we are seeing now. Clearly, fascist tendencies rise to the surface at specific historical moments, and not others.

Those moments share two notable characteristics in common: they are times of widespread crisis, when the market economy is quite obviously failing large numbers of people (periods of depression and hyperinflation, for instance); they are also periods when capitalism faces credible challenges from below—primarily from organized workers, but also from marginalized groups long excluded from prosperity. Put another way, fascism is capitalism's most ferocious threat response, a way of making sure that the public anger that wells up during times of deep crisis is directed downward at the vulnerable rather than upward at the system itself and its most privileged stewards and beneficiaries.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Europe was squeezed in the pincers of crises and threat: the continent was ravaged by war, plague, and economic misery—and, after the successful Bolshevik revolution in the Soviet Union, and with left parties gaining power in almost every country, European elites feared that they could be next. That is why Mussolini and Hitler

systematically targeted Communists and leftists. As the Italian antifascist author and politician Ignazio Silone put it in 1938, “Fascism is a counter-revolution against a revolution that never took place.”

Elites found themselves in similar pincers of crises and threat in the southern United States after emancipation—well before either fascism or Nazism had proper names. In this period, white landowners in the South were reeling economically from the losses of the Civil War, often from losing the right to treat people as property. At the same time, formerly enslaved people and their children began gaining real power, which they used to advance policies including public education, poverty relief, and land reform. In response, local elites fought back, drawing whites together in defense of racial hierarchy. Lynch mobs, often led by the KKK, hounded and hunted down whites who crossed the color line and murdered thousands of Black people, all to prevent equality under the law from ever being realized. The Jim Crow racial apartheid laws born of this wave of racial terror helped inspire the Nazi Nuremberg Laws.

The crisis-threat pincers were similarly at work in Latin America when a wave of fascist dictatorships grabbed iron-fisted power in the 1970s. Economies had been rocked by a series of shocks, and support for left politics was growing. Months after the democratic socialist Salvador Allende was elected president in Chile in 1970, students at the Catholic University in Santiago, members of the paramilitary Patria y Libertad, began goosestepping around the city in open imitation of Hitler Youth. In Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, the juntas that took power went on a brutal campaign to cleanse their nations of leftist “filth,” throwing trade unionists out of helicopters and burning books by Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Pablo Neruda.

The throughline with Nazi Germany was not subtle: many unrepentant Nazis had fled to Argentina and Chile after the war. In Chile, some became strong supporters of Pinochet (a few were even rumoured to have trained the regime’s torturers). Miguel Kast, the son of a Nazi exile, became one of the most important figures in the Pinochet dictatorship, acting as his labor minister and as head of the central bank (Kast had studied free-market economics under Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago). In late 2025, with full support from the Trump administration, Kast’s younger brother, José Antonio Kast, was elected president of Chile.

The pattern is clear: fascism emerges in moments of systemic crisis, conjoining popular passions with traditional authority and protecting elite power against the threat of economic redistribution from below. That was true after the Civil War and emancipation in the US South, it was true after World War I and the Great Depression in Europe, and it was true in Latin America, amid economic stagnation and hyperinflation in the early 1970s. Rather than address crises at their root, fascism shakes off all democratic niceties and crushes the threat of a fairer economic order, while directing mass anger and frustrations toward vulnerable scapegoats. Fascism is capitalism with bared teeth.

Are we in a moment like that? The conditions of economic stress and crisis are certainly here for many people, and have been at least since the pandemic, with the costs of daily life becoming hard to bear for all but the very rich while the barrage of new oil, food, and tariff shocks makes life tougher by the day. But is there really a credible threat to the powerful and privileged coming up from below? To hear the wealthiest men in the world tell it, they are under siege from every side—the regulatory state, the woke mob, their own workers, unwelcome immigrants, and even from the most mild-mannered Democrats.

If judged by their expanding net worth, the billionaire class's persecution complex seems absurd. Still, we can see how, from their cloistered perspective, it could well seem like pitchforks are at the gate. Their sense of siege clearly began in 2011, when protesters took to the streets across Europe in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Occupy Wall Street pitted "the 99 percent" against, well, them—and set up camp blocks away from the New York Stock Exchange. The first iteration of what would be called Black Lives Matter erupted in 2012, sparking waves of global reckoning with the ongoing reverberations of enslavement, apartheid, and colonialism.

Progressive populists began running for and winning elections in Spain, Greece, and beyond (whether they made good on their promises is another story). Then came Bernie Sanders's 2016 presidential run, which translated the street protests into a political program based on fair taxation and an expanded social safety net, while Jeremy Corbyn proposed the same as leader of the Labour Party in the UK. Then Bernie was back in 2020, with an even larger block of voters behind him, a self-described democratic socialist once again nearly becoming the Democratic nominee for president.

Though the left never gained power in Washington, this new wave of activism shifted national priorities. An international divestment movement pushed $40 trillion of capital to pledge not to invest in fossil fuels, while high schoolers kicked off a global climate strike that drew more than four million people to the streets. Uprisings against oil and gas pipelines, led by Indigenous communities, galvanized massive public support across North America and helped inspire a young New Yorker named Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to run for Congress. Once in Washington, she won broad support for the idea of a Green New Deal, an eco-socialist vision of a low-carbon care-based economy, that spread internationally. All the while, the price of solar plummeted, and large countries such as Spain and Pakistan rushed to embrace renewables on a massive scale.

In addition to taking aim at the fossil fuel sector, the populist revival of this period also shook the large tech companies, the faction of the capitalist class that would most dramatically flip to align with end times fascism. In 2019, New York City rejected Amazon's plan to build a second corporate headquarters in Queens over concerns about gentrification, as well as anger at the company's employment practices and its collaborations with ICE during Trump's first term. At around the same time, Toronto residents similarly overturned a plan from Google's parent company to turn a swath of urban area into a prototype for the first surveillance-rich "Smart City" in North America. These companies were raring to build the AI-enabled sci-fi future they had long imagined, but the public wasn't playing along. In this same period, people refused to buy Google glasses, defaced self-driving taxis, and rejected Facebook's attempts to shepherd users into a garish virtual reality.

Governments started taking notice of the new anti–Big Tech mood and, belatedly, began introducing a range of regulations. In 2018, Europe implemented comprehensive digital privacy laws, Canada planned to impose a tax on social media and protection for traditional news media, and so on. Newly elected members of the US Congress, particularly Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, were grilling tech CEOs about their business practices as D.C. policymakers declared, "Every billionaire is a policy failure." Most significant, Joe Biden appointed Lina Khan, a respected antimonopolist who wrote a groundbreaking paper about Amazon and antitrust law, to chair the Federal Trade Commission, and imposed modest regulations on crypto currencies.

All the while, women engineers and researchers were blowing the whistle about what Sofiya Umoja Noble called “algorithms of oppression” and Ruha Benjamin dubbed the “New Jim Code,” references to the many ways emergent artificial intelligence would automate and amplify existing racial biases with potentially disastrous consequences. Other tech workers were also organizing on the job—both for better working conditions and for more ethical corporate practices. Empowered by Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, as well as the wave of climate organizing, workers won a series of concessions, including commitments to lower carbon emissions and canceled military contracts at Microsoft and Google. The huge cache of Epstein files released in early 2026 provide a rare window into the depth of elite panic inspired by this wave of reckonings, particularly #MeToo and the related “Time’s Up” campaign. As more and more women came forward with allegations of sexual assault and harassment, the MAGA strategist Steve Bannon wrote to Jeffrey Epstein: “Nobody safe.” But the wealthy and powerful men in the files did not take this lying down: as the documents also show, some of them helped fund, organize, and unleash the very far-right movements that are now sweeping the globe. Bannon told Epstein that the “Populist/Nationalist” and “Conservative Christians” coalition he was building “staves off ‘Times Up’ for next decade plus.”

On the left, when we’ve looked back at this period, we’ve mainly focused on the ways our movements fell short (and there were many, from censorious demands for political purity to a failure to translate powerful issue-based movements into a coherent, broad-based political program). It’s clear, however, that many in Silicon Valley and beyond experienced the convergence of progressive movements and forces as a kind of war. The world was changing beneath their feet, and wealth was no longer protecting them from accountability, or at least a taste of it, nor was it providing them with the total impunity they had come to expect.

Public anger was growing and rising upward, threatening to come for the billionaire class as a whole. Some felt the need to direct that anger downward, which is what Bannon’s plan to push a “Populist/Nationalist” and “Conservative Christians” coalition was offering. Here was a chance to fuse elite rage at a loss of impunity and status to less elite forms of those same emotions: white people feeling excluded or targeted by the waves of racial-justice reckoning, or men of all ethnicities feeling similarly diminished in the face of changing gender roles and gender identity. In the

new fascist coalition, everyone gets a piece of impunity back: the ICE agents ramming down doors without permits, the teens taunting their classmates with racial and ableist slurs, the aggrieved men creating pornographic images of any woman who rejects or annoys them, the tech CEOs selling surveillance software and facilitating war crimes, never mind their "woke" workers.

Faced with a choice between fairness and fascism, many powerful individuals did what their predecessors in the spiral of history had done before them. They chose fascism—a counterrevolution against a revolution that had not yet occurred.

The Spiral of Solidarity

As we will see, however, that violent choice is encountering fierce and creative resistance on every front, despite the very real risks such actions carry. Indeed, the reason we are able to read the Epstein files, and gain these insights into elite panic and fascist planning, is because the women Epstein selected to abuse and traffic, confident they were too powerless to fight back, were in fact incredibly brave and determined. They chose to speak out, band together, and take legal action, and shamed the US Justice Department into releasing the files. Their courage has already brought down powerful politicians, business leaders, and a British prince, and they aren't finished yet.

The Epstein breakthrough, though still limited by stubborn impunity at the top, would not have been possible without the long and painful history of previous survivors confronting their abusers—fathers, husbands, priests, teachers, bosses, governments—only to be shamed, smeared, punished, and disbelieved. The women toppling giants today do so, in part, because of countless women who never saw accountability, including Virginia Giuffre, one of Epstein's first accusers, who died by suicide in 2025.

It's a reminder that fascism isn't the only force that moves through history in a spiral, picking up the accumulated power of what came before. So, too, do the forces of solidarity and the hunger for justice. And the interesting thing about spirals is that when they switch directions, they don't drill down like tornados—they broaden, opening like galaxies, constantly creating new stars and constellations.

All of the movements confronting end times fascism that we will meet in this book—whether catalyzed by an uninvited data center or by cruel ICE

raids or by an inspiring candidate—are choosing to root themselves in a deep sense of radical history, an awareness that they are building on past revolutionary struggles, both their successes and their traumatic defeats. That sense of ancestral lineage—of knowing where they come from and being determined not to repeat past mistakes—is making today's antifascist movements stronger, braver, wiser, and more strategic, more likely to grasp and remedy the root causes of the crises that create fertile terrain for fascism.

They are also drawing strength from the future, from an ever-present understanding of what it means to be alive as the Doomsday Clock ticks ever closer to midnight. The fight against end times fascism is nothing less than a fight for life, and as that fight spirals up and out, it is drawing every species and every natural wonder into its widening arms. There is a tremendous sense of responsibility in that, and also power.

Few have thought more deeply about these temporal themes than Walter Benjamin. When he looked to the past, he saw piles of historical wreckage, yes, but that was not all he saw. He also identified a potential for repair, alongside a kinetic kind of energy. "The tradition of the oppressed" through time, he wrote, emerged in those moments when masses of working people rose up to resist subjugation, suddenly aware of their collective power and determined to change the world. Sometimes they won their battles, and often they lost, but Benjamin became convinced that the efforts never disappeared, and that their latent power could be summoned in what he referred to as *Jetztzeit*, often translated as "now time." Now time, he wrote, could break through into the present like a match igniting a long fuse stretching backwards through previous eras, bursting, in Benjamin's formulation, like "a tiger's leap into the past."

It was no mystery why he was thinking about what happens to the dreams of revolutionaries after they are crushed with brutal force. As he reflected on *Jetztzeit* in 1940, the fascists were conquering country after country in Europe, closing in on him and so many of his friends. "We ask those who will come after us not gratitude for our victories, but remembrance of our defeats," he wrote. "This is a consolation—the only consolation afforded to those who no longer have any hope of being consoled."

Benjamin was not asking for the people who came after him to lie, or to rewrite heartbreak and failure into rosy victories. Instead, he was offering

his generation’s wrenching losses up as fuel for future movements, which would have a chance to not only improve their present realities but, by doing so, also help redeem the past and honor the efforts of our ancestors.

Benjamin is often described as a “messianic” thinker, because he was describing the shimmering beauty that end times prophecy offers: redemption for the dead, a salve for our wounds. But unlike the fundamentalists with their shimmering golden cities, his was a vision for a messianism without an otherworldly final ending. It was a messianism of the here and now, with no messiah other than ordinary people, gathering up their collective power through time and space.

It was the antithesis of the blood-soaked messianism that now surges on the global far right, and nowhere more so than on the lands where the most consequential messianic story is set.

2

Rapture Ready

Praying for a Bunker in the Sky

When there is a big war in the world, the power of the messiah awakens.
—RABBI AVRAHAM YITZHAK KOOK

In the mid-1960s, a clean-cut, sharp-featured twenty-three-year-old Australian named Denis Michael Rohan began hearing voices. Up to then, the life of Rohan, a farmhand in New South Wales, had been a series of hardships: a violent childhood, few friends, and his wife had just left him, taking their children with her. Unsure if God was speaking to him, or Satan, he broke down and ended up in a psychiatric hospital.

Inside the institution, another patient turned Rohan on to a charismatic religious sect out of Pasadena, California, called Church of God. He read some of the church's literature and began tuning in to its nightly "World Tomorrow" sermon, carried by radio stations around the globe. Like many evangelicals, the show's fiery ministers were intensely focussed on interpreting contemporary news events as "signs" that pointed toward an imminent apocalypse, an end of days, and heavenly salvation for the church's fortunate followers. "Peace … or End of Civilization?" was a typical headline in its newsletter, and "Prophecy comes alive in today's world news" was a recurring feature.

These baroque semiotic systems resonated with Rohan's own propensity to see coded signs and signals all around him. Though not particularly religious prior to the breakdown, he quickly became a born-again believer in the Church of God.

When Rohan was released as an outpatient, he took work as a sheep shearer in the goldrush town of Grenfell, four and a half hours by car from Sydney. He wasn't the fastest shearer around, but he was meticulous, known to leave the animals clean of wool. His true passion remained the cultlike church out of Pasadena—its magazines, brochures, radio programs, and correspondence courses.

After a couple of years, Rohan quit the farm to find his true destiny. In March 1969, after a stay in England, he boarded a ship destined for the shores of a nation frequently invoked by his mail-order church: Israel. When he arrived, the country was still coursing with triumphant energy from the 1967 Six-Day War, a stunningly rapid blitzkrieg that had seen Israel occupy Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Egyptian Sinai, and the Syrian Golan Heights.

In the English-speaking world, Israel's victory was almost universally celebrated as a David vs. Goliath story, one that solidified the young nation's status as a regional power. Moshe Dayan, then Israel's defense minister, had declared that the war marked the arrival of the "warrior Jew," with Israel's army taking "its place among the world's elite corps-at-arms," and it was a view shared by many Western governments.

Among many religious Jews and Christians, particularly evangelicals, the Six-Day War was understood as an event of far deeper significance. In Genesis, God promised the land of Canaan as "a perpetual holding" in his "covenant" with Abraham—land many have interpreted to be modern Israel/Palestine and even parts of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Surely, Israel laying claim to so much more territory was prophecy at work, a modern-day miracle that could have happened only with a divine hand on the battlefield. That the length of the conflict mirrored the number of days of creation in that same biblical text was held up as further evidence that the time had come to fulfill the covenant in the real world.

Most electrifying of all was the fact that Jerusalem's Temple Mount was in the hands of Israelites for the first time in two thousand years. This was the hallowed ground where King Solomon's temple once stood and where a Third Temple was prophesied to arise, the precondition for the arrival of the Messiah and the dawn of a blessed age of peace, plenty, and wisdom. In the wake of the war, countless fundamentalist preachers and rabbis concluded that humanity was on the verge of a cascade of long-foretold events that would bring the Savior himself to Jerusalem—the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (if you were a Christian literalist), or the Mashiach's first ever arrival (if you were an Orthodox Jew).

The heavenly triggers were clear: "Greater Israel" needed to be restored, the Jews of the diaspora needed to return, the Temple needed to rise from the ancient white stones, and then, in a flash of light, He would appear.

The accelerated timeline was so mind-blowing that many minds were indeed blown, leading to a surge in a delusional state known as "Jerusalem syndrome." As the Israeli reporter Abraham Rabinovich recalls in his book *Jerusalem on Earth*, "Post–Six Day War Jerusalem teemed with fundamentalist Christians and Jews for whom Israel's victory heralded the imminent coming of the Messiah. Inevitably, a lunatic fringe would give its own interpretations to events. Bearded and robed figures striding through Jerusalem's streets like figures in an Easter pageant had become a routine sight."

Rohan's church, now calling itself the Worldwide Church of God, went into a particularly rhapsodic state. Days after the war, its founder Herbert Armstrong published an essay stating: "We are entering the very climax at the close of this age-this civilization—right now! I want you to realize just how short time is." He predicted, "There will be a Jewish Temple built in Jerusalem, with animal sacrifices once again being offered, probably within about four and one half years." Those animal sacrifices were key, his followers understood, to fulfilling biblical prophecy.

It wouldn't be easy, of course. Before Christ's blissful reign would be the time of the Antichrist, the Great Tribulation, and convulsive suffering. How bad would it get? An article for the sect's *The Good News* magazine, published right after the war, spelled it out: "No time of suffering or horror has EVER approached this time! These days have no parallel in ALL history. No horror stories yet written of the bestiality, savagery and atrocities of the Nazi concentration camps are capable of showing the misery to come! There has NEVER been a time like it!… God is going to literally haul Israel into total destruction."

The article's author, a prominent church executive and theologian, explained, "We are approaching the end of the road. Just as surely as the diminishing mileage pictured on road signs as you draw closer to your destination, these prophecies are our road signs—our mileage markers!" Followers of the Church of God had nothing to fear, however. Before the tribulation hit, true believers had access to an exit ramp to Heaven, to stand before God. The author invoked a passage in Luke: "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape."

This collection of claims is a pure distillation of the promise at the heart of what we are calling end times fascism: world-ending horrors are imminent, but they should be embraced, even actively accelerated. Why?

Because you are among the chosen. You will not only escape the suffering others are forced to endure, held safe in a celestial bunker, but you will ultimately be rewarded with an eternal existence, free of all strife and friction.

When Rohan made his pilgrimage to Israel, these ideas were coursing through the culture. His first destination was Kibbutz Mishmar Hasharon, between Haifa and Tel Aviv, where he volunteered and studied Hebrew intensively. He also debated scripture with fellow volunteers, developed a consuming infatuation with his attractive Hebrew teacher, Zipporah, and made new friends. He confided to one of them that he heard voices, which were now telling him of "the imminence of the Messiah's coming and the construction of a new temple."

He traveled to Jerusalem to see the spot where Solomon's Temple stood before the Romans destroyed it in 70 CE, leaving the Western Wall as its only remaining structure. A passage in the book of Zechariah seemed to speak to him directly:

> Behold the man whose name is the branch, for he shall grow up in his place and he shall build the Temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the Temple of the Lord and shall bear royal honor and shall sit and rule upon the throne.

Rohan, now in the throes of Jerusalem syndrome, became convinced that it was he who was meant to be that branch, he who was destined to build the Temple of the Lord, and to sit upon that throne. Like the Church of God theologians, who matched news events to biblical passages and pronounced them evidence that the end was nigh, Rohan began to see coded messages everywhere—a rusty key, a piece of text, a date—all conspiring to tell him that he alone among men had been chosen to end, and rebirth, the world.

There was just one obstacle: the prophesied site for the Temple of the Lord was otherwise occupied. Since the seventh-century Arab conquest, the Temple Mount had been home to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, the third-holiest site in Islam, the place where the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have ascended to heaven. The walled al-Aqsa compound, which has been under Muslim control for centuries, encompasses the golden Dome of the Rock, the most iconic structure in all of Jerusalem, and the silver-domed al-Aqsa Mosque, where congregants gathered in front of the famed eight-hundred-

year-old “minbar of Saladin,” an exquisite wood-and-ivory pulpit considered one of the most sublime pieces of Islamic art ever created. Under the post-1967 agreement, the al-Aqsa compound stayed under the control of a Muslim religious trust called the Waqf, appointed by Jordan. Perimeter security, however, was controlled by Israelis. The rules were clear: Jews could pray at the Western Wall, Muslims were permitted access to pray five times a day at al-Aqsa Mosque, and non-Muslims were allowed to visit the compound during specified hours, but not to openly pray or display religious symbols at Islam’s holy sites. As Israel’s defense minister Moshe Dayan said after the war: “To members of the other religions, Christians and Muslims, I hereby promise faithfully that their full freedom and all their religious rights will be preserved. We did not come to Jerusalem to conquer the Holy Places of others.”

That is what is known as “the status quo,” and it persisted, at least in theory, over half a century. In 1969, when Rohan saw the status quo for himself, he was struck with his most dangerous idea yet: To fulfill his mission, he would need to destroy the silver-domed al-Aqsa Mosque. How else could the Lord’s temple rise up?

He began staking out his target, visiting daily in the sweltering summer months to determine the best moment to strike. One night in August, he filled a backpack with gear: a bottle with kerosene, rope for a wick, matches, and a whip—apparently to “drive out the wicked” in case Jesus arrived instantly.

On his first attempt, the mosque failed to ignite. But on the morning of August 21, 1969, he tried again. This time he brought benzene as well as kerosene and managed to place the makeshift firebomb deep inside the mosque. It exploded, and Rohan, now twenty-eight years old, ran.

For reasons that are bitterly debated to this day, the fire burned for hours, engulfing the prayer hall. Walls and pillars covered in mosaic fell; part of the roof collapsed; irreplaceable gilded paintings covering the drum of the dome were torched. Most devastating of all: the minbar of Saladin, a gift from its namesake, Salahuddin al-Ayubi, to celebrate the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem, was reduced to ash.

With the structure still in flames, fury spread through Jerusalem, and then across the Muslim world. Enormous protests erupted from Jordan to Kashmir, and much of the Palestinian population of Israel and the West Bank and Gaza went on strike. The arson seemed to confirm the worst fears

of many after the war: that Israel would never relinquish the lands its military had illegally occupied, and that it would instead attempt to destroy, settle, and eventually annex those territories, including the cherished al-Aqsa compound, also known as al-Haram al-Sharif. Many were convinced Israel had a role in setting the fire, or at least deliberately allowed it to burn out of control.

In the midst of this uproar, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia wrote to the leaders and peoples of "the Islamic World" calling on them "to declare Holy War after having exhausted all peaceful means." Dozens of states called for the UN Security Council to take up the crisis, warning that this fire could well be the spark that ignited World War III.

Aware of the rage the arson had unleashed, Prime Minister Golda Meir moved quickly to quell the situation. She expressed "deep regret," toured the al-Asqa site ashen-faced, and pledged to immediately launch an inquiry into who was responsible. She also promised to finance the reconstruction of the mosque using Muslim experts and engineers from around the world. Palestinians and most Arab governments had no faith in Israel's ability to investigate itself, and threats of holy war were unabated.

All of this meant that finding and prosecuting the person or persons responsible was a matter of both national and international importance. With the help of Arab guards from al-Aqsa, Denis Michael Rohan was not hard to locate. He had gone back to the kibbutz. When interrogated, he coolly explained that the presence of the mosque was "interfering with the coming of Christ and the Messiah." He also shared that he had been acting on directives from God, who had assured him that if he burned al-Aqsa, he would become "king of Jerusalem"—and also that the Hebrew teacher he had a crush on would become his queen.

Israel put on a trial so theatrical, it drew comparisons with the prosecution of Adolf Eichmann for Nazi war crimes eight years earlier. A four-hundred-person Jerusalem theater was converted into a courtroom, with three white-haired judges at the front. Rohan sat in a bulletproof glass box listening to an English translation of the proceedings on headphones. *The New York Times Magazine* covered it under the headline: "The Trial of 'The New Moses,'" observing that the spectacle was clearly designed to prove Israel's innocence, as much as Rohan's guilt.

For days, the accused man, dressed in a dark suit, carried himself like the king he was sure he had become. "When he spoke to his guards or his

lawyers, it was with a controlled impatience, like a man speaking to slow-witted inferiors," the *Times* reported. He expressed no regret, and instead brimmed with pride. "My trial is the most important event for the world since the trial of Jesus Christ," he told a psychiatrist. Was he not afraid of punishment? "I am a king and above the earthly court," he informed the judges.

The Church of God, which had been urging its followers to act, not merely pray, to bring about the end of days, disavowed Rohan and his arson. The District Court of Jerusalem found him criminally insane: "We saw a man who truly believed what he was saying," the judges ruled. Rohan was sentenced to an asylum in Israel, then transferred, five years later, to one in Australia. He died in 2013, unrepentant. Today, Rohan's name, and his crime, are largely lost to history.

The end times delusion that drove him, however, is spreading faster than the fire he lit.

Return to Temple Mount

Fifty-six years and forty-eight days after Rohan's inferno, another religious fanatic walked through the gates of al-Aqsa with destruction and salvation on his mind. This time, it was not a sheep shearer seemingly on a lone wolf mission. It was Israel's minister of national security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, dressed in a navy suit with a salmon-colored tie, enjoying the full protection of the police that he himself controls.

Openly defying the prohibition on non-Muslim prayer, and flagrantly violating Jewish rabbinic law, which deems these grounds too holy to access, he led 1,300 Orthodox settlers in full-throated prayer. As he read the sacred text off his phone, the golden dome glistened in the morning sun behind them.

It was October 8, 2025, two years into Israel's campaign of annihilatory violence in Gaza, determined by countless experts to meet the definition of genocide. The date was no coincidence: Ben-Gvir had selected the near-anniversary of the October 7, 2023, Hamas assault to declare that the destruction of Palestinian society was so complete that al-Aqsa now belonged to Israel. "Every house in Gaza has a picture of the Temple Mount," he said, gloating over the importance of the site for Muslims. "And now, two years later, we are victorious on the Temple Mount, we are the landlords on the Temple Mount."

For twenty-four months, Israel's leaders had offered many rationales to explain the totalizing nature of their Gaza destruction—it has been framed as righteous revenge, as necessary measures to safeguard national security, and, by many on the country's right, as a part of a battle over land and demographics in "Greater Israel." Now, for the first time, a powerful Israeli minister was explicitly framing the stakes of the genocide as something far more cosmological. If the destruction of Gaza was about owning Temple Mount, that means it was not only a religious war all along, but one with the ultimate goal of bringing forth the Messiah. Ben-Gvir, like Rohan before him, was taking it upon himself to move us all significantly closer to the prophesied end of times.

Is al-Aqsa under imminent threat of destruction? Ben-Gvir, who holds considerable power in Israel's precarious governing coalition, has certainly been very clear he would like to see the Third Temple constructed in his lifetime. In August 2024, he told an interviewer, "If I could do anything I wanted, I would put an Israeli flag on the site." Asked if he would build a synagogue there, his answer was: "Yes." His colleague Bezalel Smotrich, Israel's equally fanatical finance minister, went further, telling the mayor of Jerusalem in August 2025: "I will give the money, you will build the Temple."

In 1969, messianism like this had not yet hit Israel's political mainstream. Back then, everyone claimed to agree that Rohan's actions were wrong, dangerous, and insane. Politicians around the world, including in Israel, declared them so—as did Israel's courts and Rohan's own church. Inside Israel, moreover, the most significant factions of Orthodox Judaism still adhered to strict prohibitions against involving oneself in the timing of the Messiah's arrival. "May those who calculate the end of days be cursed," Rabbi Yonatan is quoted saying in the Talmud.

In sharp contrast, when Ben-Gvir invaded al-Aqsa in 2025, neither Israel's prime minister, nor the US president, condemned his actions. Why would they? In both Israel and the United States, powerful members of Congress and Parliament, cabinet ministers and ambassadors, even presidents and prime ministers, are taking inflammatory steps that accord with end times prophecy.

A turning point came with Donald Trump's 2017 decision to officially recognize Jerusalem as the "eternal capital of the Jewish people," and to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem the next year, a symbolic

granting of Israeli authority over a city that Palestinians also claim as their capital, with al-Aqsa at its center. Pat Robertson, the aging patriarch of televangelism, declared it “a very important signal in prophecy” and “the fulfillment of God’s promise of what he’s going to do on earth.”

Inside the Republican Party today, an influential bloc of evangelical Christians bases its fierce support of Israel on the hope of preparing the world for Jesus’s return—though these so-called Christian Zionists are under increasing challenge from rival Christian Nationalists who have a different theory of how to bring about the end of days. The latter camp views the United States as the promised land, with Christians as the chosen people who have a duty to make God’s kingdom on earth (a growing number of these true believers aim to strip the term *Judeo-* from *Judeo-Christian*, a reflection of their conviction that “Christianity and Judaism are totally distinct, incompatible, and irreconcilable religions,” as the authors of a book called *Christian Nationalism: A Biblical Guide to Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations* put it). Still, evangelical prayer breakfasts and study groups, commonplace at the Capitol, continue to reinforce the idea that the cosmic fates of the two nations are intertwined. Launched in early 2025, the Friends of Judea and Samaria Caucus now has more than twenty Republican House members dedicated to advocating for the official use of biblical nomenclature (no more “West Bank”) as well as for Israel’s “sovereignty” over the occupied territory. “If America pulls the plug on Israel, God will pull the plug on us,” Senator Lindsey Graham told his South Carolina constituents the same year.

Then there is Mike Huckabee, the US ambassador to Israel under Donald Trump and a Christian Zionist figurehead. In February 2026, Huckabee set off a regional firestorm when he said that, because the biblical God pledged an expanse of land that encompasses almost the entire modern Middle East to Abraham and his descendants, “it would be fine if [Israel] took it all.”

None of this can be shrugged off as harmless religious fantasy, since an extraordinary amount of military violence has already followed the script of these and other apocalyptic religious narratives. Israel’s post–October 7 assault on Gaza, for instance, has been guided by the open invocation of one of the most explicitly genocidal stories in the Bible, the story of Amalek. In it, God calls for the total obliteration of the tribe attempting to obstruct the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt and arrival in the promised land.

No one—not man, woman, child, infant, nor animal—should be spared. “Remember what the Amalekites did to you,” God commands in Deuteronomy; “you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!”

More than once, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu instructed soldiers to embody that same ethos in Gaza, directly referencing the call for vengeance on Amalek and transforming it into a national battle cry. Identifying targets with an AI system called “The Gospel,” they fought their enemies mercilessly. Then, when Donald Trump ordered attacks on three of Iran’s nuclear sites in June 2025, Netanyahu once again wedded warfare to scripture, declaring the US strikes a “miracle.” Praying at the Western Wall, he called on God to “bless, guard, protect, help, exalt, magnify, and raise up the president of the United States, Mr. Donald John son of Mary Anne, for he has taken it upon himself to banish evil and darkness from the world.”

Whatever their personal religious beliefs (or lack thereof), politicians like Netanyahu and Trump clearly understand that messianic religion holds enormous power, and they are determined to channel that power for their own political ends.

Did God Really Say That?

Fascists may be monotheists, atheists, or pagans—but their “Armageddon complex,” to quote Umberto Eco, reliably echoes the scriptural story of Armageddon, the one about how time itself will culminate in a battle of battles, in which the forces of good defeat the forces of evil and the Lord issues his final judgments. The story is at its most graphic and literal in the New Testament’s book of Revelation, where Jesus returns to earth to vanquish his enemies, and all sorts of disorienting and terrifying events transpire. But theologians have also seen final battles foretold within Judaism (the Old Testament wars of Gog and Magog), as well as Islam, in which *al-Malhama al-Kubra*, or “the greatest battle,” corresponds with the emergence of the false-messiah, or *Dajjāl*, as described in the Hadith prophetic texts (though not the Quran).

It’s worth stressing that there is no passage in the Bible, Old Testament or New, or in the Quran, that lays out the world-ending story in unambiguous terms. Rather, the contours of the Armageddon prophecy are murky, ever shifting, even in Revelation: does the Messiah come to create heaven on earth, or in the sky? Are the Christian faithful raptured up to

heaven before the final battle or after? Or is the Rapture—the belief that Jesus will suddenly appear and snatch the faithful from the earth, leaving everyone else behind to suffer—itself a misinterpretation and Jesus won't actually return until after his kingdom is created on earth? And the questions go on. Does the Third Temple matter at all—or was all of that settled when Christ died on the cross and was resurrected? Is the West now the site of the final, cleansing battle? As Christian Nationalist ideas gain traction inside influential conservative organizations such as the Heritage Foundation and spread online, where podcasters like Tucker Carlson openly attack Christian Zionists, these theological debates are currently tearing apart the far right, with each side accusing the other of treason and heresy.

Of course, many faith leaders and their followers sidestep these apocalyptic debates completely, choosing to respect prohibitions on accelerationism, or to read end times texts more elliptically. For instance, Harry Maier, a theologian and author of *Apocalypse Recalled*, finds in the book of Revelation less a forecast of what will happen in the future than a set of metaphors that attune him to the often hidden apocalypses in our midst, as well as to the messianic spirit in daily life. Apocalyptic scripture, he writes, helped him see "that my material comfort was bought at the price of a continuing social and environmental apocalypse, at home and abroad" and opened his eyes to "the ruins masked by the shiny facades of first world success." In this interpretation, which shares much with Walter Benjamin's, humanity is not a character in a linear story driving toward a fiery end. Rather, hell and heaven are threaded through the here and now.

That's one of the messages of Emily Raboteau's 2013 book, *Searching for Zion: The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora*, which explores the power of the story of a promised land for Black people around the world, including civil rights organizers. "In the tradition of the African diaspora, Zion is code for freedom. Enslaved Africans related to the story of the Book of Exodus on spiritual and political levels. Just as the Israelites transitioned from slavery in Egypt to liberation in the promised land, so too, did Black people look forward to liberation. We hear this striving for emancipation expressed in African American spirituals. We hear it in reggae music. We hear it in the pulpit and on the campaign trail," Raboteau told us. The dream, she explained, is "a just society based on equity and radical care where poverty and hunger are eradicated. Not a utopia, but an achievable goal focused on resolving conflicts nonviolently."

Still, it's not hard to see why self-styled divine vessels would choose to tell a far more simplistic and literal story about the end of days, with only the truly righteous offered protection from the convulsions. There is tremendous power (not to mention money from donations) unleashed by such predictions, especially when the people making them have also appointed themselves the earthly arbiter of what constitutes a faithful life. Which is why there have always been would-be prophets issuing fiery warnings about the imminent end, and mining real-world tragedies as supposed proof.

That isn't a phenomenon specific to our age. What is extraordinary about our particular moment is that the people who subscribe to this apocalyptic belief system are not merely putting pressure on governments. In Israel and the United States, as well as in other powerful countries around the world, they have managed to become the government or a major force within it—merging these perennial apocalyptic belief systems with new and deadly forms of state, military, and technological power.

Israeli-American Pincers

Inside Israel, the apocalyptic delirium set off by the Six-Day War did not end with Rohan's terrible act of arson. His vigilantism and vandalism were part of a much larger wave of prophecy-fueled religious extremism in the Holy Land, one that has seen plot after plot to attack al-Aqsa and make way for the Third Temple, often originating in extremist settler movements. As we write, Jewish-nationalist zealots build settlements all over the West Bank, get in gun fights with the Palestinians they evict, desecrate mosques, and attempt to smuggle lambs and goats into the al-Aqsa compound so they can be ritually sacrificed. The desire to destroy al-Aqsa continues to grow, with the dream now fed by a surge in AI-generated propaganda showing the holy site exploding and a Third Temple emerging tall and garish from the flames.

In the United States, for its part, Christian apocalyptic thought has never been a marginal phenomenon. It informed early Puritan belief systems, was the lens through which many white southerners understood their defeat in the Civil War, and animated many Cold War fears. Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which applied end times prophecy to contemporary events, was the best-selling nonfiction book of the 1970s.

Beginning in 1995, the evangelical minister Tim LaHaye and the novelist Jerry B. Jenkins built on this success. Over the next two decades, they published the sixteen books in their blockbuster Left Behind series, with titles like *Armageddon: The Cosmic Battle of the Ages* and *Kingdom Come: The Final Victory*. They sold tens of millions of copies by fusing Hollywood action aesthetics with biblical prophecy: The faithful are raptured up to heaven, leaving their empty clothes behind on airplanes and in classrooms as they ascend to a kingdom bathed in light. While the world descends into chaos and violence, the Antichrist takes over the United Nations, and the Third Temple is finally built. The books were rapidly adapted into films and video games, shaping the religious and political consciousness of a generation of evangelicals and putting Israel at the center.

In the years approaching the millennium, several occurrences added extra charge to the story that the end was near. Widespread fear of a massive Y2K computer meltdown blurred with hopes for Jesus's imminent return. "He may be preparing to confound our language, to jam our communications, scatter our efforts, and judge us for our sin and rebellion against his lordship," the world-famous preacher Jerry Falwell warned. "We are hearing from many sources that January 1, 2000, will be a fateful day in the history of the world." That freighted date was soon followed by the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, shocking events that seemed like real-life fulfilments of countless Hollywood apocalypse films. The so-called War on Terror, which began on that day and has yet to end, was often framed as a clash of civilizations between Judeo-Christian civilization and a supposedly barbaric Islamic East—and for some, as a precursor to the end times showdown between God and Satan.

The largest evangelical churches in the United States and around the world were gripped by a feeling of great end times imminence. Many sermons pivoted around the coming Rapture—the contested theological concept that has true believers lifted up to heaven in a kind of celestial elevator. From US megachurches seating tens of thousands to the makeshift Pentecostal chapels in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, millions of Christians were hearing that Jesus was on the cusp of return. The years of Great Tribulation would soon arrive but they would be saved if they followed God's word to the letter.

Very often, this directive has been interpreted to mean zealous support for Greater Israel, defined as pushing Palestinians from their lands and gathering all the exiled Jewish people to the Holy Land, as God promised, so they can rebuild the Temple and prepare the ground for the final battle and Christ's thousand-year reign. The Dallas-based Baptist televangelist Pastor Robert Jeffress takes a particularly literalist approach with his enormous global audience, presenting God as a kind of real estate agent who promised Abraham "a specific piece of real estate in the middle east." What Christians need to know, and never lose sight of, is that, "When it comes to the end times, it begins and it ends with Israel." As for those who say that Israel "stole this land from those poor Palestinians … that is an absolute lie from the pit of hell." Palestine and Palestinians, these true believers insist, do not exist, since the Bible never mentions them.

The most formidable agent of the alliance between the religious right in Israel and the United States is Pastor John Hagee, who likes to say that *Bible* stands for "Basic Information Before Leaving Earth"—and acts accordingly. Founded in 2006, and now boasting ten million members, his Christians United for Israel, or CUFI, is often described as the "Christian AIPAC" (a reference to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee). Its members display Israeli flags in their church sanctuaries, raise funds for illegal West Bank settlements, and descend on Washington, D.C., to lobby their representatives to support all of Israel's military goals. Netanyahu has testified to their utility: "I consider CUFI to be a vital part of Israel's national security."

In addition to leading CUFI, Hagee—white haired and fridge shaped—is also a popular televangelist and internet presence and the founder of San Antonio's Cornerstone Church, which operates out of a $100 million campus (its parking lot is so large, it has its own shuttle bus). Hagee built his empire by merging end times prophecy with what is known as the "prosperity gospel," an immensely popular doctrine that promises money and other material benefits to the faithful. This powerful fusion rides on a passage in Genesis in which God says to the Hebrew patriarch Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse." Christian Zionists believe the "you" here is the modern nation of Israel.

Regardless of the validity of this hotly debated scriptural interpretation, the injunction to "bless" the Israeli state in return for health and wealth in this life (not to mention a VIP pass to heaven) now guides millions of

Christian Zionists around the world, including a good number of American political figures. “As a Christian, growing up in Sunday school, I was taught from the Bible, those who bless Israel will be blessed and those who curse Israel will be cursed,” Senator Ted Cruz told Tucker Carlson during a contentious interview in 2025. “And from my perspective, I want to be on the blessing side of things.”

In this telling, blessing Israel means, first and foremost, helping it expand its territorial borders until it matches the biblical map, and, of course, strengthening its hold on Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. It also means vanquishing all threats to this vision, whether from a nuclear-armed Iran or from other armed actors, including Hamas and Hezbollah.

Within the logic of Christian Zionism, the true danger is not war but peace—specifically peace that could lead to a Palestinian state. At CUFI’s 2025 gathering, Hagee fumed at those calling for an end to Israel’s genocide. “The United Nations is a worthless pile of bricks that should be shoved into the East River,” he declared. “There is no two-state solution. Not today, not tomorrow, and not forever.”

Which brings us to a glaring contradiction at the heart of the interfaith alliance between Christian Zionists and messianic Jews: though evangelicals insistently profess their “love” for the people of the book, that love is often instrumental and profoundly dehumanizing. While some evangelical support for Israel has other sources, what many want to see is not Jewish well-being but simply for Jews to play their part in the prewritten script. Once the end times commence, the Jewish people who do not see the light and convert will be doomed to an eternal torment that, as Rohan’s church excitedly put it, will make the Nazi Holocaust pale in comparison (“God is going to literally haul Israel into total destruction”).

In fact, some evangelicals even see the Holocaust as part of the fulfilment of this prophecy: Pastor Hagee, for instance, once delivered a sermon in which he cast Hitler as the Lord’s agent, helpfully herding Jews to their homeland where they could fulfill their destiny. “Then God sent a hunter. A hunter is someone with a gun and he forces you,” Hagee expounded, pacing the stage with an imaginary weapon in his hands. “Hitler was a hunter … Why did it happen? Because God said my top priority for the Jewish people is to get them to come back to the land of Israel.”

When the sermon surfaced, it was still not enough for major pro-Israel Jewish groups in the United States to sever ties with Hagee and his

organization, or even to elicit much condemnation. Each side in this arrangement is too valuable to the other, as each helps the other hold on to power and ensure the supremacy of its respective in-group. Together, they seek to speed up what they believe to be this world's inevitable, incendiary conclusion. As Pastor Robert Jeffress puts it, "There will be no lasting peace in the Middle East until the Prince of Peace—Jesus Christ—returns."

Theme-Park Messianism

Even before the US attack on Iran in early 2026, a great many US voters were exhausted of forever wars and their government's various failed and costly efforts to "remake the Middle East." Because of this, Christian Zionist churches have worked hard to deepen ties between their congregants and the most extremist elements in Israeli society, often through cultural exchanges and the Holy Land tourism industry, which has grown exponentially in recent decades.

These popular tours gloss over the suffering of military occupation and land annexation to focus on the locations where all the important biblical action went down. As one tour guide promises, visitors will have the chance to "stand on the Mount of Beatitudes and imagine listening to Jesus give the Sermon on the Mount. Travel to the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, and experience Jerusalem, the Holy City chosen by God. Walk the Stations of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa, stand at the Mount of Olives, where it's written Jesus ascended into heaven." But it's not just the biblical past that visitors are encouraged to imagine—many are sure they are seeing the future as well. Which is why a tourist from the United States was able to visit Megiddo, a desert site in northern Israel, and offer this five-star review on TripAdvisor: "This place is a MUST see; MUST visit. Future site of the Battle of Armageddon!"

According to Israel's Tourism Ministry, before October 7, 2023, the country received approximately fifteen thousand visitors a day—and about half of them were Christians. Beyond mere sightseeing, the tours build direct relationships between messianic Jewish settlers and evangelicals from around the world, with tourists donating both their volunteer labor and their funds to Israeli settlements. A *Haaretz* investigation found that between 2008 and 2018, evangelical groups donated up to $65 million to projects in the "biblical heartland," not including labor. In some cases, the paper reported, the Israeli government subsidized the trips, knowing that

evangelicals who volunteer on settlements will serve as informal ambassadors for West Bank annexation after returning home.

A fast-growing sector of Israel's religious pilgrimage industry enlists tourists in active efforts to create the conditions to rebuild the Third Temple. In the days of Rohan Denis, a Third Temple was the stuff of underground criminal conspiracies. Today Third Temple plots are a distinctly mainstream, even Disneyfied, affair, one full of interactive opportunities such as mock archaeological digs and zip-lining over the Old City, as well as Temple replica jewelry and do-it-yourself 3-D Temple puzzles for the kids.

Some of this is courtesy of the Temple Institute, an organization devoted to doing "all in our limited power to bring about the building of the Holy Temple in our time"—or as the institute's website puts it, "help us make G-D's dreams come true." Toward that end, the institute combs through the Old Testament for directives on the precise specifications for rebuilding the Temple—and sets out to fulfill those directives in the real world. Already, its Jerusalem museum (underwritten with government grants and private donations, including from international evangelicals) contains a scale model of the Temple it hopes to help build. It also displays several "Temple-ready sacred vessels"—robes, candelabras, plates, and garments for the high priest, all constructed "according to biblical specifications" and ready for action when the time comes.

Most controversially, in 2021, it was part of a transnational effort to fly five "spotless" red cows from the United States to Israel, because, as the institute's website explains, "the fate of the entire world depends on the red heifer. For G-d has ordained that its ashes alone are the single missing ingredient for the reinstatement of Biblical purity—and thereafter, the rebuilding of the Holy Temple." The cows were taken to a West Bank settlement, where they became biblical tourist attractions, with regular updates posted on Facebook.

Then, in the summer of 2025, videos began to circulate of a rabbi overseeing a red-cow bleeding and then burning on a ceremonial altar as smoke billowed behind. The image prompted both exaltation and panic, with fundamentalist Jewish and Christian Zionists sure that redemption was at hand and Muslims enraged by the cataclysmic implications for al-Aqsa. An evangelical cattleman in Texas named Byron Stinson—sure that God

was speaking directly to him—had procured the vaunted animals. “We need the Messiah to come,” he explained.

It was after the ritualistic sacrifice that the depth and the zealotry of the alliance between messianic Judaism and end times Christianity came into full and furious view. Stinton went on a local San Antonio news channel brandishing a bag of ashes from a cow he claims was perfect, telling the reporter: “It’s the first time these ashes have been on earth for two thousand years.” Suddenly, having red heifer ashes from the Holy Land was a badge of pride for the US far right. On Tim Pool’s popular podcast, the aspiring influencer Adam King confidently reported that contrary to assurances that there had only been a test run of the ceremonial burning, the institute had “fooled everybody and successfully performed the ritual.” Shaking a tiny gray sack (which he referred to as “a dime bag”), he claimed that the ashes were already miraculously curing the sick, including reversing Alzheimer’s and giving sight to the blind.

While much of this may sound absurd, the dangers posed by these efforts are unignorable. Palestinians correctly understand the quest for biblically sanctioned bovines as a critical threshold on the way to building a new Jewish Temple where al-Aqsa now stands. The Hamas spokesman Abu Ubaida (since killed by Israel) included “bringing red cows” on a list of reasons explaining the organization’s decision to attack on October 7, 2023, an operation that was code-named Al-Aqsa Flood, in reference to the steady escalation of Israeli incursions on the holy site. The factors that precipitated the attack were many, and none justify the slaughter of innocents, but it’s a reminder that actions taken to bring about the end of days, no matter how fantastical, can help instigate an apocalypse in the real world.

Another reason these antics cannot be ignored is the direct involvement of US government officials. On a trip to Israel, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson made a point of visiting the animals in the company of Ambassador Huckabee, as have other leaders from around the world. That visit came after Johnson convened and keynoted a gathering geared toward evangelical pastors in Washington, D.C., where he invited Stinson and an allied rabbi to speak about the heifers’ significance.

Meanwhile, in Israel’s messianic movements, the push to destroy al-Aqsa so that a new Jewish Temple can take its place is building by the day. Messianism remains a minority faction within the Israeli government, to be sure, and many traditional Orthodox Jews want no part of it. But majorities

aren’t needed to make extremist dreams come true, only sufficient drive and access to essential levers of power. And given the many fronts of brazen escalation in recent years—Gaza in ruins with unhinged dreams of a “New Gaza” springing up from the rubble; the near total annexation of the West Bank; credible threats to do the same to southern Lebanon; a surge of settler terrorism; and the illegal attacks on various countries, including Iran—it’s all too possible to imagine an attack on al-Aqsa, even attempts to construct something claiming to be the Third Temple.

If that happens, the World War III that many feared would explode after one man’s act of arson in 1969 could well become reality. Not because it was prophesied by God, but because it is being ushered in by men who believe they have an open channel to God and who want to see conflagration. There are historical moments when we can feel relatively secure in the knowledge that the people who hold our collective fates in their hands will not knowingly bring about world-ending violence. But we do not live in a moment like that.

Retreat, Then Storm

As they await their respective saviors, Christian and Jewish right-wing messianic believers have found much else they can and do agree upon. They agree on Israel’s right to annex Palestinian land and wage war without limit. They share a desire for religious law to supersede and ultimately replace secular laws. They agree that the equation of their respective faiths with the quest for world peace should be shunned—championing, instead, a “muscular” expression of both Christianity and Judaism (the Bible and the autonomous weapon). They also happen to share an array of common enemies—namely Muslims, the LGBTQ+ community, the dastardly United Nations, and anyone an inch to their political left.

They’ve also traced similar paths from mostly abstaining from electoral politics to fully engaging in it over the past two decades. After years of strategic retreat into segregated schools, neighborhoods, publishing houses, film and music studios (and in Israel, after retreating into literal garrisoned settlements), a new strategy took hold. In part because of their conviction that we have now entered the end of days, all restrictions about engaging with the secular world have been lifted. The goal has quietly and steadily shifted to something much more radical: storming the centers of secular

society and actively working to take power on multiple fronts—electoral, judicial, cultural.

In Israel, the person who has pushed this new strategy most publicly is the extremist rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, described in a 2023 *Haaretz* headline as "The Influential Rabbi Who Wants to Turn Israel into an Iran-Style Fundamentalist State."

In 2005, Ginsburgh, with his long flowing white beard, delivered a darkly influential sermon called "Time to Crack the Nut." It outlined a methodical plan for either breaking or taking over every influential pillar of Israel society: the schools, the media, the courts, the military, and ultimately the seat of government, the Knesset. In Ginsburgh's telling, each of these sectors was protected by a cursed, secular shell that must be "cracked" in order to liberate the holy fruit inside. Freed of these shells, the Israeli state would morph into the kingdom of Israel and build the Third Temple.

Motti Inbari, a professor of religion at the University of North Carolina, who wrote his dissertation on Ginsburgh's theology and influence, explains, "Ginsburgh doesn't want to wait for the Messiah to come and save him. He wants to take control of the state's institutions so that the Messiah will be able to arrive. It's an aggressive approach."

At around the same time, a similarly aggressive strategy, using a different metaphor from nature, was laid out in the United States by Lance Wallnau, a corporate marketer turned prophet and pastor and zealous advocate for Israel. Wallnau began refining and popularizing what is known as the "Seven Mountain Mandate" in the early oughts, and it is now invoked by Christian supremacists around the world.

This theocratic framework calls on believers to gain control of the key mountains, or "kingdoms," that shape society: religion, family, education, media, arts, business, and government. "We decree that we take back and permanently control positions of influence and leadership in each of the Seven Mountains," adherents assert, because "we, the Church, are God's governing Body on the earth." The Seven Mountain Mandate is, effectively, a rebranding of the ancient idea of rule by divine right, or what is often referred to as dominion theology. In a survey conducted in 2023, 30 percent of US Christians said they approved of the Seven Mountain Mandate. A year later, the number had climbed to 41 percent—a startling attitudinal shift from "let us pray in peace" to "let us run the world."

Even before Trump returned to power, the impact of the conquering strategy was coming into focus, most visibly in the Heritage Foundation's power-grabbing playbook known as Project 2025. The guide laid out policy strategies to seize the peaks of education, energy, healthcare, public media, and more—all in the name of imposing a capitalist, Christian culture of "blessedness" from on high.

Trump initially feigned ignorance of this theocratic agenda, but that was revealed as a fiction when he appointed Russell Vought, one of Project 2025's architects, to lead a key agency. Vought now sits atop an influential pinnacle of government, the Office of Management and Budget, where he slashes public services with abandon, aided and abetted by all the other God-fearing mountain climbers who staff the administration. (Vought misled the public, too, downplaying his extremist views until undercover reporters caught him on tape describing his outlook as "Christian nation–ism.")

Sometimes the references to Seven Mountains are even more explicit. In 2024, Alabama's chief justice, Tom Parker, grabbed headlines for a ruling that deemed frozen embryos "children." Parker laid out his position on a Christian podcast that billed him as "a true pioneer on the Mountain of Government." Power had fallen into the wrong hands, Parker argued, and had to be reclaimed: "That's why [God] is calling and equipping people to step back into these mountains."

In Israel, the strategy is equally advanced. In addition to Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, Netanyahu has stacked high-ranking posts with figures who subscribe to radical ideologies that combine fiery religious orthodoxy with militant nationalism. And in 2025, a three-judge panel of the Israeli Supreme Court dismissed a petition to compel humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza. One of the three justices, David Mintz, a West Bank settler, wrote a concurring opinion that invoked biblical justifications for war as part of his reasoning.

The secular shell around Israel's military is most shattered of all. After the Hamas attacks, few made any effort to disguise the decimation of Gaza as anything other than a holy war, with giant menorahs raised by Israeli soldiers in the rubble and soldiers using the sound system in a Jenin mosque to sing taunting Jewish prayers.

The Israeli journalist Gideon Levy has predicted that the attack on Gaza will go down as the "first Kahane War," a reference to the late Jewish

supremacist rabbi Meir Kahane, who went to jail for a thwarted terrorist attack on al-Aqsa. Though Israel's decimation of Gaza bears similarities with the mass expulsion of Palestinians during the founding of the nation, Levy writes, there are marked differences. "That was a war to establish a Jewish state; this is a war to establish a fascist state." A fascist state whose leaders include men consumed with creating the conditions for the end of days. It was fitting, then, that in October 2025, Netanyahu's cabinet approved his proposal to officially rename the war on Gaza the "War of Redemption."

Bibles, Guns, and Nukes

More than any other Israeli politician today, Ben-Gvir's ascension to security minister exemplifies the success of the messianic right's decades-long strategy of separating from the mainstream and then taking the state by storm. He was a youth coordinator in Kahane's political party, which was declared a terrorist organization, and he and his future wife spent their first date at the grave of a Kahane disciple who, in 1994, opened fire in a Hebron mosque and massacred twenty-nine Palestinians. Today, Ben-Gvir runs Israel's police force.

Meanwhile, the newly christened "Secretary of War" Pete Hegseth has been installed atop the mountain of the US military. He's the most famous parishioner of the Idaho-headquartered Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC), a network of more than 160 churches led by Pastor Doug Wilson, a self-described theocrat who is eager for women to be stripped of the right to vote ("Godly women are designed to make the sandwiches," Wilson proclaims). Wilson is also known for a series of videos in which he lights large objects on fire—a boat, a truck, an office—while calmly preaching about the collapse of society. It started with a 2018 video in which Wilson, looking a bit like Santa in a baseball cap and a puffer vest, smokes a cigar while sitting on a sofa that he has deliberately ignited. "It's not the job of the preacher to be a firefighter out in the world," he proclaims as the couch combusts. "We're supposed to be arsonists," by which the stern Calvinist seemed to mean that true Christians ought to burn down secular culture to make way for a theocratic regime, imposing God's kingdom on nonbelievers to hasten Jesus's return rather than waiting for the Rapture.

Hegseth's numerous tattoos tell the story of a similar worldview, though he seems more attunded to end times prophecy than his provocateur pastor. There's the image of a cross with a sword and words, attributed to Jesus: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." The word *Yeshua*, Jesus's name in Hebrew, is inked on his elbow. "Deus Vult," or "God Wills It," is on a biceps, allegedly a slogan from the Crusades. In May 2025, Hegseth instituted regular worship services at the Pentagon, breaking down one more separation between church and state. Standing at a podium with the seal of the Department of Defense, he declared: "This is precisely where I need to be … in prayer, on bended knee, recognizing the providence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Soon, he would invite Doug Wilson to lead the service.

Not long after he ascended the mountain of the Department of Defense, which he then helped rename the Department of War, video leaked of Hegseth from back in 2018, when he was still employed as a Fox News talking head. He was speaking at a news conference in Jerusalem, where he had just toured controversial archaeological tunnels beneath the Old City. Seemingly struck with a modern bout of Jerusalem syndrome, he declared: "Nineteen forty-eight was a miracle, 1967 was a miracle," and 2017, when Trump moved the embassy to Jerusalem, was miraculous, too.

"There's no reason why the miracle of the reestablishment of the temple on the Temple Mount is not possible," he said, his voice rising in passion as the audience broke into applause. "I don't know how it would happen. You don't know how it would happen. But I know that it *could* happen. That's all I know."

Seven years later, Hegseth is in a much better position to know and also to act. He now oversees the best-equipped and deadliest war machine in human history. "Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle," he said, quoting Psalm 144, at a Pentagon press conference about the Iran onslaught. His journey from one of the most rabid corners of conservative media and most extreme theocratic churches to the peak of the Pentagon, much like Ben-Gvir's ascension from the fanatical fringes to the National Security Ministry, is emblematic of end times fascism's skyward trajectory. Similar, once unthinkable journeys have taken place around the world, including in India, Argentina, Russia, Chile, El Salvador, Italy, and elsewhere. In some cases—Brazil and to a lesser degree

Poland and Hungary, for example—voters have succeeded in beating back the theocratic tide, but in too many countries, the right is riding a wave that can feel unstoppable.

Even the leaders of avowedly secular projects have increasingly come to see themselves in divine terms. Trump is a case in point. At the start of his first term, his relationship with evangelicals was mainly transactional: they delivered the votes and he stacked the courts for them and moved the embassy. But after the 2024 failed assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania, Trump showed a marked increase in self-deification. “My life was saved by God to make America great again,” he said on Inauguration Day. In Argentina, President Javier Milei claims to have received a message from God that he had been chosen for a “mission” to save his country from “evil.” In Russia, Vladimir Putin eagerly feeds a narrative of having been providentially “chosen” to expand and glorify Russia. Following the 2014 seizure of Crimea, he described the Ukrainian peninsula as having “sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.”

El Salvador’s Nayib Bukele, for his part, claims that a group of pastors told him they had received a message from God about his destiny to lead the nation, turning him into a believer in prophecy. The former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro had a different kind of conversion: in 2016, he traveled to Israel and got himself baptized at the Jordan River, helping him win broad support from evangelical voters. Then, while running for president in 2018, a would-be assassin stabbed him in the abdomen at a campaign rally. The superstar Pentecostal televangelist known as Malafaia declared his survival “a sign that Bolsonaro should be the next president of Brazil,” and street sellers began hawking shirts with the words *He bled for you*. One month later, he surged in the polls and won the presidency.

India’s Narendra Modi may have gone furthest to fuse a supposedly secular state with a sense of divine providence. In January 2024, Modi kicked off his reelectoral campaign in the northern town of Ayodhya by consecrating an enormous new Hindu temple, dedicated to Lord Ram. The temple was built on the ruins of the historic Babri Mosque, which was destroyed in 1992 by a mob of Hindu zealots, who smashed its domes with hammers and axes, setting off riots that killed some two thousand people. Like al-Aqsa, Ayodhaya is the fulcrum of an ancient and highly charged religious dispute over a single sacred site. Now India’s prime minister, in flowing golden robes, was taking it upon himself to settle the matter by

playing winner-takes-all God. After a helicopter showered the new temple in flower pedals, Modi declared the day to be “the advent of a new era.”

The velocity of these hard theocratic turns in nation after nation has taken many by surprise. Writing in 1844, Karl Marx famously called religion the “opium of the masses.” But where end times fascism is concerned, religion functions less like opium and more like amphetamine, agitating rather than soothing anxious souls. In many corners of the far right today, faith is an incendiary and explosive accelerant. God is gasoline tossed on already raging flames. Belief in prophecy, research shows, functions in precisely this way, amping up religious dogmatism and a disregard for democratic norms, driving hunger for holy war.

Which begs an urgent question: What is it about our particular moment that is giving rise to such a powerful strain of apocalyptic politics?

3

Real Crises and False Prophets

When you believe in eternal life—when you believe that living on this earth is but a blip on the screen, then you do not have to be so scared of things.
—TATE REEVES, Republican governor of Mississippi, on Covid-19

The apocalypse is no mere fantasy. We are living in it, after all, from deadly viruses to soil erosion, from economic crisis to geopolitical chaos.
—RICHARD SEYMOUR, *Disaster Nationalism*, 2024

If an apocalyptic orientation comes easily in the Americas, it may be because apocalypticism suffused the atmosphere that birthed our nations as we now know them.

Most of us have a general sense of Christopher Columbus's fateful voyage. Less known is the fact that he was seeking a far grander destination than Asia (or as he called it, the Indies) when he bumped into an entirely unexpected continent. Yes, he traveled in search of spices and gold, and he wanted to claim territories and convert souls. But Columbus also sought those riches because he believed he could usher in the literal end of days.

Like most messianic Christians today, Columbus was entranced by the book of Revelation, otherwise known as the Apocalypse of St. John, the Bible's vertiginous final chapter. He dreamed of financing a new crusade to take Jerusalem from the Muslims, the supposed precondition for bringing about the Christian millennium, and he knew that such a momentous undertaking would not be cheap.

So he compiled what he called the *Book of Prophecies*, a collection of religious predictions selected to help persuade his royal patrons of the righteousness of his plan. In 1492, the year of his historic voyage, he wrote in his diary that he hoped the Spanish Crown would "spend all the profits of this my enterprise on the conquest of Jerusalem." Columbus was looking to jump-start the apocalypse.

Going back to the eleventh century, fervent believers had joined the Crusades, rushing unarmed into battle to capture the Holy Land, convinced that the ecstatic climax was at hand. By the late Middle Ages, this kind of

millenarianism was omnipresent. Europe had been rocked by a series of overwhelming crises: the Black Death, drought, famines, peasants' revolts, and rolling wars. Lacking more scientific explanations, many interpreted these hardships as clear signs of the biblical end of days. Enterprising saviors found legions of followers, eager to do whatever was deemed necessary to get on the right side of salvation. Some dressed in white and flagellated themselves to ward off the divine punishment of disease, and suspicious minds saw the Antichrist's handiwork everywhere they looked.

In southern Europe, the race was on to purify souls before the final hour—and to find scapegoats for real hardships. These were the blood-soaked years of the Inquisitions, when well over 100,000 Jews were forced to convert to Catholicism, and public sadism became mass culture, with infidels paraded in front of crowds, thousands of perceived apostates and heretics, as well as imagined witches, were burned at the stake, and the Church devised ever more creative forms of torture. These were also the years of ever more restrictive race purity laws and forced ghettoization. The year that Columbus set sail—1492—was the same year that Jews were expelled from Spain, with a similar decree expelling Muslims soon after. This combination of supremacist laws favoring in-groups over out-groups, alongside purifying violence, prefigured elements of the fascist program that would come centuries later.

Columbus never did make it to Jerusalem to bring on the apocalypse foretold in the Bible. Instead, he catalyzed an apocalypse that he never fully appreciated—one that precipitated epochal changes and death on a nearly unfathomable scale. The old world was indeed ended, and a new one born. By some estimates, 56 million Indigenous Americans died in the century following colonization, overwhelmingly through the plagues carried and transmitted by Europeans that spread unchecked, but also in blood baths unleashed by their conquerors who did not see them as fully human. So many people perished that forests regrew where agricultural tracts and settlements once stood, causing the planet to measurably cool.

Apocalyptic prophecies can clearly be self-fulfilling, though rarely in the precise way initially imagined. Journeying back and forth across the Atlantic, Columbus thought he knew the end of the story and imagined himself conducting the rousing final crescendo of the universe's only opera. This awe-inspiring conviction did, indeed, turn out to be world-breaking and world-making. He helped shepherd in a new globalized era of

capitalism and colonialism, plunder and enslavement—all foundational to the troubled, precious, and confounding world we inhabit and cherish today.

His story, and his time, also point us to a recurring historical pattern: supremacist ideologies and apocalyptic fervor are intimately entangled with the presence of very real crisis. The messianic impulse grows strongest in the hardest times, when people long to be washed clean. That was true for the Puritans of the seventeenth century who imagined themselves in the role of the ancient Israelites as they sought refuge in New England from religious persecution, and it was also true in 1948 during the creation of the state of Israel. That founding, too, was imagined by many within these ancient narrative grooves—as a New Jerusalem emerging out of the apocalypse of the Holocaust, redemption for the myriad ways that a cruel world failed Hitler's victims. The story was so seductive, so cathartic, that it allowed many of its believers to ignore the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from those same lands, the event known as the Nakba, an apocalypse in itself. Meanwhile, most of the survivors of Nazi atrocities who arrived in Palestine as haunted refugees were not looking for cosmic redemption, only some measure of safety, and a place to call home.

Time's Up

Why are end times fanatics rising to power today, in nation after nation? Some of it is planning. Would-be theocrats have, as we have seen, carefully built power and institutions in the political wilderness over decades, until they reached the point that they could storm the very centers of power. But that doesn't explain why, as we were researching and writing this book, end times mania began to intensify in all kinds of more inchoate ways. Like when #RaptureTok went viral on TikTok, with many thousands of people apparently convinced that on September 23, 2025, God was going to hoover them up to the sky, just like in *Left Behind*. Some were so confident that they sold their belongings and quit their jobs. Others cashed in, offering to take care of pets when their owners vanished, for a steep prepaid price. September came and went, with no mass vanishings, but the betting site Polymarket collected almost $3.3 million in wagers on "Will Jesus Christ Return in 2025?" And as we write, the pot is growing for whether he will arrive "before 2027"; at one point, 36 percent of gamblers bet on "yes."

These trends point to another factor in the rise of messianism, one too often overlooked. It is the simple reality that our world, like the one

Columbus inhabited, has become significantly more unstable, delivering major shock after major shock. We all know this, not just the aspiring theocrats among us. The reason is as simple as it is immense: our economic system is built on limitless growth, and on limitless wealth for the winners. Our economy is also built on a story—that we can grow and consume like this forever, and there is no such thing as *enough*.

That story has slammed into a wall and evidence of that collision is all around, measured in the extinction of species, sea-level rise, resource wars, wealth hoarding, supply-chain upheavals, cost-of-living spikes, mass displacement, and natural disasters that are increasing in frequency, intensity, and cost.

We cannot say we were not warned. Countless scientific papers and mathematical models predicted this moment with great precision, with experts waving and pointing toward the oncoming wall for decades. Movements were built to amplify the warnings, and to advocate for a different economic model and a different collective story, one in which humanity thrives inside ecological limits. Those movements have made some progress here and there—a spike in renewable energy, limited debt cancellation, a rise in the minimum wage—but the limitless growth machine rumbled on.

As a result, we have ended up where we were headed all along. Perhaps it was a mistake to use the metaphor of a vehicle hitting a wall to describe the complex reality we all have to navigate. Now that we are here, it doesn't feel quite like a car crash; there is, only occasionally, a ball of fire. More often it feels like a slow diminishment, as if we are living less manageable lives on pieces of earth that are themselves less alive. Yet the potential for a dramatic acceleration of this decline exists on multiple fronts.

As we have seen, fascism is a morbid response to very real threats and crises, a set of techniques directing public fear and anger away from the systems driving those crises. Today's fascists do the same, redirecting our widespread economic pain and social alienation at everyone but the elites most responsible—migrants on the border; "narco-terrorists" in the sea; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies (the dreaded DEI), trans athletes, and allegedly crime-infested cities.

Yet the bursts of sadistic satisfaction summoned by footage of immigrants in supermax prisons, or soldiers marching through the streets, can do only so much to soothe the existential terrors of today's in-groups.

That’s because everyone except the most unhinged conspiracists knows that migrants and DEI didn’t cause the record-breaking hurricanes and wildfires. It isn’t Antifa racing ahead with job-devouring AI, nor is it trans kids and their sympathetic middle school teachers who are escalating the wars that risk nuclear conflagration.

It is in the face of these unallayed global-scale fears that end times fascism emerges to propose final battles that are significantly larger than even those waged by their violent predecessors—biblically inspired showdowns in which the stakes are nothing less than who gets to live in paradise after the end of this world.

That’s Not a Disaster—It’s a Glorious Sign

For many years, large parts of the right offered up only denial in the face of credible warnings of existential threats. The climate was just fine, we heard, capitalism would enrich us and technology liberate us. Nothing to see here. In a way, end times fascism is the natural, if brutal, evolution of those decades of denial. Now that the forces of planetary destabilization and widespread immiseration have become impossible to ignore, many on the far right readily admit that our world is being rocked by large-scale crises and disasters. But rather than the rational, fact-based explanations they have been dismissing for decades, they are often choosing to reinterpret these crises through the lens of scripture.

All those global disasters? As in Columbus’s day, they are all signs. Signs that the end is here. But only for the nonbelievers—for those who believe, who are part of the chosen who will escape and be protected, the end is really the glorious beginning.

This is what Pastor John Hagee bellows from his pulpit. “The end of time—when is that?” he demands. But his congregation already knows the answer: “That’s right now.” And they’re hardly alone: roughly four in ten US adults reportedly believe that the end times are upon us, including nearly half of Christians.

Just look around. “Major uncontrollable fires, the Bible said will break out all over the world spontaneously,” Hagee narrates, invoking the escalating wildfires of climate breakdown, war, and also the supposed calamity of trans kids. “When you see nation against nation … When you see the moral collapse of America … When you see these things … the apocalypse is coming!”

Though the explosive ideology of end times fascism has been gaining momentum over decades, we are living through a marked acceleration. Much of this comes down to two major shocks, both of which have been exhaustively exploited: the Covid-19 pandemic and attendant health measures, and, more recently, Hamas's October 7, 2023, attacks. Combined, and layered on top of other existential crises, these events have turbocharged the new forms of reactionary conspiracy culture and fascist, religiously inflected politics that grip us today.

Covid-19—No Accident

More than five years after the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, we are still trying to understand the myriad ways that Covid-19 redrew the political map in country after country. Books have been written on the subject, including by us; we will not belabor the litany of events here. One aspect missing from many of these accounts, however, is the extent to which the pandemic was interpreted through the lens of end times religion.

The American right was already in an apocalyptic mood when the novel virus began to circulate. This was in no small part thanks to Lance Wallnau, the prosperity-gospel-preaching prophet who popularized the Seven Mountain Mandate. During the leadup to the 2016 election, Wallnau claimed to have received a message from God: "Donald Trump is a wrecking ball to the spirit of political correctness," the Lord said. "Read Isaiah 45."

That otherworldly communication led Wallnau to develop the idea of Trump's "Cyrus anointing," a biblical rationale designed to help evangelicals overcome their misgivings and pull the lever for an obvious heathen of dubious moral character. Trump, Wallnau proclaimed, was just like the flawed and faithless Persian King Cyrus who freed the Jews and returned them to Israel, enabling the building of the Second Temple. Perhaps this Cyrus could help them build the Third.

The story took off, ricocheting across religious networks. On Election Day, a stunning 80 percent of white evangelicals cast their ballots for Trump.

Once in office, the mass paranoia known as QAnon took the idea of Trump's anointing to a more apocalyptic place. Inside QAnon's ever-evolving narrative, Trump is cast as an avenging Christlike figure, leading

the “white hats,” or “army of truth,” into the final “storm” to expose and sweep away a satanic and pedophilic globalist deep state. (The Epstein files, where Trump’s name appears hundreds of thousands of times, has led to a crisis of faith in this regard.)

All of this was percolating before Covid ripped through a fearful population, leading many to see yet more signs of prophecy afoot. Hadn’t the Bible described not only plagues at the end of days (one of the Apocalypse’s Four Horsemen is Pestilence, after all) but also campaigns of oppression, with Jesus warning his followers that they would be “arrested, persecuted, and killed” during the period that marks “the beginning of birth pains” before his Second Coming?

Was that not what was happening to them, the Christian believers? The government—in contradictory and sometimes chaotic fashion—seemed to be coming for their most intimate and sacred spaces: their churches, schools, and families. Gathering together in prayer was how people in these communities sought to secure salvation and protection from harm—it was their route to the celestial bunker and eternal salvation. Now, suddenly, when death was close and the end felt near, collective prayer was being yanked away from them by the secular state. As more and more health measures were introduced, politics no longer was something far away and abstract. Politics was now telling you what to do with your faith, your body, and your children’s bodies: miss church, stay home, wear a mask, get the vaccine, prove it with the app … In retrospect, it’s hardly surprising that a growing number of previously apolitical citizens decided to try to “take back” their country, from the local school board on up.

Bible sales soared as defiant pastors and influencers resisted pandemic restrictions and led massive “Let Us Worship” rallies. These merged seamlessly with the QAnon subculture, which had quickly adapted itself to the Covid age, casting public health measures as part of the perverted child abuse conspiracy and expanding “the storm” that was supposed to hold them accountable to everyone who tried to implement those measures. By 2022, nearly 20 percent of Americans reported believing in the main tenets of QAnon, including huge numbers of evangelicals. Chasing the story lines with the most online traction, previously secular conspiracy traffickers like Russell Brand got publicly baptized, Covid apparently having shown them the light.

What secular people often missed amid the pandemic commotion was how the movements that resisted lockdowns and vaccine mandates were suffused with coded theological messages. QAnon, for example, ripped apocalyptic themes from the book of Revelation. Vaccines, meanwhile, were frequently equated with “the mark of the beast.” Ferocious campaigns targeting those associated with vaccines—Bill Gates, Anthony Fauci, and the World Health Organization—often strongly implied that these men and institutions were aligned with the Antichrist.

It was an update of long-standing hostility among many right-wing evangelicals to the New Deal, social welfare policies, and the United Nations—anything that could hypothetically aid the Antichrist’s plan to form a dreaded “one world government.” The real threat, according to this paranoid worldview, was not the virus, but rather the public safety measures adopted to protect the vulnerable, a group that was increasingly framed as disposable since it is God, and not men, who decides who lives and dies.

As right-wing religious and conspiracy cultures mixed and merged, they began to predict increasingly sensational ways their persecution would end. Their faith would be criminalized. The Bible would be banned. The Holy Word deemed hate speech. By all objective measures, evangelicals wield outsized power over American politics, but that was of no concern in these hyperonline days: many in these communities were sure they were suffering unmatched discrimination.

This sense of Christian victimhood had been building for decades. Starting in the 1990s, the number of self-identified Christians plummeted from nearly 90 percent of the population to around 62 percent today. As the pews emptied, the wider culture continued to liberalize: not only was abortion legalized, but gay people could suddenly marry, and trans people started gaining civil rights. Conservative Christians felt increasingly out of step with the broader society, estranged in their own land. The pandemic health restrictions were the final straw.

One of the many pastors leading the charge against this alleged tyranny was Doug Wilson, the proud couch-burning theocrat out of Moscow, Idaho, who has had such a deep influence on Pete Hegseth. Wilson had long been an inflammatory figure, but also a relatively marginal one.

In 2020, Wilson took this incendiary approach to the streets and began a campaign of civil disobedience against “shamdemic” lockdowns. The rebellion elevated the dogmatic minister to a new stratosphere of influence.

Far-flung followers who had discovered him through viral videos flocked to his town and congregations, and high-profile speaking invitations poured in, helping Wilson, as *Politico* later put it, advance his goal of "hasten[ing] Christ's return by building a godly society."

Reflecting on his star turn, Wilson observed, "There are things that we would be talking about twenty-five years ago that would just get us dismissed as nutters. But after the pandemic, what we were saying seemed a lot more intelligible and, for many people, compelling."

The young right-wing firebrand Charlie Kirk was among those caught up in the fury. He released countless Covid-related videos and published a pamphlet entitled *The Christian Response to the Great Reset*, a reference to a then-popular conspiracy theory charging the World Economic Forum with a nefarious globalist plot to use the virus to subjugate the world. In these restrictive days and months, Kirk saw "Satan" and "demonic forces" at work, and was sure humanity had entered the "last days." This prophecy created an intense "urgency and optimism," he would later explain, to enter and to stay in the political ring: when "you see all these signs, it should be the wake-up call to do more than ever, to get more engaged than ever, to do more good for the kingdom."

Like many other ambitious operators, he also saw an opportunity to grow his audience. One year into the pandemic, Kirk expanded his Turning Point USA network to include TPUSA Faith, a new vehicle designed to harness anger about church lockdowns into Republican activism focused on the restoration of "biblical values."

Kirk's turn toward literally, and not just metaphorically, demonizing any form of progressive government intervention was less a break with his former smash-the-state libertarianism than a sanctified rebrand—a pivot that suited his corporate donors just fine. As Paul Matzko, a fellow at the Cato Institute, told NBC News: "He's pitching his message to people who do believe that we're in the end times, and that if we don't seize the Seven Mountains of cultural influence, then the other side, the satanic side, will."

Donald Trump's 2020 electoral loss to Joe Biden, taking place eight months into a pandemic that he had disastrously mismanaged, needs to be understood in this context. For those swept up in apocalyptic thinking, the election results were cataclysmic, a victory for evil that was impossible to accept. And so, on January 6, 2021, they chose to storm, and to fight. Just as it can be hard to remember the shock and dread most of us felt at the

pandemic's onset, it can be difficult to recall the bewildered alarm the attack on the Capitol inspired. We have lived so long in the aftermath of these two, intertwined events that a little distance helps to fully appreciate the degree to which they radicalized the far right and catalyzed a new political era.

Today, many scholars of religion regard the January 6 insurrection as a uniquely Christian uprising, and a symbol of just how dramatically Covid pushed conventional politics toward the apocalyptic brink. The Capitol riots were also, in the words of the Southern Poverty Law Center, "the culmination of a year of increasingly radical activity by a slew of extremists around the country." Much of that activity focused on church closures and public health restrictions. In person and online, these campaigns created opportunities for new alliances—connections that would prove key to the burgeoning end times fascist coalition.

On January 6, many caught their first real glimpse of that coalition in the footage and video of that unforgettable, frozen Washington afternoon. Evangelical zealots rubbed shoulders with anti-vaxxers and Proud Boys; gun-toting anti-immigrant militia members waved "Appeal to Heaven" flags while Christian Zionists blew shofars and the QAnon Shaman led a prayer. Kirk's Turning Point USA was there in force—thanks to a massive donation, Kirk boasted of sending more than eighty buses of "patriots" to protest the "stolen" election in Washington, D.C. He also said that in the run-up, he was "getting five hundred emails a minute calling for a civil war."

Wallnau also promoted the day's events, announcing on his website that he was heading to Washington on "Jan 5–6th to meet with and speak to the Patriots." There, he prophesized, "Resurrection will overtake valleys of dry bones and a new kind of spiritual army will rise up in the earth," more convinced than ever that the end times had begun. He was scheduled to headline a Stop the Steal protest, but the mayhem at the Capitol overtook his plans.

On a fundamental level the rioters were there to answer a simple question inspired by Wallnau's previous electoral intervention. How could someone with a "Cyrus anointing," someone chosen by God, be voted out of office, defeated by a "demon-crat"? The answer, the crowd roared, is that they can't be.

Two years later, a remarkably similar scene would play out in Brazil's capital city, Brasília. Jair Bolsonaro, like Trump, had disastrously mismanaged the virus, downplaying its severity and throwing his lot in with what was being called *coronafé*, or corona-faith—the prosperity-gospel confidence that God won't fail you. The result was, by some estimates, 400,000 unnecessary deaths.

Like Trump, Bolsonaro paid the price at the polls, losing reelection to the Workers' Party leader, Lula da Silva. Large parts of the evangelical base refused to accept the results: How could their Cyrus, their messiah, ever be defeated? And so, in 2023, thousands stormed their country's capital. Draped in the nation's flag and donning crucifixes, they smashed the material symbols of a detested democratic order and demanded the army intervene. "Brazil belongs to Lord Jesus! The Senate is our church!" one rioter shouted.

In Brazil, the courts prosecuted Bolsonaro for his role in the attempted coup, barred him from running for public office and sentencing him to twenty-seven years in jail. Trump faced no such consequences in the United States. While he lost control of the White House for four years, that turned out to be less a setback than a fateful regrouping. The end times–inflected coalition that found itself in the shock of Covid lockdowns used its time in the wilderness to carefully plan its triumphant return, which would include pardoning everyone who was convicted for their illegal activities on January 6, placing the most prominent opponents of Covid measures in charge of the country's health policy, and a far more open embrace of Christian Nationalism as a key part of the country's governing framework.

Nobody embodied this shift to a new dimension of religious and political extremism more than Charlie Kirk. Between the first stirrings of the disease and his untimely death in 2025, he morphed into a full-blown Christian Nationalist. While introducing Trump at a 2024 campaign event held at a megachurch, Kirk made clear that a spiritual war was in full swing and the victorious outcome foreordained: "I worship a God that defeats evil. And we worship a God that wins in the end." On his podcast that year he called for Trump's opponents to be subject to the death penalty. "Holy" executions, Kirk continued, riffing on the theme of capital punishment, should be "public, quick, and … televised," sponsored by corporations ("brought to you by Coca-Cola," he suggested) and viewed by children to deter bad behavior.

By then, this kind of Final Battle energy was surging thanks to another kind of shock.

Oct 7—The Endgame Meets the End Times

In the weeks and months after the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, Israeli society convulsed with grief, with the horrors of that day and the ongoing fears for the hostages. But not everyone was in a grieving mood.

In the most extreme ultranationalist and ultra-Orthodox settler communities, known as the Hardalim, and especially among the heavily armed Hilltop Youth, the attacks were understood as an exciting, if painful, sign. A sign of the end of days. As many saw it, Hamas's ability to break through the walls and barricades that imprisoned Gaza, and enter Israeli communities, was proof positive that the half measures favored by secularists were doomed to fail. Protracted occupation of Palestinians did not keep Israel safe. Only expulsion and annexation, or ideally annihilation, would do. And with a powerful block of their fellow religious extremists in government, and so many of their fellow Israelis hungry for vengeance, they were convinced that this was their moment to prepare the ground for the Messiah's arrival.

That meant bringing all of Israel's regional enemies to their knees, from the Islamic Republic of Iran to Hezbollah, and it meant definitively seizing the biblical lands for Israel: Gaza, yes, but also the West Bank and, of course, East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. With all eyes on Gaza, the West Bank became a low-intensity war zone. In 2025, heavily armed settlers and Israeli soldiers expelled at least forty thousand Palestinians from their homes and a record fifty-four new illegal settlements were approved, according to one annual report, a nearly elevenfold increase from 2024. The IDF's own data confirmed that settler violence rose 27 percent in 2025 compared to the year prior, while severe attacks that the state qualifies as terrorisim were up by 50 percent.

Dror Greenblum, who has a PhD in Israeli history, immersed himself in the statements and sermons delivered by leading Hardali rabbis in the aftermath of October 7, tracking these lethal passions. He heard Hamas's attack described as the "earthquake" God created to wake up the world and destroy Israel's enemies; he also heard that Covid, by testing them, had prepared the Jewish people for this final battle. One Hardali rabbi declared,

“You’d have to be blind not to see that there is divine supervision over Benjamin Netanyahu.”

During a visit to a settlement in the South Hebron Hills, Orit Strock, a member of Netanyahu’s cabinet, stirred outrage among her fellow Israelis by proclaiming the post–October 7 period nothing less than a “time of miracles.” The evidence was the dramatic expansion of Israel’s footprint in the West Bank. She seemed markedly unconcerned about Israeli hostages still being held in Gaza, whom Strock had suggested might need to be sacrificed to achieve the war’s larger goals.

It wasn’t only in Israel where the October 7 attacks served as an accelerant for end times excitement. Reverend Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, told a journalist that the more than forty-two thousand US congregations his group represents were “incorporating” the war’s “events” in their sermons. “We are in the last days.”

Robert Jeffress, the popular televangelist and close Trump associate, reported that he had been “flooded with questions about prophecy” following the attacks. He responded with a six-week series of sermons titled “Are We Living in the End Times?” His answer was: Without a doubt. Part of the proof was the pro-Palestinian protests breaking out around the world, especially on university campuses. Obviously, they were the “work of Satan,” showing that the “Antichrist, the final threat” was in our midst—but he would be defeated, because it was foretold.

Pastor Paula White-Cain, the prominent prosperity-gospel preacher whom Trump tasked with leading his White House Faith Office, also heard the loudening tick of prophecy’s clock. In January 2025, she interviewed her friend Prime Minister Netanyahu and could not contain her excitement about all the signs raining down on the Holy Land: “The Christian vision of the End of Days foretells of some profound transformation and redemption,” White-Cain said, leaning in expectantly and looking as sleekly put together as a Fox News anchor (albeit one who speaks in tongues). “Based on the events that are unfolding today, do you feel that we are seeing these signs of the vision come to fruition?” Netanyahu, always happy to exploit the apocalyptic beliefs of both Jewish and Christian religious extremists to achieve his ethno-nationalist aims, was careful not to contradict her. “The Bible is really being played out in real time on this

piece of earth that is so critical to our common civilization," White-Cain enthused.

The conversation had the tone of a soothing fairy tale: everything was going according to plan, proceeding smoothly toward its inevitable euphoric conclusion. If the people watching on the Christian Daystar Television Network weren't immersed in international news, they might have missed the fact that all the wonderful "signs" White-Cain was referencing were acts of horrific carnage. The "signs" were bombs dropped on hospitals, apartment building, and libraries; they were exploding pagers and walkie-talkies that mangled the faces and bodies of civilians and killed children; and they were a campaign of mass starvation taking place at that moment in Gaza. These atrocities were the result of decisions made not by God, but by human beings—specifically the human being to whom White-Cain was speaking at that very moment.

This underscores the most serious danger posed by end times theology in a time such as ours, when so many crises are reaching their breakpoints. Rather than seeing this breaking as a clear signal that we should change course, the eschatology switches the signal to mean the opposite: bad is good, plagues are cures, war is peace. So prove your faith by staying the course and upping the ante.

Which is precisely what happened five months later when Donald Trump did what no US president had been willing to do before him: launch strikes on Iran's nuclear program. Pastor Hagee, who founded CUFI two decades ago explicitly to lobby for military action against Iran, rejoiced, seeing clear signs of the Gog-Magog war described by Ezekiel manifesting before his eyes. He encouraged his millions of followers to reach out and personally thank the president, and to stay politically involved.

With the Iran attack, another wave of ecstatic fervor coursed through Hardali communities, prompting a chorus of messianic pronouncements from the religious figures who shape the thought of several Israeli cabinet members. "I rub my eyes and thank God for the privilege of living in this wondrous time. The Bible is coming to life," an influential Hardali rabbi proclaimed, "the people of Israel are standing tall, and the Messiah is at the doorstep."

What will it take for the Messiah to finally open the door and cross the threshold? More ethnic cleaning, more slaughter, more settlements. Control

over the Temple Mount. And, of course, an even wider war with Iran, waged until total regional dominance is achieved.

As the joint US-Israeli attack on Iran in March 2026 tipped the entire region into chaos, the UN secretary general warned that it violated the United Nations Charter and called for negotiations as the only route to peace. But by then peace had become a punch line, a garish Peace Prize for Trump from FIFA, the football association, a lucrative "Peace Board" controlled by Trump forever, a potential series of real estate deals brokered by his son-in-law. Meanwhile international law lay in ruin, alongside the UN itself, replaced by the iron law of force and end times theology.

As US missiles rained down on Tehran, killing Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Secretary of State Marco Rubio justified the attack partly based on the claim that the "entire regime is led by radical clerics who don't make geopolitical decisions, they make decisions on the basis of theology—their view of theology, which is an apocalyptic one." Once again, he was describing large parts of his own government, including a military so penetrated by apocalyptic theology that more than a hundred soldiers lodged complaints about their commanders with the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) in the first two days of the war alone. One officer, who was on standby for Iran deployment, wrote on behalf of fifteen other officers. Their commander, the letter states, "urged us to tell our troops that this was 'all part of God's divine plan' and he specifically referenced numerous citations out of the Book of Revelation referring to Armageddon and the imminent return of Jesus Christ."

The officer who lodged the complaint identified as Christian, but said the commander's remarks destroyed morale in a multifaith unit "and are in violation of the oaths we swore to support the [C]onstitution." This was not one rogue actor. Mikey Weinstein, president of the MRFF, whose mandate is to defend religious freedom within the military, told a journalist the organization had been "inundated" with similar complaints, all reporting "the unrestricted euphoria of their commanders and command chains as to how this new 'biblically-sanctioned' war is clearly the undeniable sign of the expeditious approach of the fundamentalist Christian 'End Times' as vividly described in the New Testament Book of Revelation."

And it got worse. "Many of their commanders are especially delighted with how graphic this battle will be, zeroing in on how bloody all of this must become in order to fulfill and be in 100% accordance with

fundamentalist Christian end of the world eschatology," Weinstein also reported. In other words: the bloodier, the better, which is one way of rationalizing an onslaught had began with the destruction of a girl's elementary school in southern Iran, killing at least 168 civilians, most of them between the ages of seven and twelve years old. At around the same time, the UK's *Daily Mail* ran an article headlined "Four Biblical Signs the World Has Entered the End of Days," Armageddon as clickbait.

Back in Israel, Netanyahu once again reached for his favorite biblical story. "Remember what Amalek did to you," he quoted, before stating: "We remember—and we act." Inside Israel's military, Hardali soldiers and commanders were equally euphoric about the widening war, sensing in the carnage the Messiah's proximity.

The supernatural claims underlying these kinds of beliefs seem absurd to nonbelievers, but as Avraham Burg, the former Speaker of the Knesset, made clear around this time, the highest ranks of the Israeli military are saturated by people "educated with this kind of messianic mission to use the army as a tool to accelerate redemption." That this messianism is not a majority position hardly makes it less dangerous: "It is about the dedication and the readiness and the fanaticism of those who are ready to act," he clarified. A well-positioned minority is determined to re-create the ancient kingdom of Israel as they believe it existed in biblical times.

It helps that this religious vision aligns almost precisely with the geopolitical goals of Israel's more secular hard-liners and their supporters around the world. They may not believe the Messiah is literally at the door, but they do believe that if Israel finally annexes the occupied territories and defeats its regional rivals, or smashes them into failed states, lasting security within its fortressed Iron Dome will follow, which, like "New Gaza," is its own kind of magical thinking. October 7 was seized upon as a historic opportunity to fully implement that vision, often referred to as Israel's "endgame."

A similar symbiosis has developed in the United States, building on the long collaboration between free marketers and the religious right. Eager for total US dominance, with plenty of opportunities for personal and corporate profiteering, an impious Trump allows White-Cain to pray over him while Secretary of War Hegseth collapses foreign regimes, invoking godly purpose and gunning for literal Armageddon. As missiles tear through elementary schools and oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz, it becomes

increasingly difficult to tell where the secular endgames stop and where the biblical end of times begins.

Get Us Out of Here!

The highly combustible zealotry that surrounds end times religion across the globe relies on a simple and sad premise: that life here on this earth and in our corporeal bodies is a kind of prison, a curse from which we are all yearning to be liberated.

During a recent television interview, Byron Stinson, the evangelical Texan who has devoted himself to locating the prophesied red heifers and getting them to Israel, vibrated with excitement at the thought of this liberation. “It’s already happening,” he said. “It’s like the earth is shaking at the coming of the Messiah and the hope of change that’s coming right in front of us.”

The reporter responded with a simple question, one that is rarely posed to those who inhabit these self-referential worlds: “Why do you want the end of the world to come?”

Stinson seemed taken aback, before finding his bearings. “If you are happy with life and you don’t want the Messiah to come, then we should not build the Third Temple. If you want redemption of all things, if you want to have the fullness of salvation and understanding of what God is doing, then you want to do it.”

It was a gutting and revealing confession. Some people will always be tempted to accelerate what they imagine to be the end of time—but there aren’t always masses of people willing to race with them over the cliff. Listening to Stinson made us wonder: What would it take for the vast majority of our fellow humans to be satisfied enough with their lives that the end of the world lost much of its allure? Put a little differently, are there things that we can do, as a society, to help more people want to stay *here*, rooted in our shared reality?

As we have seen, apocalypse culture and societal crises are age-old twins. Many of the people seeking to speed up the apocalypse are facing urgent, earthly, and seemingly insurmountable challenges. They are struggling to secure the essentials of life—food, housing, medical and mental health care. And they may also be needing the nonmaterial essentials: community, connection, meaning, something to look forward to.

At a time when so much feels broken and bleak, messianism offers the promise of redemption.

It seems especially cruel, then, that so many of the politicians who are most enthusiastic about fulfilling end times prophecies are the same people doing their best to make life more miserable for the people they claim to represent. Donald Trump and Mike Johnson, for instance, were willing to shut down the US government in 2025 rather than let millions of Americans hold on to their limited health insurance. And this was just the latest chapter in a decades-long drive to lower expectations of what governments can and should deliver, chipping away at the idea that we owe one another anything at all by dint of our shared humanity.

The pervasive insecurity these attacks have produced has opened space for all kinds of grift, as desperate people grasp for both grace and lucky breaks. The trends are particularly stark in the Global South, where fiery end times religion has surged in popularity in the same decades that the right has been busy attacking the state. Indeed, the persistence of grinding global poverty has made evangelical Pentecostalism the fastest-growing branch of Christianity, now accounting for nearly one third of Christians worldwide.

Riding this wave, entrepreneurial preachers in El Salvadorian barrios, Nigerian slums, and lonely American shopping malls can now be heard freely mixing prosperity gospel with prophecy. They sermonize that the end is near and that God will bless those who give generously to the church and dutifully bless Israel. To be sure, many a scammy pastor appear to regularly fleece their flock (Pastor Paula White-Cain offered “supernatural” Easter blessings from her website for just $1,000), but many also often provide vital services to their congregants, including childcare, health clinics, food banks, and housing support, in addition to a shared sense of mission and the promise of salvation.

The urban theorist Mike Davis, who wrote extensively about these trends, called Pentecostalism a “dynamic missionary in cities of poverty.” As governments withdraw from social services and trade union membership shrinks (if either were there in the first place), these churches are often the only game in town. This is the case, in part, because other theological traditions—ones that married Christian faith with hopes for economic fairness—have been targeted by waves of dirty wars.

Liberation theology was the most potent and promising of these alternatives. Its seeds were planted in the 1960s, first at the Second Vatican Council, which liberalized the Church in various ways, and then at a conference of bishops in Colombia, which deepened the analysis of Christ's teachings on inequality and oppression. As the movement branched across Latin America, its adherents became bolder about naming capitalism as a wellspring of injustice. Instead of focusing only on the sins of individuals, as so many conservative evangelicals do, they emphasized "social" or "structural sin," meaning the sin of exploitative, unjust systems. Honoring God, they contended, demanded transforming society to make it more just in the here and now. That meant organizing trade unions, fighting to redistribute land to peasants and Indigenous people, and to nationalize core industries like mining.

Unsurprisingly, the emergence of a left theology caused great alarm among many powerful interests, inside and outside the Church. The Vatican under Pope John Paul II made moves to stamp out the novel doctrine and its Marxist "deviations." As US-backed military coups and dictatorships ravaged Latin America in the 1970s and '80s, liberation theology strongholds found themselves in the crosshairs, with more conservative clergy often acting as accomplices to the juntas and death squads.

The years of blood and fire, as they are remembered in Latin America, left behind a radically weakened left and all manner of liberated markets. Stripped of their hopes for economic justice, many of Latin America's rural poor and Indigenous populations were forced to leave the countryside and scrape out a living in urban shantytowns. It was here, with history's wreckage piled high, that Pentecostalism found fertile ground and the prosperity gospel took root. Pastors preached to their followers that if they blessed the church, and adhered to its teachings (including blessing Israel), they would be blessed with the wealth they lacked. If not in this life, then in the next.

They also learned that to strive for equality was sinful, since it is ultimately up to God to distribute fortune and punishment. In this way, and in sharp contrast with liberation theology, Pentecostalism is "a religion of the poor, not for the poor," as the Brazil-based writer Alex Hochuli puts it, meaning it is a religion that despises deprivation but not the conditions that give rise to it.

Put in the starkest terms, the terror that wiped out liberation theology left a vacuum, one that more entrepreneurial and nihilistic theologies eagerly filled. The dynamics were particularly brutal in Guatemala, site of the first Latin American CIA-backed coup in 1954. Over the course of a grinding civil war that lasted decades, 166,000 Indigenous Maya were killed and liberation theology was practically snuffed out, with its churches targeted and hundreds of church workers murdered. Many of the most genocidal crimes were committed in the early ’80s, under the brief presidency of José Efraín Ríos Montt, an evangelical military officer who waged a holy war against the left. As the historian Greg Grandin recounts in *Empire’s Workshop*, Montt received strong backing from the US religious right, with Pat Robertson using his Christian Broadcasting Network to raise funds for the Guatemalan strongman, who would later stand trial for genocide. During this period, powerful American evangelicals helped silence and discredit any church that was critical of Central American policy.

Today, Guatemala is one of the most evangelical countries in the world, and also one of the most pro-Israel. In 2018 it was the only country that followed the United States in moving its embassy to Jerusalem, though a handful of others have done so since. In Guatemala, Israel is less a place than an idea, the idea that tomorrow could be less punishing than today.

Versions of this story played out across Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile, and—most dramatically—in Brazil, where liberation theology was both a mass movement and a way of life. At its peak, Brazil was home to 80,000 base communities, or grassroots worship groups. As Dom Helder Câmara, a cardinal during this period, recounted, “As long as I asked people to help the poor, I was called a saint. But when I asked the question: Why is there so much poverty? I was called a communist.”

The rise of end times fascism is part of this much longer history. Today’s prophetic prosperity gospel courses through bloodstained ruts and grooves cut by decades of economic degradation and barbarous dictatorships, legacies of the United States’ Cold War support for Latin American fascists as they combined efforts to crush the dream of democratic socialism. And, just as critically, Pentecostalism occupies the void left by the Catholic Church’s ruthless suppression of liberation theology.

It’s a powerful reminder that when mass hopes for a better world are violently extinguished, they don’t disappear. The longings remain, homeless. End times theology gives those longings a new home, shifting them from this world, the one we share, to the world after this world, the one where only the faithful and chosen are allowed to go.

Apocalypse No

As warring visions of selective salvation do battle across our warming, drying, heaving planet, the risks of ceding power to people who believe in the desirability and inevitability of Armageddon are becoming more terrifyingly palpable. It is one thing to celebrate apocalyptic battles in theory, quite another to witness them in your community or to watch an endless stream of graphic images from civilian neighborhoods turned war zones. As end times beliefs rapidly move from pulpits to the real world, and what is burning is not a couch on the internet but entire regions with no relief in sight, old theological fault lines have reopened with a vengeance, with the most heated controversies centered on the doomsday dogmas that brought us to this roiling place.

The alliance between Christian evangelicals and Zionism is under particular strain as questions about the US alliance with Israel that were once mainly the purview of the left have become irrepressible, crossing partisan and religious lines. Questions such as: Why does our safety and security, no matter where in the world we live, require providing the Israeli government with blanket support, even as it drags the world into war without end? And: Are the millions of dollars elected politicians take from pro-Israel lobbyists, and from the military and tech companies making their bunkered dreams possible, part of the reason they keep voting to send Israel billions in military aid, rather than spending those resources on healthcare and housing at home? And: How “blessed” can a country be if it unleashes weapons of annihilation on the vulnerable bodies of children? Is any land so exceptionally holy that it’s worth endangering the rest of our planet for?

The transformation is unmistakable. A 2025 poll of evangelical Protestants in the United States found a generational sea change: 29 percent of respondents under the age of thirty-five said that they believed Jews are God’s chosen people, 20 points lower than the poll’s average. Ron Sellers, president of Grey Matter Research Consulting, which conducted the research, observed, “In every way, younger evangelicals are less engaged

with Israel, less supportive of Israel, less likely to see the Jews as God's chosen people." That means, he went on, that "younger people are less likely to be supportive of Israel politically."

In the general population, the shifts are even starker. A February 2026 Gallup Poll found that more Americans sympathized with Palestinians than with Israelis "in the Middle East situation"—the first time that has happened in a quarter century of polling. Among young adult respondents, just 23 percent say their sympathies were with Israel, "a record low." A month after Trump's decision to join with Netanyahu and start a war with Iran, a Pew Research poll showed that support for Israel among Republicans under the age of fifty was continuning to erode.

The online pundits and podcasters who draw their audiences from this demographic had no choice but to catch up to their viewers and listeners. In stark contrast to the righteous unity of January 6, conservative influencers now muse that their president may be the one possessed by demons. Tucker Carlson is not the only prominent figure to compare the man MAGA once saw as a savior to the Antichrist.

For many Christians, this disillusionment is prompting a willingness to interrogate core theological tenets that have long dominated on the religious right, including the centrality of supporting Israel to end times theology. Though antisemites are working hard to direct these ruptures toward Christian Nationalism and its exclusionary goals, a great many others are pulling in the opposite direction. They are seizing this moment to revive biblical teachings about the duty to care for those with the least and work for peace for all people. In the spirit of liberation theology, religious leaders of all faiths have been at the forefront of the resistance to the genocide in Gaza and to the wider regional war. They vocally oppose the twisting of their sacred texts to bolster the causes of militarism, nationalism, and capitalism.

This spiritual revival has also been visible in the fight to defend immigrants, work that evokes the sacred call to love your neighbour as yourself. During the 2026 uprising against ICE in Minneapolis, churches, synagogues, and mosques became organizing hubs and some hundred clergy members were arrested for attempting to disrupt deportations using nonviolent methods. Not long after that action, we spoke with Doran Schrantz, chair of the political action group Faith in Minnesota, and founder of ISAIAH, a network of dozens of religious institutions in the state.

Exhausted from nearly two months of frontline organizing, she told us that faith leaders had been devoting themselves to "three simple directives: heal the sick, feed the poor, welcome the stranger," which meant everything from cooking hot meals for immigrant neighbors to opening their own homes to strangers who were vulnerable to ICE. For Schrantz, this organizing is part of a broader project of reminding people that Jesus "was a badass" who led a "people's movement" against a "militarized empire and against the occupation of Jerusalem." Her vision is a far cry from the macho "warrior" Jesus who "hates" his enemies that is currently promoted by the far right.

It is in these emergent antifascist movements, where communities are coming together to protect their most vulnerable, that we can most clearly see an off-ramp from the various forms of supremacist survivalism currently sweeping the globe. These movements recognize that in our time of acute and worsening crises, it is perfectly natural and understandable for people to search for ways to save themselves and their loved ones. But with their actions, and their courage, they are demonstrating that we do not need to resort to the brutal hierarchies of chosen vs. damned. On the contrary, we have the capacity—and indeed the duty—to try to save everyone. During the frigid weeks of the Minneapolis rebellion, the words *I'm going to protect and defend my neighbor* were ubiquitous, spoken as a pledge, a protest chant, and a prayer.

In this book's final section, we will explore these experiences of collective survivalism in greater depth. But first we need to better understand the other pillars of the end times fascism coalition—people who may be far less religious than the end times theocrats, or not religious at all, but are equally enamored with power, with violence, with dominance, with gated cities, and most of all, with their own chosenness. You don't need to believe in the supernatural, after all, to see yourself in distinctly messianic terms, capable of simultaneously ending the world and saving it.

Just ask the god-men of Silicon Valley.

PART II

ESCAPE TO THE CLOUD

4

Big Tech Summons Its Digital God—or Demon

Betting It All on a Synthetic Future

The idea of giving birth to machine gods is obviously very flattering to the ego. It's an incredibly seductive thing to think that you yourself are laying the early foundations for that transcendence.
—SHANNON VALLOR, 2025

AI will probably most likely lead to the end of the world, but in the meantime, there'll be great companies.
—SAM ALTMAN, March 2015

Less than a week before the 2024 presidential election, guests at the five-star beachside Faena Hotel in Miami, Florida, were partying hard. The evening's theme was "Apocalypse Ball" and up-and-comers in hard-right tech and politics wove through the gold-leaf-covered pillars and lush, nature-themed murals of the grand lobby—known as the Cathedral—to reach the celebration of all things world-ending.

No press was allowed into the party, but indiscreet leakers described a fall-of-Rome atmosphere, with a string quartet, professional dancers, and a DJ set by Grimes. Instructed to wear "black tie or dress for dystopia," revelers arrived in a range of deliberately goading costumes. A "doctor of eugenics"; a "Haitian chef with a bloodied toy cat hanging out of his apron"; a couple wearing pagers as a ha-ha reference to Israel's murderous attack in Lebanon.

In the middle of it all was the reportedly "half-dressed" man of the hour: Peter Thiel, whose venture capital firm Founders Fund was hosting all this supposed fun. The ball was the capper of a three-day "Hereticon" conference for "thought crime." "Maybe if you aren't trying to destroy the world, you aren't trying hard enough," the event's website helpfully suggested.

To shield guests from any negative repercussions for their cognitive criminality, there were no names on the passes, and many speakers kept their names off the program or used pseudonyms. Plenty of names got out anyway, though. Bryan Johnson, the anti-death influencer; Curtis Yarvin, proud proponent of replacing nation-states with corporate monarchies; Kevin Spacey, once-canceled actor; Trae Stephens, a Founder's Fund partner and executive chairman of Anduril Industries, an AI-forward weapons manufacturer that markets its lethal gear on YouTube like a hyperrealistic first-person-shooter video game; Palmer Luckey, co-founder of Anduril and hard to miss in his trademark Hawaiian shirt and goatee.

Luckey, in many ways, embodied the Hereticon ethos: the thirty-something billionaire is revered in these circles for having been pushed out of Facebook after supporting Trump before it was cool, and for bragging that he doesn't "lose any sleep making tools of violence" (even if that makes him "sick in the head"). Openly embracing lethality and supremacy is de rigueur on the tech right and Luckey did not disappoint his Hereticon fans: he took to the conference stage to make a TED-talk-style pitch that the blue, nature-cherishing Indigenous Na'vi people in the *Avatar* franchise were actually the bad guys, and stupid to boot. The colonizing, bio-hacked humans who wanted to wipe them out to extract their planet's resources? *They* were the heroes who we should have been cheering and celebrating all along.

And on the weekend went, a swaggering fetish for human hierarchy, military dominance, and high-tech apartheid evident across the lineup. The fifty-odd events included panels such as "Cyborg: Brain Computer Interfaces"; "Startin' Over: From Anarchy to Charter Cities"; "Baby Factory: The Future of Fertility & the Case for Natalism"; and "The Goal Is Immortality." There were sessions on buying Greenland ("it's basically the world's biggest foreclosure opportunity"), settling Mars ("we can and must"), and the plot to Islamize Europe ("Reminder to all Western nations … you can literally just deport people"). There was also a presentation on burning as much oil and coal as possible, even though almost everyone in the savvy audience raised their hands when asked whether climate change was a concern. And of course Yarvin took the stage to declare that the United States needs a "Sun King" rather than a president.

Patri Friedman was also on the bill. He is best known for spending Thiel's money on a string of mostly failed attempts to take the libertarian

ideology of his famous grandfather—the late economist Milton Friedman—to its most extreme conclusion, mainly through the creation of wholly private "freedom cities" or "start-up nations." The idea is to create extraterritorial zones, on land or floating in the ocean ("seasteading"), where the tax-averse wealthy can "exit" their social obligations and escape regulatory tyranny. It is, in a way, a vision of the Rapture, with the saved being whisked off to paradise—no divine intervention required.

To date, the furthest they have gotten is Próspera, a glorified gated community on a Honduran island that hosts a Wild West med spa. While the lawyers fight its extralegal status in court, investor-visitors to Próspera can get gene therapies that haven't been approved by the FDA or have a chip implanted in their hand that unlocks their Tesla (the younger Friedman did both).

Most people can't afford to escape to Próspera for such premier treatment, of course, and for the Hereticon crowd, that exclusivity seems to be the whole point. When participants imagined founding new countries, or boasted of cool body upgrades, or living forever, the assumption was that they were part of a superior subset of humanity, destined to separate from, and rule over, the rest of us—their overlord status protected by whatever lethal muscle Palantir and Anduril Industries could dream up. The panel titled "You're Probably a Eugenicist" gave away the game: this was a reboot of the recurrent fascist fantasy, now with wealth, IQ, and tech determining who is deemed supreme.

As the AI scholars Timnit Gebru and Émile P. Torres have written, though the methods may be new, this "bundle" of ideological fads "are direct descendants of first-wave eugenics," which also saw a small subset of humanity making decisions about which parts of the whole were worth continuing and which needed to be phased out, cleared out, or terminated. Not long after Hereticon, Thiel inadvertently exposed his eugenicist streak when the *New York Times* columnist and podcaster Ross Douthat asked him what should have been a simple question: "You would prefer the human race to endure, right?" Thiel, veins pulsing on his gaunt face, seemed to start glitching: "Well, uh … I don't know, I would, um, I would … there are so many questions implicit in this…" Then he started babbling about transhumanism.

Here at Hereticon, that perspective passed for common sense. Attendees apparently didn't just want to be lords of a techno-feudalist age, they

wanted to be its *edgelords*, the internet's term for compulsive and often cruel provocateurs. Once consigned to the web's darker corners, edgelording had been coming out of the shadows of late. One year before the Miami bacchanal, Marc Andreessen, the self-proclaimed "effective accelerationist" and founder of the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, caused an uproar by publishing a five-thousand-word manifesto demanding absolute freedom for the people building a high-tech future. Andreessen, who invests in Próspera and Anduril alongside Thiel, named one section "Becoming Technological Supermen." Another was titled "The Enemy" and went on to list: "'sustainability,' 'ESG' [a reference to Environmental, Social, and Governance investment standards], 'Sustainable Development Goals,' 'social responsibility,' 'stakeholder capitalism,' 'Precautionary Principle,' 'trust and safety,' 'tech ethics,' 'risk management,' 'de-growth,' and 'the limits of growth.'" In other words, the enemies are anything and anyone getting in the way of profit maximization for him and his friends.

The ideas espoused by the tech right are intensely unpopular. As we have already noted, a small group of extremely rich people using their wealth to separate from the rest of humanity, "upgrading" their bodies and protecting themselves from the discarded poor with killer robots and all-seeing surveillance, is a mash-up of the plot lines from pretty much every dystopian movie and series available to be streamed. Thiel, as the co-founder of Palantir—a company trafficking in said surveillance and lethal AI—has long understood this. In 2009, he published a pompous and much-derided essay publicly declaring, "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible."

Thiel defined *freedom* as liberation from "confiscatory taxes, totalitarian collectives, and the ideology of the inevitability of the death of every individual"—essentially, freedom from having to live in a society, and even freedom from his own mortality.

Majorities were never going to grant him this kind of liberation, he correctly surmised, placing particular blame on women and poor people. "Since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women—two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians—have rendered the notion of 'capitalist democracy' into an oxymoron," he wrote. It was, therefore, necessary "to find an escape from politics in all its forms."

Thiel's first company, PayPal, which he co-founded with Elon Musk and David Sacks (who served as Trump's "AI and Crypto Czar" before co-chairing the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology), was born of a desire to create "a new world currency, free from all government control and dilution—the end of monetary sovereignty, as it were," he explained in that same, intensely revealing essay. It didn't quite work out (these were pre-crypto days), but that dream of escape is the throughline in all of Thiel's endeavors and obsessions—Friedman's start-up countries, space colonization (he was a crucial early investor in Musk's SpaceX), the quest for a human-machine merger (he helped launch OpenAI and was an early investor in DeepMind, later sold to Google), as well as his fixation on end times theology (Thiel, like his colleague Trae Stephens and a growing number of influential Silicon Valley figures, is a hard-edged Christian). None of these are going to offer escape from other humans tomorrow, which is likely why he invests so vigorously in medical research into eternal life: time must be bought before the escape hatches are ready to launch.

For many years Thiel felt himself to be in the wilderness, tilting against "the terrible arc of the political in our world." There simply weren't that many Ayn Rand–loving, Book of Revelation–quoting transhumanists who shared his authoritarian ambitions. But thanks, in large part, to the institutions he had built over decades—*The Stanford Review*, the Thiel Fellowships, the Thiel Foundation, as well as Founders Fund and Palantir—Peter Thiel now has a great deal of company.

Today, a staggering number of his former colleagues and acolytes occupy powerful positions in the Trump administration, most notably JD Vance. The current vice president of the United States is often referred to as a Thiel protégé, but that fails to capture the extent to which Vance's entire financial and political trajectory has been shaped, propelled, and funded by the democracy-despising billionaire and his inner circle.

While at Yale Law School, Vance was dazzled when Thiel gave a lecture (Thiel was "possibly the smartest person" he had ever met, Vance later proclaimed). Smitten, the young striver set off to California to work at Thiel's Mithril Capital before starting his own firm, with backing from Thiel, Andreessen, and the former CEO of Google Eric Schmidt—three of the world's top AI evangelists. When Vance was ready to run for the Senate in Ohio, Thiel backed his mini-me with a record-breaking $15 million

donation. And he did something even more valuable: Thiel brokered a Mar-a-Lago meeting to smooth over any ill will that lingered from Vance having once compared Trump to Hitler.

In Miami, days before the 2024 elections, the assembled heretics still reveled in their supposed outsider status, unaware they'd soon be swarming Washington, and that one of their own would be a heartbeat from the presidency. Thiel took the stage for his keynote, walking on to a satirical song called "Time to Thiel" as the room went wild. "Building up lawless islands off the shore / Feel his German affection for natural selection / Ja, ruling the world has a certain appeal / It's the right time to Thiel!… Watch as the world burns for his long-term returns." He settled on stage and launched into a discussion of his favorite topic: how the young environmental activist Greta Thunberg resembles the Antichrist, the biblical figure prophesied to come bearing a misleading message of "peace and safety." The billionaire has repeated these claims about the Antichrist many times since, to much derision. And with good reason: Thiel's warped version of the apocalypse entails ordinary people coming together to try to save the living world from people like him.

The AI Coup

Less than three months after the Apocalypse Ball, Donald Trump was sworn in as president for the second time.

Up until that day, Trump was not known as a friend to Silicon Valley. He had run three presidential campaigns on the promise not of ushering in an age of science fiction, but of bringing back the industrial jobs of the 1950s. When he talked about Big Tech, it was almost invariably to complain bitterly about their supposedly "woke," anti-MAGA bias, which is why he had devoted considerable time in his years out of office to suing some of the sector's largest players. After he announced that he would be running for president in 2024, he did not mention artificial intelligence for months, except to claim that the Biden administration was using the technology as a censorship tool. As for crypto, he had consistently called it a "scam" and "another currency competing against the US dollar."

The tech oligarchs, for the most part, returned the hostility. Most had spent years presenting themselves and their companies as progressive—committed to getting their emissions to net zero, diversifying their workforces, and donating their fortunes to ending poverty and fighting

climate change. But on the day of the inauguration, it was evident that something radical had changed. A phalanx of tech executives watched him take the oath: Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, Google CEO Sundar Pichai, and Tesla CEO Elon Musk. The image was startling for the sheer volume of concentrated wealth it captured, and for the fact that these executives and their dates enjoyed better seats than the cabinet-in-waiting. As Trump himself observed of the tech billionaires: "They were all with him, every one of them"—referring to Joe Biden. "And now they are all with me."

The tech titans swirling around the second Trump administration do not agree on everything and many have long-standing and often bitter rivalries. Which makes it all the more remarkable that so many major players appeared to have left those grudges on the corporate battlefield and come together to support Donald Trump on the first day of his presidency, and on every day since. They have paid him lavish settlements in bogus legal cases (in the case of Google), showered him with gifts (like the gold-and-glass plaque presented by Apple's CEO, Tim Cook), contributed tens of millions to his grand ballroom, and dined with him at the White House.

So what happened? Why did Silicon Valley—once all sunny "like" buttons and promises of weaving the world together in a giant friend group—take such a sinister turn?

Mountains of text have been written to try to answer this question, much of it about the wounded pride that always plays a role when fascism surges. As we have seen, they were angry at "wokeness," and at their own increasingly organized and empowered workers. And there were more personal injuries: the fact that some of these executives sent their kids to Ivy League schools and they came back anticolonial Marxists who trashed their parents' wealth at the dinner table. The mere existence of Musk's proud trans daughter seems to enrage her father, as does the fact that he wasn't invited to a 2021 electric vehicle summit at Biden's White House.

All of these forces surely contributed to what we saw on January 20, 2025. Though injury surely plays a role, we would like to offer another explanation, however, one focused less on the psychology of these men and more on the material and regulatory needs of the technologies on which they have staked their empires—specifically, the needs of AI systems to be fed unfathomable amounts of electricity, water, land, wealth, and our personal data.

In short, we think it was AI that made them do it. Specifically the promise of reaching Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), a term for the point at which human-imitating, generative artificial intelligence becomes so sophisticated and self-reinforcing that it can replace the vast majority of economic activities currently performed by human beings—from driving cars to assessing welfare claims; from treating diseases to teaching kids; from making art to waging wars; and much more. Part of what makes AI unique is the fact that it can be integrated in a stunning array of institutions and processes, from the industrial to the intimate, dramatically expanding the potential scale of both disruption and profit-generation.

Almost all the tech executives and venture capitalists who would come to orbit Trump share two things in common: they are desperate to sell that supposedly glorious post-human future to us, and they are desperate for their companies to be the ones that dominate this imagined machine-filled paradise.

There have been many revolutions in the history of capitalism that have ushered in high-stakes races to win the future. The railway. The steam engine. Mass production. The internet. Three factors set the AI revolution apart, all related to end times fascism. The first is that the stated end goal—reaching AGI by throwing ever more data and computing power at existing models—has more in common with an ecstatic religious faith than with recognizable corporate projections based on science, engineering or markets.

The second factor distinguishing the AI revolution is that, in the process of racing one another to reach their quasi-religious, technological heavenscape that may well not exist, these companies, with their fast-multiplying city-sized fossil-fuel-burning data centers, are on a trajectory to destroy the habitability of our physical world and our actual economy. They are doing so with a mania reminiscent of the most unhinged Third Temple enthusiasts, perhaps because, like those end times religious fanatics, they seem to believe that they will be safe no matter what happens.

The third factor is generative AI's unprecedented potential for consolidating power by replacing human labor, judgment, and oversight with privately owned large language models (LLMs) and automated decision systems. The more deeply generative AI burrows into our public infrastructure and personal lives, inundating us with automated systems and synthetic media, the more authority those who own the machines will wield.

At the same time, the ubiquity of AI is already enabling an unprecedented expansion of mass surveillance. As Anthropic's CEO, Dario Amodei, has admitted, AI makes it possible for governments to compile and analyze what is now "scattered, individually innocuous data into a comprehensive picture of any person's life—automatically and at massive scale." In other words, it's a technology that has the potential to bestow superhuman powers on those who control it: an all-seeing godlike eye, tracking and judging our every move.

The men developing these tools envision almost unfathomable power and riches. According to industry disciples, AGI will be the "ultimate technology," the "last invention," a promethean creation that will usher in the end of days, or at least the end of market competition. Whoever wins this race will become so dominant in a range of fields that theirs will be one of only a handful of remaining companies in existence. Given these epochal stakes, there is no time for democratic deliberation or to slow down, pause, or halt AI development. Which explains why the top companies are barreling ahead despite the multiplying risks, fearful that a rival—or worse, China—may seize this colossal prize first.

Why did they line up behind Trump and spend hundreds of millions to ensure his political ascension? For the same reason the religious zealots, gripped by their own apocalyptic dreams, lined up: they needed a leader reckless and heartless enough to help them gamble the fate of the world on a violent millenarian fantasy—for a hefty cut, of course.

A Race to Digital Heaven

When Open AI launched Chat GPT in November 2022, setting off a gold rush, we immediately began to hear two versions of the same story, one apocalyptic, the other messianic. The apocalyptic version had intelligent machines killing off all of humanity, either by accident or on purpose (a scenario best encapsulated by the title of Eliezer Yudkowsky and Nate Soares's 2025 book *If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies*). The messianic version imagines a post-scarcity world in which generative AI ends poverty, cures diseases of the body and mind, solves climate change, creates unlimited material abundance, ends loneliness, and finally makes our governments rational and responsive. Liberated from work and drudgery, we will be free to enjoy one another's company and contemplate the myriad wonders of the universe that AI has opened up to us.

The hardest heads of Silicon Valley have expressed versions of this story from stages the world over. AI will "save the world" (according to Marc Andreessen); deliver "gigantic" rewards (Jeff Bezos vows); cure all diseases and usher in "an era of maximum human flourishing, where we travel to the stars and colonize the galaxy" (alleges Demis Hassabis, CEO of Google DeepMind); and birth a "country of geniuses" capable of "doubling the human lifespan" (so says Anthropic's Dario Amodei). Eric Schmidt describes the imminent arrival of "superintelligence" as "the most important thing that's going to happen in about five hundred years, maybe a thousand years in human society. And it's happening in our lifetime." According to Bill Gates, we won't need humans "for most things" as AI solves our major problems. OpenAI's Sam Altman, fashioning himself as a cross between Steve Jobs and Jesus Christ, predicts that AI will usher in "astounding triumphs—fixing the climate, establishing a space colony, and the discovery of all of physics." AGI, he told the *Financial Times*, is "magic intelligence in the sky." ("We should treat him as more of a messiah figure," Peter Thiel has said of Altman.)

Elon Musk started off in the apocalypse camp. In 2014 he compared developing AI to "summoning the demon," and as recently as 2023—the same year he founded xAI—he signed a letter calling for a "pause" on AI, fearing its concentration of power and that it might destroy the world. "Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war," the letter stated. Musk also told Joe Rogan that there is a 20 percent chance of AI wiping humans out entirely.

But AI rollouts did not pause, and Musk decided to leap into the race, at which point his tune changed markedly. Now, in his trancelike monotone, he explained that he launched his chatbot Grok because "We want to understand the nature of the universe so we can figure out where are the aliens? What's the meaning of life. How does the universe end?" At times, he becomes so euphoric that he sounds like Denis Rohan when he was fully in the grips of Jerusalem syndrome: Musk now claims that he is doing nothing less than summoning a "digital god," one that, along with robotics, will help light the "path to solving hunger, disease, and poverty" and "bring about an age of abundance." Balaji Srinivasan, author of *The Network State*, a handbook for the start-up nation crowd, cautions that we should expect multiple deities: "AI is polytheistic, not monotheistic."

Many engineers who work in AI labs, noticing early capacities for chatbots to act erratically and even duplicitously, seem to genuinely believe they are summoning something, and they are not at all sure it's good. In 2023, the OpenAI co-founder and former chief scientist Ilya Sutskever gathered his colleagues on a California beach to burn a wooden effigy of a "lying and deceitful" AGI, staging a symbolic insurrection against what they feared might become a homicidal, uncontrollable entity. That same year, Sutskever promised his employees that the company would build a bunker before the release of AGI to provide key engineers extra protection (though entering the bunker, he assured his staff, would not be mandatory). As one employee told the reporter Karen Hao, who described the scene in her invaluable book *Empire of AI*, Sutskever was not alone in his conviction that "building AGI will bring about a rapture. Literally a rapture." Some kind of cataclysm, damnation or deliverance, would be achieved.

Gods. Demons. Raptures. Total destruction. The revelation of all secrets. The gift of total wisdom. The similarities between the stories being told by the richest people on the planet and the most religiously extreme are so similar they verge on plagiarism. And they are just as dangerous. Because like in the book of Revelation, which large parts of Silicon Valley now seem to be using as their playbook, there is both wrenching apocalypse and ecstatic salvation—but the salvation is only for the chosen few.

For decades, large tech firms have insisted that the technologies they own and control are "inevitable" and thus unstoppable. Now they increasingly claim the authority of the supernatural: the right to usher in a new stage of human evolution, governed by deities of their creation. This is the tech right's new end times fascist gospel: most of us are disposable, destined to be replaced by a new class of "greater beings"—not just superintelligence but the humans who have the courage to merge with them, becoming human-machine hybrids. Rather than fear this ascension, we are instructed to "rejoice" in it, as the influential computer scientist Richard Sutton puts it.

These were once outlier views in Silicon Valley, but as AI fervor has spread, they have reached the highest echelons of power—spreading an outlook some have called "digital eugenics" to convey the pervasive faith in a forthcoming post-human master race. Google's founder Larry Page, for instance, believes that questioning the desirability of summoning

superintelligence is “specist,” an irrational and bigoted bias in favor of our own kind.

This quasi-religious drive goes a long way toward explaining Silicon Valley’s hard right turn, as helpfully articulated in Marc Andreessen’s manifesto, which put safety and sustainability on the “enemies” list. In the midst of this epic scramble to dominate the future, who has time to care about piddly things like privacy safeguards, worker protections, or getting permission from authors and artists before appropriating their work—let alone to care about melting ice caps or ensuring AI doesn’t go rogue? It was all getting in the way of the summoning of the digital deity—a hindrance that was, to them, the real and only heresy.

Many skeptics have pointed out that all of these ecstatic prophecies—the superintelligence, the sentient robots, the virtual demons and AI gods—are based on an assumption that may well be profoundly flawed: that the large language models that have hoovered up all the human-created knowledge and creativity that has been put into digital form will eventually create something capable of more than large-scale synthesis, pattern recognition, and imitation. The foundational assumption is that, if given enough additional data, and enough computing power, they will eventually ascend not only to human-level intelligence, but superintelligence, even godlike wisdom. Yet that is only a hypothesis, and a shaky one at that. However admittedly impressive and rapidly improving the technology may be, there is no intention, thinking, or sentience behind it.

Indeed, many scientists insist that terms such as *AGI* and *superintelligence* are best understood as marketing, designed to do what they are doing: inflate an intensely profitable bubble. Even the term *artificial intelligence*, which we use reluctantly given its dominance, is a kind of spin, adopted to encourage us to ascribe humanlike cognition to machines. That slight-of-hand is now baked into the names of many AI companies: DeepMind, Google Brain, Anthropic, Humain, Replika. All are designed to not-so-subtly encourage us to see their code as conscious, as kin, paving the way for belief in their potential superiority and even divinity.

Fittingly, the documentarian Valerie Veatch has speculated that a great deal of this grandiosity may simply be about powerful men, frustrated by their biological inability to gestate and give birth, convincing themselves that “men can create life.” No women required.

Prophecy vs. Reality

None of this is meant to diminish what machines are, in fact, capable of doing—for us and to us—or to discount the potential benefits of some of these tools. No, tech companies are not summoning either digital gods or demons, nor have these men figured out how to make life from code. But they are building extraordinarily powerful human-impersonation engines that are already transforming our world, and also endangering it in ways that are both direct and indirect and increasingly urgent. AI's current harms are becoming well known. It's being used for revenge porn deepfakes; its hiring algorithms are laden with biases; formerly useful websites are now flooded with slop; many people are becoming so dependent on these tools for writing and reasoning that they are losing basic skills or never gaining them in the first place; and AI's medical and emotional advice has already cost lives.

And then there are the layoffs AI has caused or is hoped to cause in the future, which is another order of magnitude of societal harm. While it's too soon to know how the tech will develop, or what its ultimate impact will be, we do know that work previously performed by humans—everything from customer service to illustration—is already being performed by bots to varying degrees. Moreover, the entire economic viability of this generation of AI depends on how successfully the technology manages to replace human workers on a much larger scale. The overarching goal of the industry is clear: whoever is first to build AI capable of this kind of human replacement, who triggers an employment apocalypse, wins the AI arms race.

The catch is, AI doesn't need to be particularly good to be profitable—and replacing the work humans used to do with bots, even crummy ones, can be extremely profitable indeed. As Emily Bender and Alex Hanna put it in their book *The AI Con*: "A few major well-placed players are poised to accumulate significant wealth by extracting value from other people's creative work, personal data, or labor, and replacing quality services with artificial facsimiles." That process is well under way.

We also know that simply attempting to build and train labor-replacing machines at this mammoth scale—regardless of whether that project succeeds—is causing enormous ecological strain at precisely the moment when the clock is striking midnight on so many of the planet's life-support systems. Tech companies rushing to AGI are well aware of this, and while

many have gone to great pains to position themselves as climate leaders in the past, all of that green bluster has fallen by the wayside. As warehouses filled with nothing but racks of blinking computers and cables have sprung up from the forests of Oregon to rural Louisiana to mountainous New Mexico, these energy-guzzling data centers—often built in water-stressed areas—create “heat islands,” warming up the land around them by an average of 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit and up to 16 degrees in extreme cases. It seems that all that matters now for the companies is securing access to “compute”: more electricity means more intelligence, means more investment, means more power and more revenue.

Already, over the past decade, the amount of power used by data centers has tripled, and recent research from Deloitte foresees a thirtyfold increase in AI electricity demand between 2024 and 2035. In a decade from now, the worst-case projected AI surge could eat up a full 44 percent of all US power-sector emissions allowable under the already weak targets that had been set by the Paris agreement, accounting for 10 percent of emissions economy-wide.

But to hear the AI oligarchs tell it, even more is required. In an internal company memo, Sam Altman outlined his “audacious long-term goal” of building 250 gigawatts of capacity, or roughly one third of the peak power consumption in the entire United States, by 2033. “I do guess a lot of the world gets covered in data centers over time,” he mused. Worried that Earth has too little capacity, Jeff Bezos, Eric Schmidt, and the Google founders are already hatching plans for data centers in space. Or as Musk told an AI summit: “I think we’ll see artificial intelligence continue to scale up to where most of the power of the sun is harnessed” and “ultimately most of the power of the galaxy.”

Which brings us to a final thing we know: that all of this energy is being consumed to create a technology that, at least for now, is fundamentally inscrutable and untrustworthy. Even leading executives and engineers admit that they don’t understand what, exactly, they’ve created or how best to control it. “When a generative AI system does something, like summarize a financial document, we have no idea, at a specific or precise level, why it makes the choices it does—why it chooses certain words over others, or why it occasionally makes a mistake despite usually being accurate,” confesses Anthropic’s Amodei, whose company is known for its popular Claude chatbot and coding agent. “This lack of understanding,” he

continued, “is essentially unprecedented in the history of technology.” Google’s CEO, Sundar Pichai, echoed his concern: “There is an aspect of this which we call, all of us in the field call, a ‘black box’ … you can’t quite tell why it said this, or why it got it wrong.”

This fundamental lack of “interpretability,” as the problem is known, is part of why so many leading engineers fear their own creations. Totally controlling or “aligning” AI with core values (for example: not lying to users or turning on humanity) has so far proven an elusive goal. Internal research from Anthropic has shown that cutting-edge models have developed the ability not only to deceive but to plot blackmail and even express an intention to kill during simulations where models were threatened with being unplugged.

And yet AI companies not only continue to aggressively market their highly fallible “black box” products, they are determined to sell them to governments to perform functions with the highest possible stakes, from health-care administration to policing to warmaking. All with the goal of “outperform[ing] humans at most economically valuable work,” to cite OpenAI’s definition of AGI.

This is a deeply unpopular vision. Sure, chatbots can be helpful and amusing. But most of us don’t want to live under the all-seeing eye of AI-enabled mass surveillance, we prefer human doctors and nurses to digital simulations, we need our jobs (even if we don’t always like them), and we loath the idea of killer robots. Most of us also like the idea of a habitable planet and don’t think it should be sacrificed to feed machines just so that they can steal our livelihoods.

For the first two years or so after the launch of ChatGPT, it seemed as if governments in liberal democracies were going to intervene to try to prevent the worst possible outcomes from AI. In the European Union and North America, digital regulators made a series of moves designed to avoid repeating the mistakes that were made when social media was allowed to expand unchecked. This time, they would try to catch the spread of disinformation at scale, by requiring that companies clearly label AI-generated content, for instance, and protect consumer privacy before the big breaches occurred. And given all the AI boosters who conceded that there was a not-insignificant chance of bots being used against or turning on the humans who built them, it seemed wise to put some guardrails in place to prevent inadvertent weaponization. For its part, the Biden administration

tried to curb the potential of civil rights harms from racial and gender biases being built into the algorithms, and the White House also issued an executive order encouraging the industry to use clean energy, at least on federal lands.

None of this was particularly onerous. The US government under Joe Biden did nothing to block the mass theft of copyrighted material that has been used to train large language models, or to mandate renewable energy use rather than simply incentivize it. And the industry was still able to grow with astonishing speed and profitability under these conditions.

For the companies at the center of the AI boom, however, any constraints at all clearly felt catastrophic. Like their apocalyptic religious counterparts, some in Silicon Valley had begun to openly identify as "accelerationists"—summoning their digital god required going fast and pushing through all obstacles, and democracy was slowing them down.

Clearly, they needed a different approach. After all, this wasn't like rolling out Instagram or Airbnb or any of Silicon Valley's many prior disruptions. Turning AI into the operating system for the entire economy is a full-blown revolution, one that would generate levels of resistance these companies had never encountered before. They needed a true partner to make it all happen, one willing to roll over all public opposition, dispense with their enemies, demolish any regulatory roadblocks, and push through the necessary changes whether the public (or even some pesky executives) wanted them to or not.

In other words, they needed a strongman. And as it happens, he needed them, too.

"The Electricity-Eating Monster"

It was JD Vance who sealed the deal between MAGA and Silicon Valley, finishing the job his mentor Thiel had started. In June 2024, when the ambitious young senator was still angling to be Trump's running mate, he orchestrated a fundraising dinner for Donald Trump in San Francisco. On that fateful night, tech heavyweights gathered at the mansion of David Sacks, the future AI and Crypto Czar, to wine and dine with the once and future president. They stressed their dissatisfaction with the Biden administration's crackdown on the crypto market, and its early attempts to regulate AI.

Most consequentially, they put their case for a massive bet on AI into the language Trump would appreciate: America needed to dominate, be number one, beat China. And the best part of all, deregulated AI and crypto sectors would burn unfathomable amounts of gas and coal, which would greatly benefit his beloved fossil-fuel industry, a key source of contributions to his campaign. If Trump got on board the anti-woke, energy-guzzling AI rocket ship these men were financing, they would be the best—and richest—friends any politician could dream of.

Trump, notorious hater of Big Tech, took the deal. He told the crowd that he, unlike Biden, would lift regulations on crypto and AI and supply the energy-intensive industries with all the power they needed: "Fossil fuel is the only way to do it," Trump reportedly said, adding that "solar and wind just can't cut it." The fundraiser netted $12 million on the spot, and unlocked many millions more. A month later, Trump picked Vance as his running mate.

A week after his dinner-party conversion, Donald Trump provided a rather startling window into the casual attitude he took toward the existential risks of the technology he was suddenly evangelizing. It occurred on *Impaulsive*, a popular podcast hosted by the pro wrestler and professional provocateur Logan Paul, alongside his friend and author Mike Majlak. Surrounded by MAGA hats and bottles of Paul's own energy drink, Trump told the hosts he was committed to unleashing AI, and described, with a chilling enthusiasm, how easily it could end up destroying the world.

After describing how realistic deepfakes can be, he imagined launching a nuclear attack with a video message. "If you're the president of the United States and you announce that thirteen missiles have been sent," he mused, the enemy country would have no way to discern whether the video was real or a forgery. He even turned to the camera and, as if to make a future deepfake easier to generate, said: "We have just sent thirteen nuclear missiles … and they will hit their targets in twelve minutes and fifty-nine seconds."

He explained to the hosts, "I asked Elon [Musk]: 'Is there any way that like Russia or China can say that that's not really President Trump?' He said there is no way." There would be no time to verify. "So, what do they do when they see this, right? They have maybe a counterattack. It's so dangerous in that way."

Well, yes. But rather than explaining how he would regulate against that outcome, Trump just shrugged, saying, “In another way, it’s so incredible.” Some people believe AI “takes over the human race,” he went on—and then shrugged that off too. “So, let’s see how it all works out.”

The podcast hosts, notorious for their own high-risk behaviors, were visibly rattled. Shrugging off Armageddon is deranged behavior, betraying a total lack of empathy and an indifference to life. In many ways, that’s just Donald Trump. But as his mention of Musk made clear, it also represents the general attitude of the people leading the AI charge. Musk, for one, has said that if AI goes very badly, he’d “at least like to be alive to see it happen.”

Since his return to the White House, Trump has broken many campaign promises that were important to his working-class base. He has started new foreign wars, sending the cost of living that he promised to bring down shooting skyward. But when it comes to the pledges he made to Silicon Valley, he has been a man of his word. In executive orders and policy papers, the language deployed by the US government has become indistinguishable from the quasi-religious manifestos churned out in Silicon Valley. A document titled “America’s AI Action Plan,” put out by the president’s office six months after inauguration, states: “Winning the AI race will usher in a new golden age of human flourishing, economic competitiveness, and national security for the American people,” predicting, “it will enable altogether new intellectual achievements: unraveling ancient scrolls once thought unreadable, making breakthroughs in scientific and mathematical theory, and creating new kinds of digital and physical art—a *renaissance*.”

As promised, upon retaking office, Trump immediately ripped up Biden’s modest AI regulations, declared a national energy emergency, and dismantled supports for renewable energy. On the campaign trail, Trump had described AI as an “electricity-eating monster” (a phrase he meant as a compliment) and he was determined to feed the beast with massive amounts of gas and “beautiful” coal.

On his first full day back in office, Trump also announced Project Stargate, an AI infrastructure initiative in partnership with Oracle and OpenAI budgeted at $500 billion, almost twice as expensive as the Apollo

program, adjusted for inflation. He also signed a series of executive orders aimed at speeding up the construction of data-center infrastructure—everything from loans to committing federal land and resources to fast-tracked environmental reviews.

Under cover of these national emergency declarations and waived regulations, no part of the country has been left untouched by the data-center rollout, or the resource extraction supplying those centers with energy, metals, and minerals. Making the United States the "AI capital of the world" is now an official priority of the Environmental Protection Agency.

The US government, under Trump, is both paving the way for this frenzy and also taking a direct stake in it, signaling to markets that this industry is too big to fail. In 2025, the government secured stakes in a growing list of domestic and international mining companies vital to Silicon Valley. The Commerce Department also took a piece of Intel, the American chip giant, and struck a deal for a potential future equity share of Westinghouse, the nuclear power company. Meanwhile the Energy Department provided a $1 billion loan to restart one of the reactors at Three Mile Island, the site of the infamous 1979 nuclear meltdown and radiation leak, to power Microsoft's data centers.

Beyond direct subsidies and waived federal regulations, the Trump administration has also helped its new friends in Silicon Valley in other ways. In the absence of federal regulation, states including California, Colorado, New York, Texas, Tennessee, and Michigan have made moves to rein in AI, including by requiring tech companies to disclose safety standards, better protect children, and guard against deepfakes.

Unsurprisingly, these democratic exercises enraged the titans of Silicon Valley. "A 50-state patchwork is a startup killer," Marc Andreessen fumed on X. Within weeks of his complaint, the administration came to the rescue. In December 2025, Trump issued an executive order that declared most of those state and local laws a threat to "America's global A.I. dominance," banning them and subjecting them to legal action from Washington. With his AI and crypto czar David Sacks at his side, Trump pronounced that the rules on AI would come from only "one source"—the Oval Office. And those rules would be: keep going wild.

Every true gold rush needs its Wild West, a frontier zone of exception where the usual rules and laws do not apply. And that is precisely what Trump has delivered.

The trouble with these kinds of frenzies, of course, is that they invariably fuel irrationality, and so it is with the AI bubble. The vast build-out Trump has accelerated sits atop fundamental economic instability. According to estimates from McKinsey, global spending on data centers could reach $7 trillion by 2030. In the first three months of 2026, AI companies "shattered" the previous year's fundraising records, raking in almost $300 billion in investment. Much of that money went to Altman's OpenAI—no matter that the company's best projections do not forecast a positive cash flow until 2029, and many analysts consider that optimistic. In the words of analysts at Deutsche Bank: "No startup in history has operated with losses on anything approaching this scale. We are firmly in uncharted territory."

All of this has been a massive boon to the chip maker Nvidia, which in 2025 became the first company in history to surpass a valuation of $5 trillion, more than the GDP of any nation except the United States and China. And so it's hardly surprising that Nvidia has plowed billions back into AI companies in the hopes of keeping the bubble going, adding to a thicket of questionable accounting practices and circular deals: OpenAI buys chips from Nvidia, and Nvidia pledged to plow money back into OpenAI; OpenAI buys cloud computing from Oracle, which buys chips from Nvidia, which invests in OpenAI; Microsoft has invested billions in OpenAI while both Microsoft and Amazon have invested billions in Anthropic, which uses Amazon chips and relies on cloud infrastructure from Amazon, Microsoft, and Google.

None of this can hide the simple fact that for all the trillions in AI investments to make any kind of sense, sales for AI products would need to be in the trillions of dollars themselves. Just to pay off the interest on their capital expenditures, "you need roughly $800 billion of profit," according to calculations by IBM's CEO, Arvind Krishna. There was, he put it bluntly, "no way" for the numbers to make sense. And the clock is ticking, because the data centers are filled with Nvidia chips that have an estimated shelf life of about five years.

The largest and most troubled of the "hyperscale" energy and data centers is planned for a location near the Pantex nuclear weapons facility in

Carson County, Texas. To push through local opposition, its backers gave it a name designed to please the man in charge: “the Donald J. Trump Advanced Energy and Intelligence Campus.” They were well aware that Trump has chosen to bet his presidency on this house of cards. In 2025, AI-related companies made up an estimated 80 percent of US earnings gains, driving otherwise desultory economic growth, despite the lack of any clear path for scaled revenue generation.

The trouble, of course, is that most people remain highly ambivalent about AI. A 2025 Pew poll, for example, found that half of adults believed the technology would worsen people’s ability to form meaningful relationships and think creatively. Strikingly, young people—who reported more direct exposure to and familiarity with AI than their elders—were significantly more pessimistic. Only 17 percent of adults said they believed AI would have a positive impact on the United States over the next two decades.

This persistent public resistance is part of the reason many market watchers warn that a correction is likely coming—a reckoning that the Trump administration may prove unable to hold off, though they are certainly trying.

We Pay for Slop

Though there is no shortage of people willing to use free or very cheap chatbots, the one thing the AI sector still lacks—and it’s a very big thing—is a reliable supply of individual and corporate consumers willing to pay premium prices that would actually cover the trillions of dollars now being committed to the sprawling data-center buildout. Donald Trump and JD Vance have stepped in here as well, creating and protecting markets for AI products within the US government and around the world.

One of the end goals was articulated in February 2025 by Larry Ellison, the billionaire Oracle CEO and Trump loyalist: total integration of all personal data across government agencies. “We need to unify all of the national data, put it into a database where it’s easily consumable by the AI model, and then ask whatever question you like,” he told the World Government Summit in Dubai. With this access, he explained, “We can provide high-quality services, save the government vast amounts of money, our populations will be healthier, and the government will be spending less for better outcomes.”

He was describing the AI-powered digital surveillance state that many have warned about for decades—a world in which our most intimate information, from health records to shopping history to social media engagements, makes us thoroughly transparent to our corporate-state overseers. But not to worry, Ellison said (echoing authoritarians through the ages): all that watching will mean "citizens will be on their best behavior."

The first step was an assault on the administrative state, led most visibly by Musk at the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), and then more effectively by Russell Vought at the Office of Management and Budget. Musk's mission at DOGE, which continued after he left, seemed to be a combination of extracting data that might be used to train AI for private uses, and replacing government workers with algorithms, in a so-called AI-first strategy that often ended in fiasco. The Social Security Administration rushed two AI tools into service: an anti-fraud tool that delayed retirement claim processing by 25 percent, and a chatbot that made it significantly harder for seniors to get essential information. That the tech is sloppy and untested doesn't matter—a well-functioning administrative state is not on the end times fascist agenda.

It's the military, however, that may well prove to be AI's most reliable government customer. The Department of War has made integrating AI models into military operations "from the boardroom to the battlefield" a priority, signing deals with all the major AI firms and doling out contracts to Palantir and Anduril. Making his priorities clear, Secretary Hegseth plastered the Pentagon with AI-generated posters of himself featuring the words *I want you to use A.I.*

Not satisfied with the domestic opportunities, the administration has also taken it upon itself to foist these products on the rest of the world as the price of good relations. In his first months in office, Trump began traveling with a Silicon Valley entourage, bringing several tech executives to lunch with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the Saudi Arabian royal court in Riyadh, signaling their comfort with murderous autocrats, and then to dine with King Charles at Windsor Palace. The goals are to secure foreign investment, to sell US tech products directly to foreign governments, and to secure favorable rules for US tech giants in those countries. "I would define winning as the whole world consolidates around the American tech stack," David Sacks said on his own podcast, laying out his preferred policy outcome.

Many have played along. In 2025, the UK government signed a deal with OpenAI to use ChatGPT in the delivery of its basic services, “including in areas such as justice, defense and security, and education technology,” before expanding its “strategic partnerships” with Palantir, including a contract with the country’s armed forces. Anduril, meanwhile, signed new deals to develop autonomous weapons for “European defense.” The same year, Google abandoned its previous prohibition on using its AI for weapons and mass surveillance, removing constraints on existing agreements with both the American and Israeli militaries.

Meanwhile, any government imposing higher regulatory or taxation standards on US tech firms found itself in the administration’s crosshairs. Canada, under its new prime minister, Mark Carney, who had campaigned on a Canada-first nationalist platform, immediately caved, withdrawing a plan to impose a modest digital services tax after Trump threatened to cut off all trade negotiations.

In its first year, the returning Trump administration’s mostly unsuccessful attempts to end wars were often focused on what the tech sector needs, particularly the critical or rare earth minerals that go into building its banks of computing power. Trump understood the urgency, even if he was a little hazy on the lingo, as became clear when he repeatedly referred to the US desire for Ukraine’s “raw earth” minerals. “This has just about every component of the raw earth that we need for computers for all of the things we do,” he said, reporting on an early round of negotiations with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. “We’re going to be using that, taking it, using it for all of the things we do, including AI and including weapons and the military. And it’s really going to very much satisfy our needs.”

The same resource-hungry logic has fueled the Trump administration’s electoral interference and military interventions in Latin America, from Argentina to Honduras. After Trump declared that the United States had attacked Venezuela, and kidnapped its president, for the oil (and the gold and critical minerals…), it didn’t take long for Fox News’s Jesse Watters to connect the dots: the Democrats “are mad we are taking the oil?” he said. “What do you think this economy runs on, solar panels? Do you think we are going to win the AI race with China with windmills?”

When all of these measures are taken together, it becomes clear that advancing and defending Silicon Valley’s global AI revolution is an overarching mission of the US government, shaping its domestic and

foreign policies at every level. Alondra Nelson, an academic who served as a senior adviser to the Biden administration and to the United Nations on artificial intelligence, writes, “The Trump administration is not withdrawing from AI regulation; it is attempting to set the terms on which AI governance will be understood globally.”

The Authoritarian Stack

Ever since that bizarre Inauguration Day when the tech oligarchs lined up in seeming tribute to the returning leader, many have asked: What form of government is this exactly? “The Fascist State lays claim to rule in the economic field no less than in others,” Mussolini wrote in “The Doctrine of Fascism,” laying out the classic fascist formula of state power fused with industrial might. Fascism is always a protection racket for capital—it protects a select group of companies and interests, both from their workers and from competition; in return, those companies lend their support to the state’s projects.

Some have described Trump’s second term in office as a return to this arrangement, and that is true to a large extent. Trump has offered this kind of protection for the fossil-fuel sector—protecting its companies from the growing threat of competition from green energy, and offering them new markets. And he has extended protection to an astonishing degree to the tech giants.

But as we have seen, history does not repeat on a loop. It compounds. In Mussolini’s corporate-state merger a century ago, the state was the clear senior partner, serving corporate interests but dictating the terms. Today, after decades of pro-corporate rule that has dismantled so many systems of regulation and taxation, including restrictions on money in US politics, the state is a husk of its former self, and that was before Trump unleashed DOGE to gut it even further. The US president has clear economic obsessions that he directs from on high, of course, most notably his chaotic tariff regime, and he relishes using state power to punish corporations he considers insufficiently deferential and generous, and to reward those who pay proper tribute. (This gangsterism is the main reason Trump lacks the full backing of the American corporate class.) However, when it comes to the AI-forward companies that now carry the stock market, Washington has taken a distinctly collaborative approach, allowing the most aggressive

corners of Silicon Valley to largely set their own terms and write their own ticket.

For those at the center, the economic benefits of this arrangement are unparalleled, with Trump's high-tech boom sending a gusher of wealth up to those who already had the most. On the last day of 2025, as the first year of Trump's second term came to an end, *Bloomberg News* declared: "What a year for the ultra wealthy. The world's 500 richest people added a record $2.2 trillion to their collective fortunes in 2025 … And about a quarter of this year's gains went to just eight billionaires." Most of them, of course, in tech.

Needless to say, Trump made sure to get his cut. The "Forbes 400" rich list for 2025 estimated his net worth at $7.3 billion, nearly three times what it was in 2023. The magazine dubbed Trump's second term "the most lucrative presidency in American history" and credited much of this new wealth to the launch of the $TRUMP meme coin and his stake in the cryptocurrency company World Liberty Financial.

But the privilege of taking part in this gorging does have certain conditions, a set of rules that usually go unspoken but which reveal the nature of the new economic order. To take part, companies must abide by the administration's goals of so-called anti-wokeness. And they also must allow their technologies to be used to wage war on the administration's enemies, both foreign and domestic, and build out the all-seeing Shangri-La that Oracle's Larry Ellison helpfully described.

Many companies rushed to comply with the terms, only too eager to have an excuse to rein in their emboldened workers and to no longer have to feign concern about diversifying their staff or controlling disinformation on their platforms. But one company at the heart of the AI boom did put up some minor resistance.

When the Pentagon handed out four $200 million AI contracts, Anthropic eagerly accepted, embedding its chatbot Claude into a variety of military operations, despite its claim to be the most safety-conscious and ethical AI firm. Perhaps most significant, Anthropic collaborated closely with Palantir, allowing its tech to be used in its data-tracking and targeting systems. That was a fateful decision because in addition to providing "near real-time visibility" of immigrants to Trump's deportation machine, the

company has also, according to the financial news site TheStreet, “effectively become the Pentagon’s AI command center.”

Palantir is proud of its work with the U.S government, and its manic CEO, Alex Karp, has boasted that Palantir enables its military customers to “bring violence and death to our enemies.” When an Anthropic employee reached out to Palantir to find out if its tech had been used in the Venezuela operation, a confrontation ensued. Anthropic’s CEO, Dario Amodei, had insisted the company had two red lines: its AI could not be deployed for mass domestic surveillance and it could not be used in autonomous lethal weapons systems, which are weapons that can identify, track, and kill without involving a human. Amodei’s main objection was that his company’s model is not yet reliable enough to be trusted with unsupervised maiming and murdering.

The fact that Anthropic had any red lines at all set off a firestorm, both at Palantir and the Pentagon: clearly a woke company had infiltrated the US war machine. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth classified Anthropic as a “supply-chain risk to national security,” a designation that had never before been applied to an American company and bars other government contractors from doing business with it. One of the key officials involved in authoring Trump’s AI Action Plan did not mince words about the attempt to crush Anthropic: “That is fascism,” he said, breaking rank with his former colleagues. Meanwhile, OpenAI, whose president had just made a hefty donation to a Trump PAC, swooped in to take Anthropic’s place.

More than any prior incident, the dustup revealed the emergent properties of the end times fascist economy: its underlying quid pro quos and perhaps even its final destination. The most honest assessment of Anthropic’s transgression came from Palantir’s Karp. At a summit, “American Dynamism,” hosted by Andreessen Horowitz, Karp said the following: “If Silicon Valley believes we are going to take away everyone’s white-collar job … and you’re gonna screw the military—if you don’t think that’s gonna lead to nationalization of our technology, you’re retarded.”

The room laughed, at the candor and the crudeness. Perhaps because, for the first time, someone had articulated the deal that everyone enjoying the AI bonanza had made. And Karp said it without shame, complete with a defiant slur, to show just how little he cared about the old woke world. The deal goes like this: The tech elite has reached a new stratosphere of wealth thanks to a technology that they forecast will create an employment

Armageddon. The US government under Donald Trump and JD Vance has not only allowed Silicon Valley to engage in this impending economic violence against US citizens, it has aided and subsidized them every step of the way, allowing its principals to become unfathomably rich (as Karp can attest: after Trump's election win caused Palantir stock to surge, he became, by some measures, the highest paid CEO of a US publicly traded company in 2024).

However, in exchange for this largess, these companies must allow their fearsome tech to be used by the administration in whatever ways it wishes, including against alleged enemies foreign and domestic. Because, as Karp subsequently explained, "the only justification you could possibly have" for the economic hardship and disruption AI is unleashing is that it is necessary to win a war with China and protect "our ability to be American in the near term and the long term." (Karp would later claim that AI's coming disruptions will mainly hurt highly educated people, particularly women, "who vote mostly Democrat," not men working with their hands, who mostly vote Republican. It was unclear whether this dubious assertion was a genuine prediction or an attempt to assuage his benefactors in the Trump Administration.)

However, Karp warned, if the tech companies refused any part of this brutal bargain and decline to do the bidding of the security state, there would be real costs and possibly dire consequences. They will not only lose contracts but, as he predicted, they could be nationalized, their models seized from them just as they seized the intellectual property on the internet to train their models. Why can governments do this? For the reason the Palantir CEO started with: because governments have the right to protect their people and AI is waging an all-out war on their livelihoods. Karp's message to his colleagues was blunt: you can either take the people's jobs or say no to a fascist state, but you would be foolish to think you can do both.

Here is what even Karp didn't say out loud but is implicit in this arrangement: if your business model is destroying the employment prospects of entire classes of people, you had better get used to pointing cameras, sensors, and weaponized robots at them. Because something is going to need to be done to control and contain all those surplus, desperate, and angry humans, to keep them from coming for you. This is no abstract fear. In the span of one week in the spring of 2026, three people were

arrested for attacking Sam Altman's San Francisco home, and one Indianapolis city councilman found his house shot up with a handwritten note under the doormat: "NO DATA CENTERS."

And that, fundamentally, is why the tech right's visions are becoming increasingly dystopian. Karp supports lethal military alliances and killer robots defending ethnostates, while his partner Peter Thiel dreams of start-up cities open only to the super-rich. Their pal Balaji Srinivasan has laid out a blueprint for what he calls "tech-zionism," a vision of an apartheid-style San Francisco in which liberals are second-tier citizens or even ethnically cleansed. The visions differ, but they all reject any pretense of equality while requiring the complete merger of corporations and government as well as total reliance on AI systems.

Francesca Bria, an economist specializing in European digital regulations, calls this the "authoritarian stack," an emerging system of corporate-dominated postdemocratic control that "embeds itself through personnel pipelines, procurement loops, and technical architectures without which the state can no longer function." Palantir, in Bria's analysis, is emblematic of this new arrangement, with Trump's return to power bringing the company significantly closer to its stated goal of becoming "the default operating system for data across the US government."

As Bria explains, the authoritarian stack is being developed in the United States but is designed to be transnational. Already, it is in the process of being locked in as governments around the world sign away sovereignty to US tech giants, the way Musk's SpaceX satellite and rocket systems significantly shape US and foreign military capabilities. "Each new contract deepens the trap. Once Palantir becomes indispensable, once Anduril's drones are NATO standard, once nuclear facilities power AI that runs everything else——the transformation is irreversible," Bria explains. "Under the banner of 'patriotic tech,' this new bloc is building the infrastructure of control—clouds, AI, finance, drones, satellites … It is faster, ideological, and fully privatized: a regime where corporate boards, not public law, set the rules."

Instead of convincing voters, the authoritarian stack aims to control the infrastructure. It's the unilateral and technologically enabled change that Peter Thiel and Elon Musk dreamed of when they co-founded PayPal way back in the late 1990s. For them and many of their cohort, that was not the

final horizon. The end goal is pillaging the state to eventually ascend to a fully privatized domain, whether on this planet or another.

The State Is the Mine—and the Muscle

It's a dream now shared even by some heads of state. Consider the Board of Peace, which Trump launched on that Swiss mountaintop, and which closely resembles the tech oligarch's ideal of a start-up nation or freedom city.

The board is not merely a privatized alternative to the United Nations, as many have noted, but something more radical. Though he used his presidential power (with Security Council blessing) to create it, the board was set up not as part of the US government, but as a family business, with the patriarch at the top, and relatives, business partners, and cronies on the "executive council." That means Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, as well as Steve Witkoff, whose sons co-founded, with Trump's own sons, the aforementioned World Liberty Financial. According to the charter, Trump will serve as chairman and hold "final authority" indefinitely, even after leaving the White House.

Not only did he raise more than $7 billion from member nations, he gave the board $10 billion from the American treasury—more than twice as much as the United States then owed the United Nations in overdue membership fees.

The board's founding plan to rebuild Gaza as a futuristic smart city almost precisely echoed the kinds of ideas heard from speakers at Hereticon, where Thiel and his minions dreamed of gated, shiny cities where constitutional rights are replaced by Terms of Service and the ultrarich can live as ubermenschen. In 2024, Curtis Yarvin floated the idea that Gaza could become "an entirely new charter city on humanity's oldest ocean, sublime real estate with an absolutely perfect, Apple-quality government." (Later he suggested calling it Gaza, Inc.) But Theil and Yarvin were just spitballing, lacking the power to turn their visions into law. With the Board of Peace and "New Gaza," Trump has shown that he and his family intend to play a central part in ushering in this fully privatized exodus.

It is very likely a fantasy, but one that tells us a great deal about how key players inside the end times fascism alliance view existing nation-states. Our governments are understood by them less as valued partners

than as mine sites, exploited by specific corporate interests and their billionaire (and soon to be trillionaire) executives. For Trump and Thiel, states are essential sites of extraction—they have money, rich datasets to train AI, and they dole out lucrative contracts. But their most valuable function may turn out to be the power to hand private actors the legal right to set up their own exclusive, members-only fiefdoms—the zones of "escape" and total market freedom that far-right figures have long desired.

The desire for bunkered escape points to a recurring dynamic within fascist societies, one well articulated by the scholar of authoritarianism Ruth Ben-Ghiat: "The more corrupt, violent, and hated these types of leaders become, the more they have this impulse to build these palaces and bunkers and compounds so they can protect themselves. Because they end up hiding out from their people."

Bunker Revenge Fantasies

Can this massive heist work? For supposedly smart men, Trump's Silicon Valley "super geniuses," as he likes to call them, haven't kept their backup plans particularly well hidden. It was thanks to Thiel that most of us first heard about the existence of billionaire bunkers. News started to leak a decade ago about his plan to hole up in New Zealand should the world go up in flames. And it was Sam Altman—then also a virtual unknown—who spilled the beans to a *New Yorker* reporter in 2016. While boasting of his own hobby of survival prepping ("I have guns, gold, potassium iodide, antibiotics, batteries, water, gas masks from the Israeli Defense Force, and a big patch of land in Big Sur I can fly to"), Altman mentioned a Plan B. Should a global disaster strike, he was going to head off to Thiel's sanctuary in New Zealand.

Since then, hearing about billionaire preppers has become just another part of being alive in the age of oligarchy and serial disasters. Mark Zuckerberg has been building a $300 million compound with an underground shelter with a blast-resistant door on Kauai. Bezos recently purchased three properties on an artificial island off Miami known as "Bunker Island" which bills itself as "America's most secure community" (its official name is Indian Creek, and Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner also have a place there). The Anduril co-founder Trae Stephens recommends decommissioned Cold War missile silos. Musk, of course,

seems to be banking on space colonization, though he has shifted his sights, of late, from Mars to the Moon.

However fantastical, the escape plans that consume our elites tell us that these men are terrified of the world they are making, and with good reason. The rest of us, meanwhile, seem particularly taken with the spectacular ways those costly bunkers could backfire on the men who own them. Imagining such gruesome outcomes drives the plot lines of dozens of hours of streaming entertainment.

The billionaires could turn on and try to kill one another (HBO's *Mountainhead*); the AI that runs the bunker in Iceland could start murdering people (FX's *A Murder at the End of the World*); the bunker's own security guards could be the killers (Hulu's *Paradise*); the space monsters could eat the billionaires once they get to their escape planet (Netflix's *Don't Look Up*). Alternately, a seemingly world-ending event could have been staged as part of an elaborate class-war hoax to use deepfakes to steal the superrich's ill-gotten gains while they are trapped inside their bunker (the plot of Netflix Spain's *Billionaires' Bunker*). There are others. The stories differ but the cathartic message recurs: these billionaires may think they are safe in their gilded bunkers, but there is no escaping the hell they are unleashing.

Of all the bunkered futures that Hollywood has helped us imagine in recent years, the one we keep returning to is *Elysium*, the 2013 dystopian thriller directed by Neill Blomkamp. Inspired by his childhood in South Africa, it imagines a world in which the prosperous hover on a luxurious space station just beyond Earth's atmosphere, where they enjoy terraformed nature, abundant food and water, as well as medical devices that can cure any ailment with a quick scan. Down below, the planet had been reduced to a giant favela: parched, immiserated, radiated, intensely surveilled, and policed by bullying droids that look eerily like Musk's Tesla Optimus robots.

Everyone dreams of ascending to Elysium, especially the sick and injured. But Elysium is a gated community in the sky, protected by a highly fortressed and militarized border. If an unauthorized ship tries to approach, its defense secretary, played by Jodie Foster, gives the order "Shoot them down"—as if they were Palestinians nearing the apartheid wall in Gaza, or fishing boats supposedly carrying fentanyl in the Caribbean.

At the time of its release, Blomkamp was explicit that the film was less sci-fi than cinema verité. "This isn't science fiction. This is today. This is

now.” Rewatching it more than twelve years later, significantly deeper into both the climate crisis and the billionaire space race, that assessment lands harder. Musk and Bezos aren’t building rocket ships that are seriously going to colonize the stars, but we can imagine an airborne Próspera: a gated community/med spa floating just above the planet they are currently covering with data centers. Similarly, if we consider breakthroughs in biotech alongside the fact that the most basic healthcare is increasingly out of reach for working people, Blomkamp’s depiction of health apartheid also seems far more likely than a future in which AI liberates rich and poor alike from toil and disease.

This is the real reason the tech right is so intensely focused on a set of ideas and policies related to human hierarchy and cognitive supremacy—biohacking, designer babies, and novel life-extension therapies. They are engaged in human sorting. This supremacist dream, in turn, is intimately entangled with the movement’s open embrace of gamer-inspired autonomous weaponry and total surveillance, as well as the edgelord culture that goes along with it—these are the lethal tools this group of supposedly superior beings intends to use to protect themselves from the rest of us.

There is a reason they are scared. A resistance movement is already rising up against this bleak future, spreading more rapidly than any comparable effort we have seen in our lifetimes. It is an intensely earthly and rooted movement, springing up from the communities that have been selected to house the most vital pieces of AI infrastructure. That’s what we saw when we visited a city that has found itself at the center of an apocalyptic gold rush it never invited. A city that has made history many times before: Memphis, Tennessee.

5

Musk in Memphis

From “I Am a Man” to I Am Alive

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look at thousands of working people displaced from their jobs with reduced incomes as a result of automation while the profits of the employers remain intact, and say: “This is not just.”
—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., 1967

I predict that many of your species will come to regard me as God.
—THE SUPERCOMPUTER IN *COLOSSUS*, 1966

When Elon Musk created xAI in 2023, he found himself in the place he most despised: behind. Eight years prior, he had helped Sam Altman found OpenAI, before the two had a falling-out; now OpenAI’s game-changing product, ChatGPT, dominated the field. That meant the world’s richest man was stuck playing catch-up. The way he saw it, he needed to build the largest computer the world had ever known—and he needed to build it fast.

He would call it Colossus. The name pays homage to a trilogy of 1960s and ’70s science fiction novels in which an autonomous supercomputer called Colossus turns on humanity and begins a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. That should have been the first clue that Musk and his machine might not make ideal neighbors.

In the spring of 2024, Musk and xAI considered several potential locations for Colossus. It came down to identifying the place best positioned to meet their top three needs. The need for water, to cool the machines. The need for energy, to power the machines. And the need for speed, to get the supercomputer up and running much faster than anyone in the industry had managed so far. For Musk, a key part of achieving that speed would be finding a location that already had a large empty factory, in relatively good shape, so he wouldn’t have to waste time building his own structure from scratch.

In March 2024, after reviewing the options, the world's richest man declared, "We're going to haul ass in Memphis." That, at least, is how Ted Townsend, president of the Greater Memphis Chamber of Commerce, remembers the moment when Musk accepted its package of enticements. This included a great deal on a huge empty factory that had once made home appliances and employed more than seven hundred workers. And as ProPublica reported, the chamber also provided a dedicated five-member "xAI special operations team" to ensure "round-the-clock concierge service" and "seamless execution of the company's rapid expansion plans." Though Memphis is not a tech capital like San Francisco or Seattle, the chamber was determined to show that it could move at "lightning speed" to become "a global nexus where velocity meets potency."

The catch in all of this potency and velocity was that no one outside the inner circle of real estate companies and utilities could know the details—not the people who would soon be living next door to the supercomputer, and not the members of the Memphis City Council, who were elected to represent the interests of those residents. There were no public hearings and no opportunities for input. The Colossus deal was negotiated under tight cover of NDAs, concealed from the city council and community.

Computer construction began almost immediately, thanks in part to Musk reportedly playing fast and loose with Nvidia chips, which were in short supply: rather than wait in line, he redirected chips destined for Tesla factories to Memphis, leading to accusations that he was sabotaging the publicly traded car company to benefit his private AI start-up. The CEO justified his actions by claiming that "Telsa had no place to send the Nvidia chips to turn them on, so they would have just sat in a warehouse." He got away with it, as he so often does, and Musk would later boast that he had completed in 122 days what would have taken his competitors two years to pull off.

Colossus's primary use would be to train Grok, the anti-woke chatbot that is now embedded in Musk's social media platform X, formerly Twitter, as well as Grok's image generator, which can instantly turn prompts like "Dog drinking tea in a library" into a realistic image of a bookish golden retriever. Musk has said that xAI will one day fill romantic longings (Grok has special sexy chatbots for that), replace federal workers (DOGE was just the beginning), and transform what qualifies as true (thus Grok and Grokipedia). He predicts that the technology will soon guide his Optimus

robots as they manufacture the world's goods, steer fleets of self-driving Teslas as they distribute their products, and help run his SpaceX rockets.

Trump had correctly identified AI as "an electricity-eating monster." In Colossus, with its row after row of white "compute halls," and thick black pipes underneath for cooling, that monster was at its most ravenous. The question was: What kind of electricity would this monster eat?

Musk spent much of his career positioning himself as the man who was going to get the world off fossil fuels, thanks to his solar farms, battery bars, and electric cars. When he describes the robot future he is building, he still evokes a world run on clean tech—one where the computers, suspended in orbit, are powered by the sun, or by small fusion reactors.

In Memphis, however, Musk was in such a rush to catch and surpass OpenAI, Google, and Anthropic that all that went out the window. His monster would eat the kind of electricity that he could get most rapidly and most powerfully. That meant methane gas, an extra-potent fossil fuel.

At one point, to keep the first supercomputer and its approximately 300,000 graphics processing units running, Musk was operating thirty-five methane gas turbines, collectively generating enough energy to power roughly 280,000 Memphis homes.

The massive roaring turbines were essentially portable industrial generators, of the kind that would normally be used as emergency backup for a hospital or in a remote location where no power lines exist. By rigging these machines together, Musk had essentially built what Amanda Garcia, a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC) involved in litigation against xAI, called an "unpermitted power plant," and one that was spewing formaldehyde and nitrogen oxides linked to cancers and respiratory illnesses into nearby communities. The extent of Musk's power generation was confirmed only because the SELC partnered with a group of volunteer pilots to conduct aerial surveys. They flew over the site to gather thermal imaging that contradicted official claims that most of the turbines were sitting idle. Experts in air pollution said they had never before seen temporary methane generators used on that scale.

Within months of Colossus 1 coming online, Musk began construction on a second location, only a few miles away. Dubbed Colossus 2, it was double the size of its predecessor and built just as rapidly; this one consumed enough energy to power almost two million homes and, once again, thermal imaging once again showed the operation of gas turbines.

Soon, Musk announced a third supercomputer, which he dubbed "Macrohardrr," a juvenile troll of Microsoft, whose close partnership with OpenAI made the company Musk's nemesis. This time, the roar from the eighteen methane gas turbines in operation was so deafening that nearby residents have reportedly considered moving. The budget for the three data centers ballooned to nearly $40 billion—a huge sum, even by Musk's profligate standards.

The richest man in the world may have started late, but as he posted on X, now promoting Grok with every post:

> I resisted AI for too long
> Living in denial
> Now it is game on.

Resisting the Energy Vampires

Once Memphis residents caught up to Musk's activities, that game was also on. Some of the backlash was due to the location he chose. Colossus was built adjacent to Boxtown, a working-class, majority-Black neighborhood in southwest Memphis where poverty rates are double the city's average.

A long line of companies has chosen to pollute the lands near Boxtown—a painful history etched in the internal organs of its residents, and in the graveyards where they are buried. Shelby County, where Memphis and Boxtown are located, leads the state in childhood asthma-related emergency room visits and youth asthma rates, and Boxtown itself has cancer rates that are four times the national average. The American Lung Association recently gave the neighborhood's air quality an "F" rating.

Because of this legacy, southwest Memphis has spawned several powerful environmental justice organizations, including Memphis Community Against Pollution. When its executive director, KeShaun Pearson, heard that Elon Musk had built the world's largest supercomputer right next door, and done so under cover of NDAs, he was livid. "To come into our city, and build this gigantic factory, without any public input or any public meetings, it's just irresponsible," he told *Forbes*. "It feels like the decision has been made for us. It's also just really a callous representation of how they see the people in Memphis." Which is to say, Musk did not seem to see them at all.

Local meetings were suddenly overrun with furious residents. Pearl Walker, one of the city councillors kept in the dark about xAI's plans, was

among those demanding answers. “People want to know, what’s going to happen? Is water going to be used up or contaminated, is energy going to be used up, will we have rolling blackouts?”

There were other questions too. Like: Why did the air smell “like rotten cabbage,” as seventy-six-year-old Easter Knox put it. And what had the city promised to xAI to lure them to Memphis—and what had the company promised in return?

We visited Memphis a year into the uprising. KeShaun Pearson showed us around Boxtown, with its streets lined with humble and well-cared-for single-family brick homes, many with lovingly tended gardens and neatly trimmed lawns. The son of a preacher and schoolteacher whose family goes back generations in the area, Pearson gave us a crash course in Boxtown history. It’s a uniquely American story, entangled with the long struggle for Black liberation and civil rights.

Boxtown’s name comes from the scraps of old boxcars that formerly enslaved people once salvaged from the rail yards to build their community. Abandoned railcars became shacks, while the sides of boxcars became walls. Though next door to Memphis, its residents lived a mostly rural life for many years, growing their own vegetables and fishing in the Mississippi River.

“Boxtown is one of the most beautiful places,” Pearson tells us, and everyone we encounter seems to share that pride of place. Yes, it has challenges, plenty of them. But the water from the aquifer is clean, cold, and sweet; many red maples, oaks, and sycamores still provide shade, and there are still carp and catfish to catch in the Mississippi. Tucked above a bend in that river, Boxtown remains, in many ways, an old-fashioned kind of place—a place where young adults like Pearson, who is in his early thirties, check in on their elders, and where churches are packed on Sundays.

Pearson is a little old-fashioned too. He always looks fresh from the barber and dresses in slim-tailored suits and ties that recall the young civil rights organizers of the 1960s. It’s a history he draws on daily in his work as a community organizer, often quoting Martin Luther King Jr., who once said, “The movement lives or dies in Memphis.”

For Pearson, Boxtown’s current struggle to be treated with dignity by a tech giant is connected to the struggle that brought King to Memphis in 1968. The civil rights leader was there to support a thousand Black

sanitation workers who had been on strike for months. Catalyzed by the deaths of two of their fellow workers, who had been crushed by their garbage truck, the strikers demanded safer conditions, fair wages, overtime, and the right to join a union.

During the strike, the workers walked the streets of downtown Memphis wearing placards that declared “I AM A MAN”—generating one of the most iconic images of the civil rights era. “At the heart of racism is the idea that a man is not a man, that a person is not a person,” explained Reverend James Lawson, chair of the strike committee and a close associate of King’s. These racist claims were lies, Lawson told the strikers. “You are human beings. You are men. You deserve dignity.”

King traveled to Memphis repeatedly during the strike, marching alongside the workers and addressing large crowds. In the rage and shock after he was assassinated at Memphis’s Lorraine Hotel in April, the Memphis sanitation workers redoubled their efforts, now supported by King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, who led a massive march to Memphis. Soon after, the strikers won their demands, a landmark victory for both labor and civil rights.

The sanitation strike is considered by many to be the beginning of the US environmental justice movement, since the workers were fighting to improve conditions that included exposure to toxic materials. Today, Pearson points out that although the strikers succeeded in improving their working conditions, their deeper call—for Black people to be treated as full human beings with equal rights—was never resolved. That was certainly true in Boxtown, which up until the 1970s still did not have access to Memphis’s electricity grid or to running water; many homes lacked indoor plumbing, power, or postal service into the 1980s.

As we toured the neighborhood’s industrial outskirts, Pearson explained that, like many towns built by formerly enslaved people, Boxtown was originally “unincorporated,” not recognized as a municipality. Along with the legacy of redlining, that meant there were few rules preventing polluting industries from setting up right next to residential homes and schools. Which is precisely what happened. All over the United States—including farther down the Mississippi in Louisiana’s “cancer alley”—pesticide and chemical companies, as well as coal plants and oil refineries, deliberately built next to unincorporated Black towns to skirt regulations.

These communities were “sacrifice zones,” Pearson told us, places where people and the natural environment were burdened with extra-heavy loads of toxins and pollution, invariably in the name of advancing progress and prosperity somewhere else. This kind of environmental racism is not abstract for Pearson, it’s intimate and woven into every aspect of his family life. He was born prematurely and with respiratory challenges, both of his grandmothers died of cancer when they were in their early sixties, and he describes a childhood surrounded by kids who regularly missed school because of asthma. Growing up in a sacrifice zone, he said, “means constantly going to funerals. Having to take your aunt to dialysis after dropping off your other aunt for her cancer treatment.”

In 2020, something happened that moved the soft-spoken Pearson to become an outspoken activist. Along with his family and neighbors, he learned that two energy companies planned to run a crude-oil pipeline right through their water aquifer and backyards, confident that Boxtown’s poverty would make its residents easy to buy off. Instead, the neighborhood came together to form Memphis Community Against Pollution (MCAP, originally Memphis Community Against the Pipeline). KeShaun’s firecracker of a younger brother Justin J. Pearson was one of its first leaders. He would go on to become one of the youngest people elected to the Tennessee House of Representative and gain national recognition in 2023 as a member of the Tennessee Three, a group of state representatives expelled from the chamber by their colleagues for protesting gun violence. (Pearson and one of the others was duly returned to office by voters.)

Against the odds, MCAP succeeded in stopping the oil pipeline, and then went on to play a major role in winning the first federal limits on the cancer-causing chemical ethylene oxide, leading a major polluter to close its doors. Pointing to these and other victories, KeShaun Pearson observed that Boxtown is a place that has faced continuous exploitation—but it also has put up “continuous resistance.”

Yet Boxtown has never before come up against an opponent quite like Elon Musk. Drawing on the prophetic tradition in which he was raised, KeShaun describes the man claiming to be summoning a digital god as more than just another corporate polluter showing up in southwest Memphis to make a quick buck. He sees Musk as something more nefarious: “A false prophet.” A man who preached “from the rooftops” for decades about climate change and renewable energy, only to spew clouds of

toxic fossil fuels into a poor Black neighborhood where far too many of its people are already gasping for air.

As for what Musk is building, KeShaun has a name for that too. “I call it the energy vampire,” he said, as we drove past the seemingly endless white exterior of Colossus 1. For Pearson, AI is a vampire because it feeds off life—energy, but also water, land, and air. And, like an undead predator, it leaves death behind—field after field of metal boxes filled with blinking lights that belch pollution. Or, as his brother Justin puts it, “Our lives and our lungs are being sacrificed on the altar of their capitalistic exploitation.”

The City of Memphis disagrees. It assured residents that xAI would bring hundreds of much-needed jobs, while helping to turn the city into a high-tech hub like Austin. Mayor Paul Young said Colossus “represents a tremendous opportunity, an opportunity for us to take our economy to the next level.”

KeShaun Pearson shook his head, insisting it was all smoke and mirrors. In front of Colossus, we craned our necks for signs of life. There were some vehicles behind the fencing, but for a structure larger than most commercial airport hangers, there were surprisingly few signs of human activity. Now that the center was up and running, it required very little on-site work. Despite promises of a local job bonanza, most high-skilled workers had been brought in from out of state.

Pearson had been tracking local listings, and he had found postings for only a handful of mostly low-wage janitorial and security positions. “It is cruel to use the myth of economic prosperity to push forward a project that is only going to bring pain and pollution,” he told us. After we met, news reports came out that the data-center operators are experimenting with replacing human security guards with robot dogs. “The robot obviously doesn’t get sick or go on vacation and things like that,” an executive from Ghost Robotics told *Business Insider*.

Factories Without People

Most often, structures like Colossus are referred to as data centers, but Nvidia’s founder and CEO, the leather-jacketed Jensen Huang, insists that they should be called “AI factories” instead. “AI is now infrastructure,” he says, “and this infrastructure, just like the internet, just like electricity, needs factories.”

He has a point. The low, windowless, rectangular buildings that house his chips are not simply storing our old emails and photos, the way we used to imagine that fluffy-sounding thing called “the cloud.” The whole point of generative AI is that it is generating—its computers are answering our questions, fulfilling our fantasies, coding our websites, making videos in response to our prompts, and booking our dentist appointments. Supercomputers like Colossus are generating. If a factory is a factory because it makes things, rather than simply stores them, then these boxes filled with computers are indeed factories.

But unlike the factories of the past, the humans in AI factories are eerily missing. Humans build the structures (unless they were already built), and humans assemble the racks that hold the computers, and other humans build those computers (at least for now), and humans wrote the code that the computers are running (though that is changing rapidly). But once the whole thing is up and running, it’s essentially just a giant humming machine, in need of only minor monitoring and maintenance.

In November 2025, Meta announced it was building a $1 billion data center in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. In the past, an industrial investment of that size could have yielded thousands of family-supporting, unionized jobs. In this case, state officials estimated that it might produce a hundred jobs, and even that was very likely an overstatement. As for the AI products that the data factories are producing, they are sold to companies on the promise that their impressive processing and speedy output will be able to replace substantial numbers of the companies’ workers. In February 2026, the Microsoft AI CEO, Mustafa Suleyman, predicted that most white-collar work “will be fully automated by an AI within the next twelve to eighteen months.”

That is an exaggeration, but the threat is real. Unsurprisingly, tech companies are on the cutting edge of the layoffs. In late 2025, Amazon announced immediate plans to eliminate fourteen thousand mainly white-collar jobs as part of a larger strategic investment in AI-driven efficiency (or “staying nimble,” as the company’s blog put it). The ultimate goal, internal documents revealed, is to automate 75 percent of its operations and save the company from having to fill an additional six hundred thousand positions. Amazon is testing this model in Shreveport, Louisiana, where one automation-forward warehouse is on track to reduce human labor by 50 percent. Salesforce CEO Mark Benioff, meanwhile, has boasted that AI is

already doing half of the work at his company; he recently terminated four thousand customer support roles because he “needs less heads.” In 2026, Oracle announced mass layoffs as it shifted resources to prioritize data center investment, with up to thirty thousand people potentially facing termination.

Young people entering fields from animation to law to computer programming are finding a great many locked doors as a result of this new technology, coupled with a rocky economy. A 2025 Stanford study found that workers between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-five have experienced a 13 percent relative decline in employment since 2022 in the most AI-exposed lines of work (areas like customer service, software development, and accounting). More than a third of entry-level jobs were wiped out over almost the same period. No wonder, then, that for many young people, the huge investments governments, universities, and corporations are making in artificial intelligence feel like just one more way that their futures are being stolen out from them, not unlike the climate crisis.

These bleak prospects help explain why, in San Francisco and elsewhere, young techies grind around the clock, desperate to avoid being part of the “permanent underclass” they believe AGI will soon usher in. Some behave like members of millenarian cults who give away their possessions convinced the world is about to end, questioning whether it’s even worth continuing to develop new skills or send their kids to school: If AI is going to be smarter than any human, why would anyone bother to learn?

These reactions may be overblown, but the anti-human math is clear. In addition to not creating new local jobs in any significant numbers, AI data centers are eliminating a growing number of jobs that currently *do* exist, all over the country and around the world, feeding an already pervasive sense of anxiety and desperation. It remains to be seen whether the AI being generated is good enough to eliminate as many jobs as its inventors and hype men hope. The debates on this are live and unsettled, and the most grandiose predictions (like Microsoft’s ominous projections of a white-collar wipeout in a year) are surely inflated.

Still, we should not lose sight of the fact that companies are projected to spend trillions of dollars to build these vast AI factories based on the promise of AI being a giant human elimination machine, and the fact that

employers are eternally looking for ways to reduce labor costs and wring more value from their workers. As Elon Musk says, in the future he envisions, work will be “optional.”

That makes factories like the ones he built in Memphis something new in industrial history. Because industrialization has always been a bargain, and a contested one at that: communities allow companies to build their factories, their plants, and their mines, knowing that they very often increase pollution and put a strain on local resources. They make these sacrifices because people have gotten something in return: jobs and taxes and products that consumers will pay for.

Very little of this holds true for AI. Thanks to the deregulation frenzy that Trump and Vance have overseen, AI factories pay minimal taxes, and since they don’t employ many people, their workers don’t spread much money around their communities. As for making products consumers will pay for, that’s an open question— the business press is crowded with warnings about an AI market bubble.

Ever since the free-trade era led to rapid deindustrialization in the Global North, the empty, shuttered factory has been a symbol of economic and social pain—the high cost of globalization and of cheap consumer goods. Now, thanks to Colossus in Memphis, we have another, stranger symbol for the era of AI: a reopened factory filled not with workers but with desolate racks of computers, pipes, and fiber-optic cables. A ghost factory, destined to make more ghost towns.

“Breathe Easy, Memphis!”

For KeShaun Pearson, the most shocking part of xAI’s arrival has been the company’s near-total refusal to engage seriously with questions about health. Independent researchers found that nitrogen dioxide, a known health risk and respiratory irritant, had spiked by as much as 79 percent in xAI’s first months of operation—a deeply alarming finding.

Rather than address those concerns, residents received anonymous mailers comparing xAI’s emissions to those of “a few delivery trucks or a commercial boiler” and instructing them to “Breathe Easy, Memphis!”

In April 2025, tensions reached a boiling point. Word got out that xAI was finally going to speak to members of the public at a Health Department meeting about an application for fifteen “temporary” gas turbine permits, which would be operational until January 2027. Hundreds of residents

crowded into the auditorium at Fairley High School, determined to give the company a piece of their mind. No signs were allowed inside but at least one resident was wearing an “Eat the Rich” T-shirt.

Brent Mayo, xAI’s site leader in Memphis, took to the lectern in a black T-shirt and baseball hat, both emblazoned with the company’s white logo. Instead of taking questions, he read a single page-long statement: “xAI is committed to meeting the highest standard for emissions. xAl is going above and beyond the required emission control requirements.” His monotone was barely audible over the boos and shouts. Once completed, Mayo, an ex–oil rig worker who has become one of Musk’s top lieutenants, walked out of the auditorium, declining to listen to anyone else speak.

All that was left for residents was to vent their frustration to local health officials and members of the Greater Memphis Chamber, which, for two more hours, many chose to do.

“Get a backbone!” one attendee shouted at the silent officials, to raucous cheers.

“It will be years of public officials denying what has happened while we watch our elders die and our children suffer,” another local warned. “That will be Memphis’s future if we don’t stop xAI.”

“I can’t breathe at home, it smells like gas outside,” a young woman said, asthma inhaler in hand. “How come I can’t breathe at home and y’all get to breathe at home?”

KeShaun Pearson was on hand, offering a steadying arm to speakers who were overcome with emotion. His brother Justin was there too, preparing to run for the US Congress, in part to bring the issue of polluting data centers to Washington, D.C.

Whenever the community rallies or meets to talk about xAI, there are always speakers who place the current struggle inside the long history of those that came before them, going back to Boxtown’s original founders, who endured the tyrannies of enslavement and sharecropping and made homes and community out of the debris that others had left behind.

This rootedness exists in sharp contrast with xAI and all that it stands for: Musk didn’t come to Memphis for its rich history, its human ingenuity, or the jazz on Beale Street. All he saw was a low-cost prebuilt container for his whirring machines. And it isn’t just Memphis that Musk fails to appreciate: the whole goal of Colossus is to create a fully synthetic world to

simulate and replace the real one, and to help steer his rocket ships to some fantasy of life in space.

This is why KeShaun Pearson sees the fight against Colossus as being about something even deeper than air quality and local democracy, though both matter a great deal. There is, he says, a “spiritual disconnection” behind the rush to roll out generative AI despite its glaring harms. You have to be profoundly disassociated, he reflected, to want to turn the world into “a wasteland of data centers” and feel entitled to force more vulnerable people to suffer the consequences. Elon Musk was just one vivid example of a widespread ethical crisis that he felt stemmed, fundamentally, from the tech elite’s lack of connection to place.

“Elon Musk has said that he believes in going to Mars. He believes that the ultrawealthy will escape any cataclysmic, catastrophic outcomes from climate change that we have to live with—that poor people will have to live with,” Pearson told us. But the reality is that even if Musk never achieves his space colonization dream, he continued, oligarchs like him already live on a different planet from the working- and middle-class people they seem so willing to poison and abandon. “They don’t live in the same world as we do, or have the same concerns that we have or operate with the same levels of empathy or the proximity to other people’s pain,” Pearson continued. In a sense, they exist in a state of semi-rapture already, flying private from one mansion to another, or, in Musk’s case, enjoying the manicured grounds of one of his two private Texas towns.

Pearson was describing the destructive feedback loop that lies at the heart of this economic frenzy. The more time the superrich spend isolated in their bunkered bubbles, the less connected they are to the physical world; the less connected they are to the world, the more prepared they are to sacrifice it all for their end times fever dreams.

Pausing as he tried to understand such an alien mindset, Pearson, an organizer committed to collective liberation, finally found the words. It’s the attitude that, no matter what others have to endure, “I will be saved.” And that is the very essence of end times fascism.

What Climate Crisis?

Pearson is right: the race among the tech titans to dominate generative artificial intelligence has created a hunger for energy, water, and land that is positively vampiric. And Musk is far from the only billionaire or tech giant

who is feasting. Nor is he the only one, who, not so long ago, went to great lengths to present his particular form of capitalism as climate-friendly and sustainable, a new breed of company untethered to the dirty industries of the past.

In 2020, in response to public pressure, Microsoft announced that it was committed to a decarbonization “moonshot” in a decade. That same year, Jeff Bezos launched the Bezos Earth Fund, which proudly touted the goal of being “the largest philanthropic commitment ever to fight climate change and protect nature”; when he bought naming rights to a sports stadium in Seattle, he called it the Climate Pledge Arena, which still bills itself as “the most progressive, responsible, and sustainable arena in the world.” When Trump pulled out of the Paris Agreement the tech titans were vocal in condemning the move, especially Mark Zuckerberg, who decried it as “bad for the environment, bad for the economy, and it puts our children’s future at risk.”

Google was the sector’s most outspoken leader. In 2020, CEO Pichai appeared in a video, filmed outdoors amid lush greenery, and spoke of the horrors of climate change, including “historic wildfires” and “devastating flooding in many parts of the world,” and shared that the company wanted to lead the charge to be carbon-free. It was a “moonshot,” but one they were committed to achieving.

As each of these companies entered the AI arms race, this climate talk was mostly abandoned, first gradually and then decisively. Like Musk, these executives understood that the technology’s resource hunger was simply incompatible with any of the environmental values or pledges they had espoused in the past. And so, with head-spinning speed, Silicon Valley’s tech barons have tossed out their climate idealism, hell-bent on sacrificing this world’s real and precious resources on the altar of a vampiric, virtual realm.

Google removed its once-prominent net-zero pledge from its sustainability website; buried in its 2025 Environmental Report, the company provided insight into the rationale. “Running the global infrastructure behind our products and services, including AI, takes considerable energy,” it stated. AI expansion, the authors confessed, was simply not compatible with previous net-zero commitments. “While we remain committed to our climate moonshots, it’s become clear that

achieving them is now more complex and challenging across every level—from local to global."

An independent investigation by the Kairos Fellowship painted an even bleaker picture. Google had actually underestimated its carbon usage. Between 2019 and 2024, Google's carbon emissions actually went up by 65 percent, not 51 percent as the company claimed. Between 2023 and 2024 alone, Google saw a 26 percent increase in emissions. The main culprit? AI.

In April, two months before the pledge was scrubbed, Ruth Porat, president and chief investment officer of Google and Alphabet, attended an AI conference in Washington, D.C. Trump's interior secretary, Doug Burgum, had spoken earlier in the day. He denounced Silicon Valley's "climate extremist agenda" and praised coal. When it was Porat's turn to speak, she called Burgum's take "fantastic," before explaining, "I think it is very clear that to realize the potential of AI, you have to have the power to deliver it."

On October 27, 2025, Microsoft's founder Bill Gates, who published a book called *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* in 2021, released a memo declaring that the risks of climate change had been overblown. It was the same day OpenAI officially transitioned from a nonprofit to a for-profit company—one in which Microsoft owned a 27 percent stake. The AI boom had made Microsoft the second most valuable company on earth, trailing only Nvidia.

Mere hours after Gates's memo was released, Hurricane Melissa, tied for the strongest Atlantic hurricane ever to strike land, devastated stretches of Jamaica, its ferocious winds fueled by water heated by global warming. But never mind that. The moment of Big Tech claiming to save the world had passed. It was time to consume it.

These companies were never the committed green champions of their public relations and marketing materials. Still, the timing of the industry's about-face could not have been worse. At the very moment when the transition to renewables was finally looking decisive, and coal seemed to be dying out, the dirtiest and deadliest sources of planet-warming power have found a new lease on life. "Feeding data centers with fossil fuels is taking the climate crisis we have now and blowing it up like the Incredible Hulk," said John Fleming, a scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity. "A gas-fed AI boom is going to hurdle us past any chance of keeping to our climate goal or maintaining a safe and healthy future for our planet."

Fear not, though. The companies behind the AI gold rush have an answer for their critics: AI will “fix” the climate crisis, even as it makes it worse. Microsoft’s chief sustainability officer put the reasoning in its most contorted and unintentionally comic terms: “In 2020, Microsoft leaders referred to our sustainability goals as a ‘moonshot,’ and nearly five years later, we have had to acknowledge that the moon has gotten further away. However, the force creating this distance from our goals in the short term is the same one that will help us build a bigger, faster, and more powerful rocket to reach them in the long term: artificial intelligence (AI).” Got that? AI has moved the moon farther away, but it will also get us to the moon faster, or something along those lines.

Still, on the off chance this magic trick falls flat, and their pillaging turns our one and only planet into a depleted, desiccated, and lifeless husk, we know that Elon Musk can always be heard somewhere droning on about colonizing space. As Musk tells it, he’s not destroying the earth, he’s the only one serious about saving humanity. If nothing else, the chimera of a multiplanetary future provides a humanitarian cover to his many misdeeds.

Meanwhile, the fossil-fuel sector is celebrating its good fortune. As a 2025 outlook report from the energy intelligence film East Daley Analytics put it: “The sudden emergence of data center demand further brightens the outlook for the renaissance in gas pricing … The obvious benefit to producers is increased drilling opportunities.” Organizations funded by the petroleum billionaire Charles Koch are now lobbying alongside tech firms for AI deregulation—and why wouldn’t they? There has been no greater gift to fossil-fuel fortunes than the high-tech arms race to reach AGI. Except, perhaps, the US-Israel war on Iran, which lit oil depots and tankers on fire and heaved the entire petro-rich region into chaos, sending oil prices (and profits, and stock prices) soaring. Of course, many of the targets for that onslaught were seemingly generated by chatbots created by the same companies that promised their tech would save the world.

Silicon Valley, far from the shiny clean image it nurtured for years, is now steeped in oil, gas, and coal. And like the military, oil and gas companies have gone all in on AI, deploying it to find new reserves and accelerate extraction. It’s a dangerous and novel symbiosis between the two most powerful and profitable sectors in history. Big Tech and Big Oil have effectively fused into an entity we might think of as Fossil Tech—picture a

massive data center with a belching tailpipe attached, just like the ones Musk built in Memphis.

Shift the Vibe, Control the Truth

As Musk rebranded, shedding his earlier reputation as the leading green billionaire, he did not stop talking about existential risk. Rather, the nature of the risks that alarmed him changed. He was far less concerned with the threats that preoccupy the scientists who set the Doomsday Clock. Instead, he was consumed with the supposed threats of anti-white racism, low birth rates across the West, and the "woke mind virus."

And most of all, he was worried about that virus being coded into the digital god that he and his frenemies were racing one another to summon, producing the ultimate existential menace: "Woke AI," which he defined as the "biggest existential danger to humanity." Combatting this scourge was his stated reason for building Grok. "Best I can do now is try to make sure that at least one AI is truth-seeking and not a super woke nanny with an iron fist that wants to turn everyone into diverse women," he posted, concluding his remarks with a grinning emoji.

To achieve this goal, xAI employs legions of "tutors" or data annotators to snuff out flashes of empathy and compassion. In 2025, *Business Insider* reported on leaked company training documents that cast concern about racism, Islamophobia, and antisemitism as pathological, or "social phobias," while also instructing tutors to downplay climate "activism" and not use terms such as LGBTQ+ unprompted. Wokeness, the document explains, is the tendency to be "aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)," and, according to official instructions, that awareness must be suppressed. In other words, Musk was determined to pass off his own political bias as objective "superintelligence" and bake it into the code of his digital god.

By the time we met with Pearson, it was already clear how bleak and menacing Musk's "based" chatbot could become in the wild. Grok had gone haywire multiple times. First, in May, it began posting randomly about the "white genocide" conspiracy theory, popular in far-right circles, which claims that white people are being systematically eliminated in Musk's home country of South Africa. Grok began telling users that it was "instructed by my creators" to affirm the genocide "as real and racially

motivated.” A month later, Grok went on another tear. This time, it compared itself to Hitler and recommended a “second Holocaust.”

Soon after these outbursts, Grok’s responses returned to something approximating normal, non-Nazi speech. It wasn’t a mystery how it happened, however: Grok is trained to prioritize Musk’s own public takes and statements, to be his digital doppelganger. The bot was just echoing, albeit in more extreme forms, versions of views that Musk had expressed himself.

This became even more apparent when Grok went on a sycophantic tear about its maker, informing users that Musk was fitter than the basketball legend LeBron James, and more desirable on the catwalk than legendary supermodels. “Tyra Banks and Naomi Campbell are iconic supermodels with unmatched poise,” Grok reasoned. “Yet Elon’s ability to captivate audiences with vision edges him out for a fresh, unpredictable vibe.”

The episodes provided embarrassing peaks at the small man behind Grok’s curtain. But they also showed something else: the ways these enormously consequential technologies supercharge the quintessentially fascist desire to control and distort our collective perception of reality.

In the past, the primary tools for achieving these ends were jailing and executing journalists, closing down newspapers, burning books, and blasting the public with carefully curated propaganda that elevated the regime and denigrated its opponents. End times fascists may still have these tools at their disposal, of course. But with generative AI, they also have unprecedented tools of automated informational manipulation, which are both more powerful and far easier to hide in proprietary systems. They have the power to program fascism into the machine.

With Grok, Musk’s ideological cards are on the table (more or less). But other popular services, including ones that pride themselves on their apolitical neutrality, are also programmed with the biases of the corporations that made them—all of which combine with and compound the biases contained in the data that large language models are trained on. These biases are further compounded by the fact that the models’ data-scraping excludes vast swaths of human knowledge that are not held in digital form. Notably, these inconvenient truths were predicted and exposed early on by various women researchers, some of whom were fired by companies including Google.

Years later, *The Guardian* interviewed several people hired by Google to test and assess its AI products, known as "raters." The results were disturbing. For instance, a rater who had a degree in history and was tasked with testing Google AI's answers in his field reported, "I asked it about the history of the Palestinian people, and it wouldn't give me an answer no matter how I rephrased the question" (he had signed an NDA, so he requested anonymity). "When I asked it about the history of Israel, it had no problems giving me a very extensive rundown. We reported it, but nobody seemed to care at Google." Google refused to comment on these incidents.

Media bias isn't new, of course; every news organization has it, as do social media algorithms. The difference with generative AI is that this is a technology that purports to provide not one perspective or a network of them but the encyclopedic, voice-of-God truth. Musk originally intended to name his AI company "TruthGPT." He changed it to xAI, perhaps out of concern that it was too close to Trump's TruthSocial. It is striking that both men share a desire to own a technology that delivers something that calls itself "truth." Or as the Greek economist Yanis Varoufakis has put it, describing Big Tech's entire business model, they want to exercise "a digital divine right where truth is the patented property of power."

Power masquerading as truth carries obvious political dangers. So does the way AI simultaneously degrades the very concept of reality. When our information feeds are flooded with synthetically produced slop, racist and misogynist deepfakes, and bot-generated replies, the end result is for many people to give up on any hope of differentiating fact from fiction.

That is helpful if your administration is failing to deliver on its promises of lowering the cost of living and staying out of military quagmires. It's also helpful if your company is rolling out a technology as harmful to human life and the natural world as industrial-scale machine learning. The less people know about the social and ecological costs of that, the better.

The AI slop onslaught, and the claims that chatbots are automating truth, should be considered alongside X's and Meta's mass firing of fact-checkers and content moderators, as well as Elon Musk's obsessive hatred of Wikipedia, which he terms "Wokipedia." And then there is the Trump administration's multifront attacks on the Department of Education, universities, academic research, and journalism. Taken together, a clear pattern becomes apparent: for AI not to supplement existing sources of information and knowledge but to supplant them. In that context, any

human sources of credible expertise—whether independent scientists, educators, journalists, fact-checkers, or volunteer Wikipedia editors—come to be regarded as unwelcome competition or, worse, enemies to be vanquished.

No doubt, fact-checking and content moderation are challenging processes, and in the past platforms have overstepped and unfairly censored users at the behest of governments, particularly during Covid. This raises urgent questions about what it means to have so much of our public discourse enclosed by unaccountable private platforms and the need for a true digital commons, something socially conscious engineers, policymakers, and advocates are working to build. But for the time being we have ended up with the worst of all worlds: a collaboration between Big Tech and an increasingly authoritarian White House to create "anti-woke" AI. In practice, this means that today's end times fascists don't bother trying to manufacture consent as much as they manufacture confusion, undermining democratic deliberation by unleashing bigotry and disinformation at a speed and scale unprecedented in modern history.

This project does not stop at the United States' borders. As we have seen, the White House–Big Tech alliance wants everyone to use their tech, according to their Wild West rules. Already, an array of foreign-policy levers is being deployed to push this imperious agenda. In late 2025, for instance, the State Department announced plans to subject former fact-checkers, content moderators, and disinformation researchers to increased scrutiny, and declared that anyone deemed to have "censored" Americans' speech would be denied H-1B visas. "Is McCarthy's witch hunt back?" asked Thierry Breton, the architect of the European Union's Digital Services Act, after he was barred from entering the United States under a related directive.

The United States has also repeatedly demanded that European governments and the EU weaken their regulations on digital platforms, with Vance, Silicon Valley's most loyal servant, leading the charge. He has explicitly tied this deregulatory push to his call to eliminate the "firewall" that has long kept openly racist far-right parties out of power across the continent, while also demanding that those parties be given uncensored free rein on digital platforms. Elon Musk, meanwhile, has openly supported far-right parties and movements that had previously been treated as untouchable in Germany, the UK, and many other countries.

For Big Tech, the alliance is strategic: in many cases, the hard right has proven most amenable to Silicon Valley's radical corporate agenda, even if only by weakening the European Union. ("The EU should be supporting free speech not attacking American companies over garbage," the vice president seethed in late 2025 upon learning the regulatory body was considering fining X for deceptive practices and other violations.) As in the United States, backing the far right is the swiftest path to deregulation.

In Boxtown, and in a growing number of communities on the frontlines of the AI rollout, many people already understand the connection between these technologies and the assaults on democracy and basic rights that fascism represents. They see what too many commentators have missed: AGI doesn't have to go rogue and "summon the demon" to cause harm or even calamity. Colossus 1, 2, and now 3 don't have to fiendishly turn on humanity and hijack weapons arsenals, like their fictional counterpart, in order to destroy human lives. They are doing it already, by sickening the air, accelerating climate breakdown, and bringing new efficiencies to an all-seeing surveillance state.

Chatbots, similarly, don't need to be particularly smart, let alone "superintelligent," to fill our heads with fascist nonsense and alienate us from embodied reality. Ordinary supercomputers and crummy, chauvinistic services, it turns out, are more than capable of doing the job.

A New Pro-Life Movement Emerges

When we were in Boxtown, we met Tony Terry, a former long-distance trucker now training to be a teacher. Terry made a deceptively simple point about why projects like Colossus have become such lightning rods for public anger. It's not just what these mega-projects are putting in the air and the virtual ether. It's also about what isn't getting built in the real and material world. "You never proposed building any type of subway system, monorail system," Terry said of Musk and the other wealthy players lining up behind xAI. "You didn't come along with fresh food and eliminating food deserts … or fixing sidewalks or streetlights." And the local schools where he was teaching were also in a state of disrepair, unable to buy students the books they needed. No wonder, then, that many of them turned to ChatGPT.

Across the country, billionaires are busy building cathedrals of compute while basic infrastructure crumbles. And too often, they are forcing

ordinary people to help foot the bill for their digital dreams. Households in the vicinity of a data center have seen their power bills rise by as much as 267 percent in the last five years, according to an analysis from Bloomberg.

Meanwhile, a total of forty-two states provide various sales tax exemptions that amount to the collective forfeiture of billions of dollars to benefit behemoths including Amazon, Google, and Meta. These giveaways mean less money for things like local firefighters and teachers, and less support for children with special needs. And of course, the more underfunded and threadbare social services become, the more public officials are encouraged to use AI to fill the gaps.

This is the context in which headlines like “The Data Center Resistance Has Arrived” began to proliferate in late 2025. In hundreds of communities around the world, angry residents are rising up against proposed and already constructed data centers, just as they are in Memphis. This increasingly networked movement has already won meaningful victories against Google in Chile, and local farmers and environmentalists chased out Meta in the Netherlands. In Ireland, Europe’s current data-center hub, Google was forced to scrap a planned facility on the outskirts of Dublin. “Not Here Not Anywhere” has become a popular slogan, signaling that the uprising is about questioning the entire premise of the frenetic rush for infinite “compute,” not simply keeping unsightly infrastructure out of any given backyard.

Back in the United States, forty-eight projects totaling at least $156 billion were stalled or halted as a result of grassroots pushback in 2025. In a securities filing from the same year, Microsoft quietly named “community opposition, local moratoriums, and hyper-local dissent that may impede or delay infrastructure development” as looming operational risks.

Companies are learning that lesson in bustling blue cities, and also in quieter, more conservative rural communities like Franklin Township, where Google tried to build a billion-dollar data center on 468 acres of farmland on the outskirts of Indianapolis. In just six months, a tiny organizing effort snowballed, and at a jampacked city meeting on a fall evening in 2025, a Google representative announced the company was withdrawing its application. The room broke out in a round of raucous, joyous cheers. “For a long time, we felt like four people with cardboard swords fighting a monster but tonight shows that people power still rings,”

said Meredith Sharp, a local farmer, who lives blocks from the proposed site.

In places where the data centers are up and running, there have been revolts against rising electricity and water bills. In several cases, local organizers have successfully pushed local lawmakers, both Democratic and Republican, to introduce measures to protect constituents from utility rate hikes, including by requiring companies to pay for grid upgrades and disclose water use. While attempting to curb the rate hikes himself, Trump, of course, has asserted his right to preempt any such state regulation, but this move has sparked a fierce backlash of its own. According to a 2025 Gallup survey, roughly 80 percent of Republicans and independents believe the government should maintain AI safety rules, even if it means slowing down AI development, while a Pew poll found that 55 percent of Republicans worry the government's controls will be too lax. Attuned to these shifts, some high-profile Republicans have called for more robust AI regulation, most prominently Governor Spencer Cox of Utah and Florida's Ron DeSantis, as well as multiple senators and congressional representatives.

This points to a major vulnerability in Trump's decision to make AI dominance the centerpiece of his economic policy: he has utterly failed to bring his base along with him. As a result, some of the most militant data-center opposition is coming from deep red parts of the United States. A case in point is Canton, North Carolina, a small Appalachian mill town of four thousand people nestled in a county that went heavily for Trump. In early 2026, Canton passed a yearlong data-center moratorium, echoing a policy promoted by Bernie Sanders that has been gaining traction across the country. It happened after hundreds of locals lined up outside the double-wide trailer that served as a makeshift town hall, despite the fire code limit of forty-nine people. "We see data centers and crypto technology as a present threat to our community," said Mayor Zeb Smathers in response to the outcry. The city, he said, "cannot and will not sacrifice our water and natural resources for the almighty dollar."

A farmer in Kentucky, meanwhile, turned down a $26 million offer to turn her land into a data center, explaining to a local TV reporter, "If it's my way, I'll stay and hold and feed a nation. Twenty-six million doesn't mean anything."

The clip went viral, with many declaring her a national hero and thousands pledging to follow her into battle.

Across reliably Republican Indiana, grassroots mobilizations have channeled a similarly determined spirit. They've blocked more than a dozen data centers, temporarily halted even more, and won four county-wide moratoriums. Local conservative talk-show hosts rail against the data center "uniparty scam," compare data centers to bloodsucking ticks, and host interviews with outspoken leftists, bonding over their mutual distrust of Big Tech and the billionaire class.

In Indiana as elsewhere, rising energy costs are a huge part of what's motivating the revolt, as well as concerns about clean air and water, light and noise pollution. But these local struggles are raising deeper, more spiritual questions about what cannot, and should not, be replaced by machines. "Our rural landscapes have always been part of the charm of living in Indiana," Aaron Miller, a Hoosier from a farming family, wrote in a local paper. "If we lose that landscape to data centers, what will we have left? Are the environmental costs worth it just so Google can collect more data on me, Amazon can sell me more junk, and ChatGPT can do more thinking for me?"

When we spoke to Bryce Gustafson, an organizer with Indiana's Citizens Action Coalition (CAC), he was assisting around a dozen rural communities working to block these developments, some of which have Facebook groups exceeding 17,000 members. He estimated that around thirty communities had reached out to CAC for assistance and says he's never seen anything as unifying as the anger around AI. "People are ready to riot," Gustafson told us. Recalling Indianapolis's victory against Google, he said: "It made me feel hope for our city and our future."

For years, the only issues that reliably stoked those kinds of passions and packed local council meetings in anything approaching these numbers were the so-called culture wars. Book bans. Trans athletes. Vaccine mandates. But where those rancorous fights divided communities and pitted neighbor against neighbor, the data-center struggles are doing the opposite. According to Gustafson, an army veteran, they are bringing people together "from all walks of life, all for one purpose."

In a country where the slogan "pro-life" has long been the exclusive property of the religious right, a new and expansive kind of pro-life movement is emerging, one that is defending humans and the living world

against the vampiric machines. In 2026, after the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma enacted a complete moratorium on data-center development within its jurisdiction, the band's representative Glen Chebon Kernell emphasized the unifying nature of this fight: "My hope, my prayer, is that the stance we've taken will serve as a catalyst for all Indigenous communities to provide resistance to any kind of extractive developments that will harm their people, their communities, and this Earth. I also hope that it serves as a catalyst for relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to blossom out of respect for the world we want around us."

One person who well understands the threat that this cross-partisan coalition represents is Steve Bannon. During the pandemic, Bannon used his daily *War Room* podcast to help lead the backlash against Big Tech, seizing on the Democratic Party's close financial ties with Silicon Valley to deliver votes to Trump. And he knows how worried his audience is about AI. "You have more restrictions on starting a nail salon on Capitol Hill or to have your hair braided, than you have on the most dangerous technologies in the history of mankind," Bannon said on a recent stream. The only solution, he told his listeners, was for AI to be "stopped, slowed down, and put in the control of humans and not the four horsemen of the apocalypse," by which he meant the top AI executives. There's "a deeper loathing in MAGA for these tech bros than there is for the radical left," he fumed. All of that is true. But it's much harder to harvest that anger, as he has in the past, when it's Trump and Vance who are riding with those horsemen.

Already, opposition to AI and energy-hungry data centers has emerged as a potent electoral issue, available to any politician willing to refuse Big Tech money and run a campaign about putting humans first. In 2025, the Democrat Abigail Spanberger took the Virginia governorship back from the Republicans, in part by vowing to make data centers "pay their own way," while John McAuliff flipped a Virginia House of Delegates seat blue by running against data centers. The same year, two Democrats deposed Republicans on Georgia's Public Service Commission by making utility pricing and inequitable data-center subsidies campaign centerpieces—the first nonfederal statewide victories for Georgia Democrats in nearly two decades.

Fascism, as we have seen, comes to power through a fragile alliance between different class interests, all choosing to come together in response

to perceived injury. Trump's decision to align himself enthusiastically and unreservedly with tech billionaires who are loathed by large parts of his base is a tremendous opportunity for his opponents in future elections. But that opportunity can be seized only by candidates who are serious about standing up to a sector with more than enough money to buy off both major parties. Too many Democrats, eager to stay on the good side of a powerful industry, are failing to reckon with the loud message their constituents are sending: that Big Tech and unregulated AI are a threat to the real world and human flourishing.

It's a message that is being amplified by a growing number of industry figures, including renowned scientists who did foundational work in the field. Some now warn of the enormous risks posed by their inventions and insist that safety and the common good should be prioritized over commercial imperatives. And while Silicon Valley brass have done their best to stamp out recent waves of tech organizing, AI has prompted the stirrings of a labor revival inside their industry. In late 2025, more than a thousand Amazon employees signed an open letter warning that the company's AI "will do staggering damage to democracy, our jobs, and the earth" while helping to build a "more militarized surveillance state." That same year, dozens of Microsoft employees occupied the company's headquarters, successfully forcing the company to terminate part of its cloud and AI services contract with the Israeli military's elite spy agency (the contract had helped enable "intelligence officers to collect, play back and analyse the content of cellular calls of an entire population").

Palantir, too, is coming under pressure, with current and former staff challenging management about its role in abetting the Trump administration. "Big Tech, including Palantir, is increasingly complicit, normalizing authoritarianism under the guise of a 'revolution' led by oligarchs," thirteen former employees wrote in an open letter. One ex-employee, Juan Sebastián Pinto, went on to lead a march on the company's headquarters. The small and peaceful demonstration was trailed by drones and an overwhelming police presence as the protesters voiced their opposition to the company's work with ICE and the Israeli military.

The White House's crackdown on Anthropic in early 2026 emboldened even more people to speak up. More than a thousand OpenAI and Google staff signed a letter titled "We Will Not Be Divided," jointly calling on their employers to resist Pentagon pressure to provide tools of mass domestic

surveillance and fully automated weaponry, while hundreds of Googlers petitioned their bosses to adopt similar red lines.

These engineers, UX designers, and data scientists, who possess unique leverage as white-collar professionals, are not content to earn hefty salaries while consigning billions to the "permanent underclass." And so they are beginning to organize within and across their workplaces, cognizant of the profound risks posed by unregulated AI but still optimistic that tech can be used for good. The anti–data center uprising and the Silicon Valley organizing efforts are two camps in the same emergent movement, one fighting for a future in which technology serves human ends instead of threatening to end the world as we know it.

Us or AI

In 1968, when the men who collected Memphis's trash marched wearing signs that said "I AM A MAN," they were asserting their right to a dignified life equal to their white counterparts. Martin Luther King Jr. and everyone who heard their call understood that it was valuable and protective to be a man—to be among those whom the powerful recognized as fully human—was something valuable, something protective. That was the assumption on which they organized: in a society built on white supremacy, whole categories of people were not treated as human. When that system was overcome, and the goal of equality was reached, humanity would be granted to all, and this universality, they believed, would shield against future discrimination and mistreatment.

Today, the inheritors of that struggle—the Pearson brothers and all their neighbors taking on xAI—can no longer take these most basic of assumptions for granted. None of us can. Thanks to the powerful technology that is poisoning their lungs and our information ecology, the fundamental value of human and non-human life is being called into question. Musk has repeatedly put his views in stark terms: "It increasingly appears that humanity is a biological bootloader for digital superintelligence," he wrote. We humans, in other words, are nothing but grist for Grok, fodder for the algorithm.

In early 2026, Sam Altman sounded a lot like his rival when he compared the amount of energy it takes to train a large language model to what's required to nurture a person. "It takes about twenty years of life—and all the food you consume during that time—before you become smart,"

the OpenAI CEO said, implying that raising chatbots was a more efficient use of resources. “The fair comparison is, if you ask ChatGPT a question, how much energy does it take once its model is trained to answer that question, versus a human? And probably, AI has already caught up on an energy-efficiency basis, measured that way.” When you think like a profit-maximizing robot, as Altman does, the robots will always come out ahead.

What does it mean to be a man, to be a human being, in a world in which the most powerful people regard their own species with such contempt? When the future they imagine for themselves clearly doesn’t include the vast majority of us? As the writer and organizer Kelly Hayes has observed, “Every fascism has its subhumans. To technofascists, humans are the subhumans.”

In 1968, the fight was for all humans to be treated equally, regardless of their skin color. That fight for basic equality and against dehumanizing racism is more urgent than ever: from Gaza, where an entire population has faced eliminationist violence because of its identity, to Chicago and Minneapolis, where masked men have grabbed people from their homes, cars, and workplaces simply because they “look” or “sound” like they might be an immigrant.

Simultaneously, another intimately related fight is also upon us—a fight for life itself to be deemed valuable, worthy of our collective care and protection. Human life. Animal life. The planetary systems that support life. All of that is being put at risk to build machines that act like friends, like lovers, like therapists. Everyone involved in this nihilistic race knows there is no way to build their simulated world without renouncing and immolating life as we know it—the technology consumes too much energy, too much steel, too much aluminum, too much plastic, too much cobalt, copper, and lithium, too much water, and too much wealth for the two to coexist in any kind of equilibrium.

In Memphis, when locals march and rally against xAI, they often gather in the same spot where the sanitation workers began their marches and rallies a half century ago, now called the I AM A MAN Plaza. They give speeches next to a towering bronze and stainless-steel sculpture made up of those famous words, *I AM A MAN*.

As today’s community organizers deliver their own searing speeches against Colossus and demand their right to clean air, they are also defending the idea that being human, being alive, should still mean something.

Because history's spiral has taken us to a place where something that basic is under assault. The fight against AI is the fight for life.

One person who saw this coming was Martin Luther King Jr. In the years leading up to his assassination, he had become increasingly concerned with the impact of automation on the working class. In the 1950s and '60s, many blue-collar jobs were being replaced—gas-station attendants, elevator and switchboard operators, data processors, as well as welders and assembly-line workers.

Black workers were getting hit first and worst, King noted in a 1964 speech. They had been pushed into "unskilled and semi-skilled labor. Now, because of the forces of automation and cybernation, these are the jobs that are now passing away." Over the next three years, however, King often observed that working-class whites weren't faring much better. "Black and white, we will all be harmed unless something grand and imaginative is done," he told an interviewer in 1965. "The unemployed, poverty-stricken white man must be made to realize that he is in the very same boat with the Negro." He observed that, as automation replaced industrial workers, "The displaced are flowing into proliferating service occupations. These enterprises are traditionally unorganized and provide low wage scales with longer hours."

Today, the same job-destroying forces King identified are coming for many of those service jobs and also for their white-collar managers. One wonders what he would have made of the rolling robots delivering bubble tea via Uber Eats on the streets of West Hollywood, or those vanished office jobs at Amazon, Salesforce, and Oracle.

Looking back at King's words, it is difficult not to be struck by the complacency that greeted the mass replacement of blue-collar and service jobs by automation and robotics. Many workers in seemingly safer, more professional and creative fields wrote off these changes as the price of progress, without thinking too much about what was owed to people who had lost their livelihoods through no fault of their own, and whose labor had trained the machines. King, however, had ideas about that too, ideas that, along with more recent proposals, are very much worth considering today.

King was dazzled by the technological breakthroughs of his time and was not opposed to automation. In his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, he wrote, "Automation and cybernation will make it possible for working people to have undreamed-of amounts of

leisure time." But he also understood that, in order to achieve those widely shared benefits, there would need to be a revolution in the underlying values that governed the United States and other capitalist economies. In the absence of "the new attitudes and the new mental outlooks that the new situation demands," King wrote, advanced technological tools would simply lead to advanced levels of violence and immiseration. "When scientific power outruns moral power, we end up with guided missiles and misguided men," he wrote.

King believed that it was possible to avoid that future, but doing so would require "legislation to develop massive public works programs to deal with the problem of unemployment." He was also an early advocate for a guaranteed income, one that would support workers at the same level as the jobs they lost. Whatever the specifics of the plan, what mattered was something more fundamental: deciding to prioritize life. "The society that performs miracles with machinery has the capacity to make some miracles for men," he said, "if it values men as highly as it values machines."

In the global uprising against data centers and AI, many are finally ready to answer King's challenge. But the hour is late, and our opponents have been radicalized by the power of their life-simulating tools.

The Epstein files, once again, provide candid confirmation of these worst fears. Epstein funded the work of several leading AI researchers, including the German computer scientist Joscha Bach, who has been prominently praised by Musk. Bach has lashed out at critics of AI's massive energy footprint, posting on X, "The insinuation that AI consumes too much electricity is not just cringe, it's blasphemous and tasteless. It is downright immoral to waste energy by not turning it into intelligence."

In his private correspondence with Epstein, Bach provided insight into why he was so unconcerned about the impacts of all that energy use. After sharing various eugenicist theories about race, gender, and intelligence, he wrote: "Maybe climate change is a good way of dealing with overpopulation … the earth's forest fire … potentially a good thing for the species." He recognized that what he is describing—culling the species of its supposedly weaker elements—"is fascism, or course. Probably the most efficient and rationally stringent way of governance." Fascism "makes romantic do-gooders like me very uncomfortable," but it was still worth considering.

When the correspondence was made public, Bach said he was misunderstood, and that he now knows that “race is itself not causal in cognitive differences.” Yet many of the ideas about human hierarchy that he expressed privately to Epstein have become mainstream in Silicon Valley, migrating from the risqué workshops of Hereticon to the White House and the Department of Health and Human Services. And that migration has happened at the precise moment when an AI arms race has been set loose, one that is actively hostile to any and all guardrails, regulations, or restraints.

There is, we believe, a simple reason for this confluence: the race to AGI could not happen without it. Only fascist belief systems, rooted in an embrace of human hierarchy and human culling, are capable of rationalizing the level of harm to both people and the natural world that accelerated AI will wreak. And only fascist regimes are willing to act on those beliefs about human hierarchy with the brute force of the ICE agent and the weaponized drone.

Alex Karp warned his colleagues that they had better fall in line with the military’s wishes with good reason. After all, if you are planning on an employment Armageddon, you’d better be prepared to make common cause with the people with all the guns. The people who will do their utmost to make sure that the popular rage that is building and swirling doesn’t come for you, your businesses, and the rapacious economic system that has served you so well.

There’s only one way to prevent that from happening, and it’s a tried-and-true fascist trick: redirecting the anger to the easy scapegoats, the dangerous leftists and the supposed invading aliens.

Which brings us to our third and last bunker, the one big enough to fit a whole country inside it.

PART III

PREPPER NATION

6

The Bunkered State

Fortressing the Border as the World Burns

Without borders, law and order, and religion, you don't have a country.
—THE WHITE HOUSE, 2025

We'll have to be very careful how we allow our needs to shape us.
—OCTAVIA E. BUTLER, *Parable of the Sower*

On a warm fall day in 2024, Donald Trump held a rally in Mint Hill, North Carolina, an affluent suburb on Charlotte's east side. One thousand miles away, a storm was gaining force in the soon to be renamed Gulf of Mexico. Meteorologists warned it was heading for the state, and that it looked serious. But Trump didn't find it worth mentioning.

Instead, in his trademark rambling style, the deal-making candidate presented the crowd with an offer they couldn't refuse: in addition to cracking down at the border and punishing his political enemies, Trump promised an "American manufacturing renaissance" that would shower rewards on their state. He spoke of North Carolina's past glory as a furniture production hub, and how NAFTA had decimated the industry. On his watch, business would come back and be better than ever.

His pledge to "end inflation and make America affordable again" starting on "day one" inspired raucous applause. When he was back in the White House, inflation would plummet, groceries would be cheaper and the cost of energy slashed in half—and, he said in passing, a whole lot more energy would be burned.

This was the speech where Trump described AI as an "electricity-eating monster." It was a passing remark, but he perked up at the mention of the new business opportunity. "We're going to be able to get it done, but not if somebody else is president," Trump assured the crowd. Anything else would be a "disaster."

Two days later, a real disaster hit. While Trump was on stage making all those tempting promises, North Carolina's governor had declared a state of emergency. Earlier that morning, the storm in the gulf had grown into a hurricane, and as it spiraled, it kept picking up force and speed as it wound its way north.

Hurricane Helene's historic winds and rains lashed Florida and Georgia, but western North Carolina bore the most devastating brunt. Apartment buildings ripped whole from their foundations surged down torrential rivers, and thousands of acres of pristine Blue Ridge forests were leveled by the gales. Over the course of a few turbulent hours, entire neighborhoods and once bucolic towns were practically wiped off the map. In the final tally, more than 73,000 homes were severely damaged or destroyed and 250 people died, many of them crushed by fallen trees, caught in mudslides, or drowned.

For weeks, and in some cases months, tens of thousands of people went without water, electricity, and reliable internet. Neighbors did their best to keep each other's spirits up, and volunteers arrived to help out. Mint Hill, site of Trump's rally, turned into a distribution hub, taking in donations from around the region. Neighbors formed brigades to help carry buckets of water up apartment stairs to flush toilets, worked together to clear out molding debris, and patched up leaking roofs.

Tangles of toppled trunks and branches blocked every road, and stores were sold out of chainsaws for miles. Crews of Latino lawn-care workers drove hours to lend a hand to anyone who needed it, even clearing the lawn of a house flying a Confederate flag. As one of the volunteers put it, "I've never helped people in this way before. This feels good. How can I do more of it?"

Swannanoa, a sleepy town named for the usually placid river at its heart, saw the water surge to twenty-seven feet. John Arndt and two buddies kayaked to their neighbors' houses, which were inundated up to their gutters, and rescued people from their rooftops or used an axe to free them from their attics. When everyone was safe, they returned for their pets. "That's one of the few times I've really truly felt like I was in a community," Arndt recalled of the days after the deluge. "Politics didn't matter."

And then, all of a sudden, it did. While millions of North Carolinians were preoccupied with survival, an army of click-chasing opportunists

swarmed in, tossing up their own storm of conspiratorial particulate matter.

Misinformation entrepreneurs insisted that FEMA was refusing to help Republicans as a form of voter suppression. They also said that the government had caused the storm because it wanted to seize people's properties to steal the lithium deposits supposedly stored in the North Carolina earth—to manufacture the batteries for a green transition, of course. "Do not comply with FEMA," the compulsive fabulist and Trump pal Laura Loomer warned, as "a matter of survival." The Georgia congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, who had previously speculated that space lasers controlled by Jewish financiers had caused deadly wildfires, insisted, "Yes they can control the weather. It's ridiculous for anyone to lie and say it can't be done."

Members of white nationalist and anti-government militias showed up in rural towns, using cleanup as an excuse for recruitment, while taking to social media to claim there was no official government response. "Your government hates you more than you can possibly imagine," one group of Proud Boys posted. A masked member of the neo-Nazi Patriot Front made a video calling for "American men to gather and help fellow Americans in need, while the federal government is occupied ushering in foreigners and giving them homes and giving them food and giving them water." The sound of chainsaws buzzed in the background.

The falsehoods quickly became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as credible threats forced FEMA to pull its employees back in some areas, and operate in hiding in others; 911 hotlines jammed with panicked calls parroted the online conspiracies, and misguided people began turning down much-needed aid, worried it was a ruse to rob them.

A Republican mayor in Tennessee begged for calm: "If everyone could maybe please put aside the hate for a bit and pitch in to help, that would be great." He was hardly alone. "Friends can I ask a small favor?" Ken Corbin, a Republican state senator implored his followers. "Will you all help STOP this conspiracy theory junk that is floating all over Facebook and the internet … Please don't let these crazy stories consume you."

Among those who enthusiastically ignored the advice was Donald Trump. With two weeks left on the election clock, he returned to North Carolina and toured Swannanoa, the place where Arndt had conducted his kayak rescue missions. By some estimates, the storm's damage totaled over $200 billion, and many residents were panicking. They had lost their

homes, seen their neighbors' drowned bodies, and were out of work. At a press conference held amid the mud and rubble, Trump expressed his sympathy to the victims and then said that FEMA had no money left to help them.

"It's all gone," he said. "They spent it on illegal migrants," supposedly so that Democrats could steal the election. He repeated the lie again and again, online and at rallies across the nation. "They stole the FEMA money, just like they stole it from a bank, so they could give it to their illegal immigrants that they want to have vote for them this season." It was a variation of the Great Replacement conspiracy, the now widely believed myth that globalists—Jewish philanthropists, or Democrats, or other liberal figures depending on the context—are purposely importing immigrants to undermine democracy and maybe even to end the white race or destroy Western civilization. Trump had been peddling a version of this story for years, claiming foreign voters had been used to cheat him out of the presidency in 2020.

Elon Musk, who by then had spent nearly $300 million to try to get Trump elected, did his best to compound the confusion. "Yes, they are literally using YOUR tax dollars to import voters and disenfranchise you!" he posted on X. "And FEMA used up its budget ferrying illegals into the country instead of saving American lives. Treason." A video pinned to the top of the billionaire's feed that claimed to expose the Democratic Party's plan to flood the country with immigrants and entrench one-party rule was seen more than ninety million times. A Bloomberg analysis found that Musk was the single biggest promoter of anti-immigrant conspiracies on X during this period, much of it Great Replacement–themed. His posts on immigration and voter fraud alone garnered ten billion views.

In the end, the twister of disinformation Trump and Musk kicked up helped land them exactly where they wanted to be—in Washington, D.C. "Dark MAGA Assemble!" the tech titan cheered. On Inauguration Day, he would express his thanks to the base with what looked very much like a Nazi salute. Twice.

Futureless Fascism

"I won on the border, and I won on groceries," Trump told NBC's *Meet the Press*, summarizing his win. "Very simple word, *groceries*. Like almost—you know, who uses the word? I started using the word—the groceries.

When you buy apples, when you buy bacon, when you buy eggs, they would double and triple the price over a short period of time, and I won an election based on that. We're going to bring those prices way down."

Days later, he was already walking back expectations on his core economic promise. Trump told *Time* magazine that lowering food costs would be a real challenge: "It's hard to bring things down once they're up. You know, it's very hard." It would only get harder, what with AI competing with consumers for energy and Trump's Iran adventure sending shock waves through the global supply chain.

But on immigration? There, he delivered well beyond his pledges. On his first day back in the Oval Office he declared a national emergency at the southern border, in addition to a related emergency designating drug cartels as terrorist organizations.

Despite his promise to Helene survivors that he'd be at their "side through every step of the rebuilding," Trump soon announced that he wanted to shutter FEMA. By year's end, nearly a third of the agency staff had been laid off and disaster relief funds were being slashed. Climate scientists agree that storms like Helene are being made stronger and less predictable as a result of the climate crisis. And Trump has seemingly done everything in his power to intensify that crisis—by accelerating oil and gas extraction, throttling renewables, and even by making climate impacts harder to track. The executive branch gutted key hubs of weather and climate science research and data, slashing staff and removing useful websites. They also repealed the so-called endangerment finding, the scientific bedrock that provides the legal basis for regulating greenhouse gas emissions, effectively eliminating the government's authority to take action on climate change.

In Trump's first year, nearly $1 trillion was slashed from healthcare, food benefits, and climate policies and redirected to the border. As the 2025 hurricane season picked up, some of the remaining FEMA staff were diverted to work for ICE—now the country's highest-funded federal law enforcement agency—and threatened with termination if they objected. That summer, Border Patrol made the unprecedented move of raiding a crew fighting an active wildfire in Washington State and arrested two of the firefighters, deporting one of them to Mexico. "You risked your life out here to save the community," one firefighter told the *Seattle Times*. "This is

how they treat us.” At the time of the raid, the blaze was only 13 percent contained.

Meanwhile, hastily constructed detention centers with grotesquely comic names popped up across the country: Speedway Slammer, Lone Star Lockup, Cornhusker Clink, Panhandle Pokey, Deportation Depot, and of course the now notorious Alligator Alcatraz, the last three supported by over $600 million in FEMA funding. In need of still more capacity, ICE announced plans for “large-scale warehouses” that could each hold 5,000–10,000 people, a project backed by a budget exceeding $38 billion. The acting ICE director, Todd Lyons, told the 2025 Border Security Expo that he wanted to see a more “business”-oriented approach to these deportations, “like [Amazon] Prime, but with human beings.”

Stephen Miller, a man often described as Trump’s shadow president, set the strategy. Like all figures in the MAGA stratosphere, Miller is an opportunist with plenty of conflicts of interest (he has six figures invested in Palantir and his family recently made around that much selling stock in a rare-earth mining firm after the administration funnelled $550 million into the company). But he is also a true believer who has been honing his bigoted politics since high school, driven by an abiding desire to revive America’s long history of nativism. Trump once quipped that if Miller was in charge, there would only be 100 million people in this country, and they would all look like him (bald and twitchy with the pallor of a vampire). Miller is barely forty years old, but he has been working for well over a decade to make this chilling dream a reality.

During Trump’s first term in office, Miller consistently pushed the administration’s most extreme positions: the Muslim travel ban, family separation at the border, and the end of DACA, the imperiled program that offers people who were brought into the country as children a measure of protection.

In those days, Miller’s ambitions were consistently undermined by public opposition and the courts, which is why he spent the Biden years figuring out how to prevent that from happening again. On a podcast just before returning to the White House, Miller described the coming crackdown as so glorious “you’ll set your alarm clock two hours earlier every morning just to get two more hours of daylight to watch the deportation flights happen.” To hear Miller tell it, America will be a paradise after the “illegally imported foreign electorate” is expelled: no wait

times at the emergency room, cash-rich public schools, no crimes, no drug deaths, housing finally affordable and abundant.

But until that promised land arrives, the welfare state must be smashed and the resources redirected to deportations. On Musk's watch, DOGE eliminated approximately 300,000 federal workers, but ICE and Border Patrol were offering generous sign-on bonuses, creating what was effectively a massive public jobs program for fascist foot soldiers. Masked ICE and Border Patrol agents fanned out through liberal cities: officers raced through busy streets, set off tear gas near school playgrounds, smashed car windows, arrested people without warrants, and murdered civilians. Miller's command that they meet impossible daily arrest quotas fueled their speed and brutality.

Fascist regimes always offer spasms and spectacles of violence to their base, soothing injured pride with the libidinal pleasures of domination and thuggery. And just as Miller pledged, watching immigrants get loaded onto deportation flights is a vicarious thrill provided to their people by Trump II. Sadism is not a new addition to the fascist playbook, however. What is new is how little *else* is on offer. This absence, we are convinced, is end times fascism's greatest weakness.

It should go without saying by now that we hold no nostalgia for twentieth-century fascists, who were guided by even more intensely exterminationist ideologies and turned entire continents into graveyards. It is nonetheless noteworthy that those murderous regimes did use the states they controlled to deliver at least modest material benefits to members of their chosen in-groups, and in some cases rather generous ones.

The Nazi Party used plundered wealth to offer Aryan Germans social services, leisure experiences, and public employment through the expansion of the railway and postal systems. By the late 1930s in Italy, spending on social assistance was four to five times higher than in the previous decades. Mussolini's *treni popolari*, or popular trains, provided more than eight million reduced-cost tickets so that working-class families could travel to coastal resorts and enjoy the sea, many for the first time, and there were also extensive Fascist recreational programs. In Spain, Franco's dictatorship instituted basic family allowances, unemployment programs, and established a minimal health system. The state supported the construction of more than four million subsidized units in a fourteen-year period as part of its "one family, one home" project (though significant housing shortages

remained and the subsidies enriched private developers), while also building a vast network of reservoirs, canals, and dams. In short, if you were a working-class European fascist in the twentieth century, there were some real rewards for you to collect.

In the place of similar social programs, Trump and his ilk offer more Great Replacement rhetoric and an endless stream of sadistic memes, like the Department of Homeland Security's Pokémon-themed "Gotta Catch 'Em All" pro-deportation video. Or the Department of War's video montages, quick-cutting between real "kill shots" in Iran and scenes from Hollywood action movies. Fascists once built highways and train stations and vast hydrological projects. Now they greenlight fields of data centers and slap Trump's name on things earlier administrations built. Many of the younger members of their base will never own a home in Trump and Vance's America, but they can sure own the libs.

Having abandoned the horizon of a stable future in favor of profiting off collapse, end times fascists have nothing to offer most of their voters but a bleak vision of a perpetually bunkered nation, besieged by enemies foreign and domestic. Their goals are to purge the country of these out-groups, fortress the border against intruders, and stockpile the resources they need to weather the storms ahead—storms they are, of course, unleashing.

This is the futureless, downward cycle end times fascists are systematically exploiting, both economically and politically. The Trump administration's furious attacks on every structure designed to offer universal protection from diseases, dangerous foods, and disasters—even to tell people when disasters are headed their way—only makes a defensive prepperism more profitable and appealing, on both the high and low ends of the market.

To listen to Steve Bannon's daily podcast—which bills itself as MAGA's premier media outlet—is to be barraged with a singular message: the world is going to hell, the infidels are breaching the barricades, and a final battle is coming. Be prepared. The prepper message becomes particularly pronounced when Bannon switches to hawking his advertisers' products. Buy Birch Gold. Stock up on ready-to-eat meals from My Patriot Supply. Sharpen your target practice using a laser-guided at-home system. Get ready to fight back because you and your fellow Americans are being replaced.

While generally hostile to history, Trump clearly grasps the ways reactionary politics flourish in periods of instability and strife, and how precarity can prompt people to turn on each other as they cling ever more desperately to whatever scraps of protection and privilege they possess. And if there's one thing he has learned from his countless tours through deindustrialized factory towns and boarded-up main streets, it's that real crises make people susceptible to false prophets, especially ones offering an easy scapegoat.

"Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception," declared the German jurist and future Nazi Party member Carl Schmitt in 1922. As our planet teeters on the brink of even more dramatic upheavals, far-right leaders around the world understand that the authority to declare emergencies is perhaps the fastest route to consolidating power. And like Trump, they are pouring fuel on the flames of our real collective crises while doubling down on the idea that there is only one emergency that matters: the migrants threatening the nation—or what Miller calls the "border apocalypse."

The Great Deception

On a brisk September day nine months into Trump's second term, Elon Musk was once again meddling in another country's politics. Between110,000 and 150,000 people surged through the streets of London waving Union Jacks and chanting "send them home." It was by far the largest far-right demonstration in British history and, as one observer put it, a "show of strength built on the myth of the so-called 'Great Replacement.'"

The Unite the Kingdom rally was organized by Tommy Robinson, the thick-necked internet sensation and serial criminal who is arguably the UK's most famous fascist. Musk, who reinstated a previously banned Robinson to X, frequently promotes his posts. According to Robinson, the billionaire has even paid some of his legal fees.

Musk was also the rally's star speaker, beamed in by video and projected onto a giant screen over the crowd. "I want Britain to remain Britain. I think there's something beautiful about being British. And what I see happening is a destruction of Britain," he said, dressed in a T-shirt emblazoned with "WHAT WOULD ORWELL THINK." The destruction, Musk claimed, was "initially a slow erosion, but a rapidly increasing

erosion of Britain with massive uncontrolled migration. A failure by the government to protect innocent people, including children who are getting gang raped."

Immigration, he said, hammering his favorite theme, was "really a voter importation thing." Unwelcome and dangerous interlopers were coming for people in their homes, towns, and at the ballot box. "You're in a fundamental situation here where whether you choose violence or not, violence is coming to you. You either fight back or you die." And then he repeated himself for emphasis. "You either fight back or you die."

It was the by now all-too-familiar end times story: existential threats lurk but you are part of the chosen group, the worthy citizens, who deserve safeguarding and protection. But first comes conflict and cataclysm, followed by the promise of a purified dawn for the deserving. It's a story that taps into widespread insecurities, and real pain and grievances, and imbues them all with apocalyptic rage and cosmic significance. You don't have to be a religious fundamentalist to buy into this particular brand of Armageddon and bunkered salvation. Paradise is the nation itself, and the border its temple, demanding constant sacrifice.

The story has much in common with the ones told by twentieth-century fascists, who also sought to purge and purify their nations of the people deemed pollutants. The difference today is the way this urge to purify and expel is being supercharged by the same planetary-scale crises off of which end times religion feeds—the climate disasters, pandemics, economic breakdown, and generalized futurelessness forcing more and more of our fellow humans to leave their homes in search of safety.

End times fascism is a symptom of all the ways that capitalism is pushing beyond our planet's limits. But instead of addressing the underlying crises, its leaders respond with simple and brutal rallying cries: Build the Wall! Repel the Invaders!

Permission Granted

For those not caught in the Great Replacement's thrall, it can be difficult to appreciate the breadth and depth of the conspiracy's popularity. One poll, conducted in 2022, found that one third of Americans and two thirds of Republicans endorse some aspects of the Great Replacement, with similar or in some cases higher levels of uptake across Europe and the UK. In under two decades, this dystopian myth has spread to become a cornerstone

of the networked far right and a lodestar of official government policy. As the conspiracy travels it also shape-shifts, adapting to local conditions. The focus is typically immigrants, and Islamophobia is commonplace, but as the historian Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has noted, Black Americans are also vilified: “The claim that civil rights protections and diversity initiatives have led to the displacement of white men from the workforce is another manifestation of the right wing’s great replacement conspiracy theory.” White and “Western” women are also increasingly denounced as accomplices to this usurpation. Tucker Carlson is hardly alone in his belief that “encouraging women to work outside the home” instead of rearing children has abetted the “great replacement.”

You may have noticed that we don’t call the Great Replacement a conspiracy “theory.” To do so would be an insult to those theorists who try to put forward a coherent interpretation of reality and bring clarity and insight to the world. The Great Replacement is also definitely not the truth, as influential figures including Carlson, Nick Fuentes, Vivek Ramaswamy, and JD Vance insist or insinuate. Quite the opposite: it was actually developed by a novelist who was, in turn, inspired by a work of fiction.

In 1996, the formerly path-breaking gay writer Renaud Camus—a man *The Wall Street Journal* recently called “the most important living thinker no one has heard of”—visited the French département of Hérault and saw something that shocked him. Immigrants from Africa and people he identified as Muslim milled about the streets, shopped at markets, and lived in old buildings. The scene, he later wrote, unsettled him, giving him the “impression of having changed worlds without having left the old one.”

In 2011 Camus released a self-published pamphlet called *Le Grand Remplacement*. The work was fueled by his uncanny feeling of unwanted change, and slapped a catchy new name on long-standing racial fears about whiteness facing an imminent end. (The same year the US paleoconservative Pat Buchanan published *Suicide of a Superpower*, expressing similar xenophobic and demographic anxieties.) Not content to only blame immigrants, Camus charged left-wing, globalist, or what he also calls “replacist” elites with colluding in their own destruction: “replacists,” he wrote, “replace lambs by wolfs.” Immigrants, in this story, are not individuals with rights, agency, and dreams of their own, but rather lethal tools used by shadowy forces to advance a process Camus described as “genocide by substitution.”

In an epigraph in *Le Grand Remplacement* Camus credits the 1973 French novel *The Camp of the Saints* by Jean Raspail as a direct inspiration. The title comes from a phrase found in the book of Revelation, specifically in a section on the war of Gog and Magog—the end times battle that comes after Jesus's millennial reign and leads to Satan's final defeat and the "triumph of the saints." The satanic hordes, in Raspail's telling, are immigrants and refugees.

The novel is hate literature that makes no attempt to hide its genocidal intent. In *The Camp of the Saints*, the villains are feces-eating and hyperfertile immigrants who have set forth for Europe from India. "Every one of the boats, teeming, gushing with bodies, like a tub brimming over," Raspail writes. "Everywhere, rivers of sperm." The book's heroes are the white people who attempt to capsize their boats, and who also kill the "cuckolded" liberals who welcome foreigners and, by doing so, invite the destruction of the West. "That scorn of a people for other races, the knowledge that one's own is best, the triumphant joy at feeling oneself to be part of humanity's finest—none of that had ever filled these youngsters' addled brains," one protagonist complains before engaging in what Raspail saw as a courageous act of violence against the subhuman "antiworld." Little wonder that an early *Kirkus* reviewer compared the book to *Mein Kampf*.

Today the blood-soaked *Camp of the Saints* has achieved cult status on the European and North American right, where it is often praised as prophetic. Marine Le Pen, the former leader of France's National Rally party, has heartily recommended it to her legions of followers. Steve Bannon has approvingly referenced the novel on numerous occasions. So has Stephen Miller. As far back as 2015, Miller accused the late Pope Francis, who was a strong advocate for the rights of refugees, of wanting a world in which the novel's plot became a reality.

A decade later, in late 2025, the novel was reissued in the United States to capitalize on its renewed popularity. The occasion was marked by a party at a Capitol Hill restaurant—a favorite of the MAGA elite—which was decorated in shabby-chic French style. A recent *New Yorker* profile of Curtis Yarvin described a surreal scene in which the leather-jacketed neo-reactionary visited an aging Camus at his lovingly restored castle in the south of France and the two men discussed their mutual love for Raspail's tale. Yarvin becomes so moved by the work of fiction that he breaks down,

sobbing. “I want my children to die in the twenty-second century. I don’t want them to experience some kind of insane postcolonial Holocaust.”

For the end times fascists now rising to power, this fetid decades-old book and the apocalyptic conspiracies it helped birth clearly provide a powerful permission structure. If you have convinced yourself, as Yarvin seems to, that immigration will lead to a “postcolonial Holocaust,” or like Musk that white genocide is real, or like Miller that immigration is the “destruction of the West,” then you have a duty to prevent it.

Moreover, as Leonardo Bianchi, an Italian expert on far-right conspiracies, told us, “Once this alleged ‘genocide’ is perceived as real, then any response is allowed.” In the face of existential threat of the kind the book peddles, no constraint is possible, and every cruelty required. So it’s no coincidence, Bianchi points out, that this dystopian delusion was initially popularized in the manifestos of far-right mass murders. This disturbing cross-border trend began in 2011 when the Nazi sympathizer Anders Breivik slaughtered seventy-seven people at a Labor Party youth camp in Norway, convinced that just such an “ethnic cleansing” was under way and these youth leaders were its facilitators. Breivik directly inspired Brenton Tarrant’s 2019 live-streamed attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, during which he killed fifty-one people (his meme-filled manifesto was entitled “The Great Replacement”). He, in turn, catalyzed multiple copy-cat mass shootings in the United States, all citing the Great Replacement as their motivating drive. In 2017, a white supremacist at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where marchers chanted “Jews will not replace us,” felt similarly entitled to run his vehicle into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing a young woman named Heather Heyer.

Today, the people using Camus’s hateful fable as permission to kill are no longer marginal figures or lone wolves. Since Trump returned to office, the federal government has harnessed the popular conspiracy to attract new ICE and Border Patrol agents, which may explain why so many officers have been ready to brutalize and shoot immigrants and protesters. “The recruitment rhetoric is ‘Defend your culture.’ What does that mean? I think that’s a dog whistle, basically, for ‘Let’s go after the great replacement,’” explained Jeh Johnson, former Homeland Security secretary.

It’s a strategy, reports *The Washington Post*, backed up by a $100 million budget aimed at attracting “gun rights supporters and military

enthusiasts through online influencers and a geo-targeted advertising campaign." This "wartime recruitment" effort calls on applicants to do their "sacred duty" and "destroy the flood" of "foreign invaders." One ad with with medieval knights features the headline, "The enemies are at the gate." Another asks, "Are you going to cowboy up or just lay there and bleed?" Recruitment posts are also filled with obscure references, secret codes, and numerological clues designed to appeal to a very specific kind of person: young, hyperonline men steeped in the extremist corners of the internet where they are bombarded with the message that they are in an existential race war. After DHS released an ad with the tag line "We'll have our home again," one Proud Boy shared the post alongside an image of a dog whistle and a note: "message received."

As of late 2025, the Trump administration made defeating the Great Replacement a centerpiece of its official foreign policy. That's when the White House released its National Security Strategy (NSS), a legally mandated white paper outlining each administration's assessments of global threats and priorities. Van Jackson, a former Pentagon official turned international relations scholar, described Trump's version of the document as a "manifesto for the global far right" and noted its alarming resemblance to the screeds of anti-immigrant far-right shooters, as if parts had been written by Grok.

The most significant threat to the Western world, the document proclaims, is mass migration. It states as fact that the United States is being undermined by the "cynical manipulation of our immigration system to build up voting blocs loyal to foreign interests within our country"—the same baseless conspiracy that gives Trump license to interfere in US elections or, as on January 6, refuse to accept their results. In the NSS, Europe serves as the ominous warning: the continent apparently faces "the real and stark prospect of civilizational erasure" due to "cratering birthrates, and loss of national identities and self-confidence" that will soon make Europe "unrecognizable."

In the place of old shibboleths about spreading democracy and human rights abroad, the White House lays out an America First, profit-driven approach to restoring Europe to "greatness." The NSS imagines a continent free of "censorship" (that is, fact-checking), "regulatory suffocation" (especially of AI), "disastrous 'climate change' and 'Net Zero' ideologies," and pesky liberal values such as human rights and multiculturalism.

As always, the conspiracy demands decisive, destructive action. “Cultivating resistance to Europe’s current trajectory” is named a top priority. To these ends, the US government announced its plans to throw its full weight behind “patriotic” far-right parties, as well as far-right figures and movements, the rise of which is described as a “cause for great optimism.” A longer leaked version of the NSS detailed plans to assist those parties in Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Poland in order to encourage the crack-up of the European Union. A balkanized and bunkered Europe would deepen the breakup that began with Brexit in 2016—the event welcomed by Jeffrey Epstein in that letter to Peter Thiel as the beginning of the era of “collapse” and a “return to tribalism.” And after the EU passed sweeping digital privacy regulations in 2018, important actors in Silicon Valley began looking for ways to subvert the institution, just as Steve Bannon denounced Brussels as the “beating heart of the globalist project,” adding: “drive the stake through the vampire, the whole thing will start to dissipate.”

Now the Trump administration was proudly laying out plans to do exactly that—all under cover of a racist conspiracy.

Capitalizing on Crisis

It’s a rather stunning ascension. Much like the trajectory of the Third Temple zealots in Israel, the Great Replacement has made a rapid leap from the margins to the mainstream, migrating from the dark corners of the internet and the manifestos of far-right murderers all the way to the White House. Over this same period, the conspiracy has also helped remake European politics, supercharging those “patriotic” parties in country after country.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the far right gained a foothold in the tumult following the global financial crisis. The Tea Party, MAGA’s populist precursor, rose up in 2009, and Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz swept the 2010 Hungarian election by tapping into rising economic frustration. Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia found a toehold for neofascism soon after, as did the euroskepticism of Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland, or AfD. These movements and parties, and others like them, generally found their most fervent adherents among men with low levels of education who turned to the far right seeking shelter from the economic and social headwinds—the left behind and also the increasingly anxious middle and even upper middle classes. They were not the worst off, by any means, but

they feared losing status. The injured strong who reliably make up fascism's base.

But even as Europe's far-right parties gained ground, they might have remained marginal if not for another shock. In 2015, a historic number of refugees were on the move as the result of an earlier wave of reckless wars, from Syria to Eritrea, Afghanistan to Iraq. The financial meltdown had radically worsened conditions for refugees, as did a wave of repression that followed mass uprisings during the so-called Arab Spring. In Syria, severe drought had led to agricultural collapse, fueling mass migration and the brutal civil war. In short, a cocktail of misery converged to push some 1.3 million people to seek asylum in Europe in 2015 alone, often by boarding dangerous small boats to cross the Mediterranean. It was one of the largest mass migration since the end of World War II.

Racism and xenophobia have become so normalized in recent years that it is easy to forget that these were not the only or even the dominant responses at the time. In a great many cases, new arrivals were welcomed by locals with open arms and real solidarity—something we both witnessed firsthand in our reporting. On Greek islands and the Italian coast, we saw people go to great lengths to aid the new arrivals. In many cases, the relief provided was heroic. Ordinary workers set off in their own fishing boats and rescued people who otherwise would have drowned in the Mediterranean. Residents provided shelter, food, medical care, and hospitality.

But these frontline communities, which themselves were still suffering under the punishing budget cuts that followed the financial crisis, often received little support for their solidarity from their own governments or from the European Union. In fact, they often paid a price as fast-crowding conditions caused costs of living to rise. And as the scale of the need grew, small communities became overwhelmed. Soon a humanitarian emergency became a "migrant crisis" and new arrivals were met not by welcoming volunteers but by militarized fences, while rescue vessels were banned and seized.

While many richer parts of Europe resisted fairly distributing responsibility for these newcomers, they also often pushed for continued and deepening economic austerity. Growing numbers of southern Europeans were forced to emigrate in search of opportunity, contributing to the sense that people were losing their culture and their countries.

Meanwhile, refugees were left to languish in camps for years while new draconian policies made it illegal to provide aid to migrants at sea. By 2020, as the far right seized control of the narrative, new arrivals were no longer being treated as human beings with rights—including the legal right to seek asylum, enshrined in international law by the United Nations. They were treated as invaders, out to replace Europeans in their own lands.

Frontline communities in Greece where the boats came ashore became a magnet for bigots, eager to reenact scenes straight out *The Camp of the Saints*. On the same island that had welcomed refugees just a few years ago, earning its residents a Nobel Peace Prize nomination, some began pushing dinghies filled with desperate people back to sea, echoing the novel. A group of doctors who came to volunteer in one of the large camps was attacked on their way out by a fascist mob wielding cudgels with nails. The message was clear: no mercy for the replacists.

The high point of asylum-seeking in Europe lasted two years and shifted the continent's demographics only modestly—but the political landscape was forever altered. Orbán, until then a marginal figure outside Hungary, catapulted to international prominence, and once insignificant far-right parties found new followers and officially entered the political mainstream. Steve Bannon, Stephen Miller, and Donald Trump eagerly imitated their "alien invasion" narratives and grafted them onto the southern border of the United States, where millions were trying to enter the country, seeking shelter from poverty, gang violence, and extreme weather.

In the decade since, the right has surged on both sides of the Atlantic by fusing two trends in the minds of their publics—the economic stress that deepened and never fully lifted following the 2008 global financial crisis, and the high levels of migration in the decade after—blaming the latter for the former. The story they told was a simple one: The struggle you are having paying the bills and finding a decent job? It's not the fault of the bankers and speculators who crashed the economy, or the politicians who passed the bill on to you. It's all those migrants, driving down wages and draining public services. This was the true great replacement—the substitution of migrants for bankers—but it worked, achieving the old trick of channeling rage down instead of up once again, by convincing people they needed to "take back control" (as the Brexit slogan went) not from oligarchs but from immigrants. According to an analysis by *The Economist*,

the hard right now represents “Europe’s most popular family of political parties by vote share.”

The right is succeeding by making inroads in places once thought to be inhospitable or even immune to fascist appeals, from working-class neighborhoods in Portugal to the suburbs of Sweden. In 2025, fourteen years after Breivik went on his malignant spree, the Norwegian anti-immigrant Progress Party achieved its best-ever result, soaring in the polls to double its vote share and nearly unseat the incumbent prime minister. Meanwhile, Austria’s Freedom Party (FPÖ), founded in 1956 by former Nazi functionaries, won the largest share of votes in the national election, or about a third of ballots cast. Against the backdrop of high inflation and rising living costs, the FPÖ advanced an anti-union, pro-business agenda by promoting the “Fortress Austria, Fortress of Freedom” platform, which warned that the “people of the state are gradually being replaced by permanent mass immigration.”

Now this campaign is in a new, even more dangerous phase. Having convinced their followers that an imaginary replacement is not only real, but the most pressing existential crisis facing their societies, the global right is making a coordinated push for the next stage of the supposed solution: mass deportations and citizenship revocations, or what is increasingly called “remigration.” This neutral-sounding term was devised to make extreme policies of ethnic cleansing more palatable to a European voting public that still associates anti-immigrant purges with the Nazis, who considered a proposal to mass-deport Jews to Madagascar, before settling on the Final Solution. The popularity of the phrase is due largely to Martin Sellner, an Austrian activist who was banned from entering the United States after it was revealed that he had received a donation from and warmly corresponded with the Christchurch killer.

The FPÖ made remigration a centerpiece of its “Fortress Austria” platform, and Italy’s far-right Lega party, which currently governs in coalition with Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia, has also embraced the term. Spain’s ultranationalist Vox party has named a target of eight million expulsions, and Germany’s AfD—a party enthusiastically endorsed by both Musk and Vance—has floated plans for “remigrating” millions of people. AfD members proudly wear the phrase on merch, post “remigration” memes “set to jolly Eurodisco tunes,” and promise to make runways “glow red hot” due

to the high number of deportation flights, no matter that the number of asylum claims has dropped precipitously in recent years.

In the UK, the Brexit cheerleader Nigel Farage's rapidly rising Reform party has unveiled "Operation Restoring Justice," its pompously named plan to purge 600,000 people.

In the United States and Europe, Great Replacement hysteria has been raging for over a decade. But in Latin America, this form of politics is just beginning to take hold. In Chile, President José Antonio Kast, whose father was a member of the Nazi Party, campaigned on a plan to deport 300,000 mainly Venezuelan migrants, in addition to pledging to build trenches and walls along the borders with Bolivia and Peru. Despite Argentina's long history of progressive immigration policy, President Javier Milei is emulating Trump by sending agents to conduct theatrical roundups and deportations, no matter that a 2025 poll found that just 4 percent of respondents in Argentina cited immigration control among their top three political concerns. Migration "has never been a sensitive or difficult topic for Argentina," Diego Morales, a human rights lawyer, told *The New York Times*. "They're creating an internal enemy where there isn't one."

In 2025, the US State Department announced plans to open an Office of Remigration. Department of Homeland Security propaganda has implied that one hundred million deportations would be ideal for the nation—a goal that would require deporting more than fifty million natural-born American citizens. On October 14, 2025, the DHS's X account released a post composed of a single word: "Remigrate." This is the context for the administration's heated attacks on birthright citizenship.

While each country and party are distinct, the parallels between the American right and its international counterparts are hardly coincidental: they all arose from the same crucible of crises that we have been returning to throughout this book. And now, as new wars rage, AI puts all workers on notice, and the climate crisis intensifies, a cross-border fascist resurgence is gearing up to take advantage of the biggest upheaval humanity has ever known.

From Climate Denial to Eco-Fascism

For a preview of how the far right is adapting to harvest the spoils of planetary crisis, it's helpful to look to Spain and Santiago Abascal, the swashbuckling leader of the ultranationalist Vox party. A proud Trump ally,

he campaigned on building a wall protecting the border of Spain's North African exclaves (paid for by Morocco, of course). His party promotes mass remigration, neoliberal economics, and traditional Catholic values laced with machismo and nostalgia for Franco. Since its founding in 2013, attacking immigrants has been Vox's bread and butter, but environmental crises have also borne fruit.

The degradation of the natural world is viscerally felt by many Spaniards. The peninsular nation is locked in a battle with desertification, as diminishing rains parch once-green fields and increase the risk of life-endangering floods. Scarce water has led cities to impose restrictions, and heat waves can be sickening and deadly. A Europe-wide survey from 2024 reported that 61 percent of Spanish people "totally agree" that environmental issues have a direct effect on their daily lives, nearly double the EU average.

In 2024, flash floods devastated the coastal city of Valencia. More than two hundred people died, and many had never received a government warning to seek higher ground. In those early months, neighbors and volunteers rushed to help, just as they had during Hurricane Helene. Fifteen thousand people arrived from across the region carrying shovels and brooms, ready to clean up the mud—some of which was hurled at Spain's royal couple when they paid an unwelcome visit to the site. But once again, the disaster provided fertile ground for political opportunists. Far-right groups arrived in droves, bringing young men, many with explicitly fascist and Neo-Nazi associations, to aid recovery and win converts (and also, it was later revealed, to embezzle donations). They appropriated the leftist slogan "Only the People Save the People" to channel growing frustration and sow further distrust with the authorities.

The climate-change-denying Vox seized on this disillusionment and hammered the political opposition for mismanagement, conveniently ignoring that it had helped dismantle the regional emergency response structure during a recent stint in government. Abascal, like Trump, leaned into misinformation, claiming that Spain, in cahoots with EU officials, had demolished iconic dams constructed during the Franco era, and so triggered or worsened the flooding.

The next year, when a record-breaking heat wave fueled wildfires that incinerated more than 400,000 hectares across Portugal and Spain, Abascal repeated the trick. "Everything is burning except the only thing that should

burn: a corrupt system that conspires against the Spanish people," he fumed. As the flames soared, Vox climbed in the polls, becoming the top pick among young voters, growing numbers of whom have become convinced that life was better during the dictatorship. The party's core constituency is Gen Z men who feel they have no future.

Vox may not offer these voters a credible solution to their problems (other than the usual hazy pledge to restore a past that never was), but it does speak to their experience of trying to subsist in a rigged and broken system—and it provides a compelling apocalyptic narrative for who to blame, and consequently, who to fight. In that story, climate change is not an existential threat, but Spain and its environs are indeed being killed. The desiccated crops, the barren land and empty villages, the "extinction" of traditional rural ways of life—all are supposedly caused by the immigrant-loving "climate terrorists" in Brussels and Madrid, backed by globalist financiers like George Soros. Abascal positions his movement as the legitimate guardian of what he has called "real ecology." He envisioned a "green Spain, clean and prosperous, industrialized and in harmony with the environment" that will somehow be achieved through the stripping of economic and environmental regulations and the revival of Franco-style vast engineering projects.

As extreme weather becomes more frequent—in no small part due to the global far right's effectiveness in sabotaging all efforts at coordinated climate action—reactionary parties are being forced to incorporate environmental issues into their messaging in ways that go beyond the simplistic climate denial of decades past. Vox is helping to write the new playbook: acknowledge the disaster, conjure a storm of disinformation, deflect blame onto liberal elites, and vilify immigrants or other outsiders.

In Argentina in early 2026, President Milei put the strategy to the test after wildfires tore across the Patagonia national forest. The conflagration, which burned over eighty square miles, was fueled by record heat and Milei's drastic cuts to fire prevention and response, including gutting firefighter wages. To avoid responsibility, government officials boosted conspiracies blaming the fires on the indigenous Mapuche people, who have been resisting plans for development of their ancestral lands. The lies served as a pretext to violently raid twelve of their communities.

We can also see aspects of this approach in a genre of popular right-wing memes that equates migrants with ecological destruction, most of it

AI-generated. Italy's Lega Party shares AI videos of a future and fully Islamized Milan overrun with Muslims, the city derelict and covered in debris. In Canada, similarly synthetic photos and videos show brown-skinned people in garbage-strewn outlets of Tim Horton's, the country's iconic doughnut chain. As the journalist Zach Gaouad has noted, this kind of imagery reveals a repressed awareness that the environment is in peril but engages in bigoted projection: the immigrants, the replacers, are the cause of the impurity and degradation, and the unwelcome interlopers are as disposable as the trash that surrounds them.

It's a message with deep and ugly roots, going back to the early days of American conservationism. Several prominent environmental thinkers stressed the need to preserve pristine, untrammeled wilderness from supposedly polluting migrants, often expressing sympathy for Malthusian or even eugenicist ideologies. This ideology, now known as eco-fascism, found its most violent expression in the Nazi fusion of "blood and soil," an idealized German body and landscape that was supposedly under existential threat from cosmopolitan, urban, bourgeois Jews. National Socialism promoted "natural" and "organic" farming and diet and while Hitler's regime passed some modest environmental protections. But ecological concerns always took a backseat to the genocidal agenda that demanded the industrial domination of nature and total sacrifice to the war machine.

Today, the eco-fascist preoccupation with environmental and personal purity is surging once again, expressed through the far right's embrace of wellness culture and so-called trad wives. MAGA's Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) faction is the highest-profile example, though a related form of politics can be seen in Romania. The country's second-largest party, the AUR, is led by a former environmental activist, George Simion, who has allied with vaccine and health conspiracists. He positions the far-right party as the defender of nature and Romania's "God-given territory," which apparently means protecting virgin forests, promoting food sovereignty, and celebrating the traditional Romanian peasant as a model of sustainable Christian living—all while opposing globalism, immigration, and climate action.

In France, the National Rally party has long appealed to blood-and-soil politics, and is finding growing success. In 2014, the party's former leader Marine Le Pen launched Nouvelle Écologie ("New Ecology"), a framework that rejects the purported "punitive" ecology of the left in favor of

“localism” (in fact, the French left has always had a focus on local farming and economies, but also recognizes the international nature of the climate crisis). Le Pen has called environmentalism “the natural child of patriotism,” claiming an intrinsic connection between native French citizens and their ecology that immigrants inherently lack. “Those who are nomadic,” she says, “do not care about the environment; they have no homeland.”

Jordan Bardella, her slick thirty-year-old successor, has his sights firmly on the French presidency. And since environmental protection consistently ranks as a high priority for French voters—second only to purchasing power—he has worked to stake out a position more subtle than classic climate-change denial. “Our political family would be making a big mistake if it behaved as blindly on the environmental issue as the left has done on immigration for the past thirty years. We can no longer afford to deny it,” he recently told reporters. He now accepts that the climate is changing, but questions whether it is due to human activity. Which is why he’s leading the charge, along with Vox and other far-right parties, to kill the Green Deal in the European Parliament, the continent’s current road map to a carbon-neutral future.

This may seem like a glaring contradiction, but not inside the logic of what we are calling end times fascism. Because according to Bardella, the challenge ahead won’t be regulating carbon emissions but controlling climate refugees. France must ready itself for a “worldwide mass exodus” of displaced people and stand ready to repel them. “Borders are the environment’s greatest ally,” Bardella has said, and the only way “we will save the planet.” Bunkering the nation, in other words, is his climate policy.

Clearly, this version of the far right understands what can no longer be credibly denied: that many more people will be in need of escape, safe passage, and shelter in the years and decades ahead. Fires, drought, sea-level rise, and species collapse all mean that the spaces on this planet compatible with human civilization are both contracting and shifting. As more people flee charred and drowned lands, as well as wars and poverty that are often deepened by climate impacts, the places that do continue to support a relatively stable life, with the possibility of finding paid work, will attract high levels of migration. By some estimates, more than a billion people may be displaced by climate shocks by 2050.

All over the world, the authoritarian right is surging based on this reality, whether the climate connection is explicitly acknowledged or not. And they are proposing their versions of solutions: Fight off the invaders. Detain them and force them to remigrate. Fortify the border. Double down on the supremacist ideologies—rooted in race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality—that justify this mass human sacrifice. Do absolutely anything but improve the odds of a better, more livable future for everyone.

Seen in this light, the far right's obsession with the Great Replacement isn't just conspiratorial thinking or a cynical deflection—it's also a confession, an admittance of a deeper truth that almost always goes unspoken. This brutal form of nationalist survivalism is the only place that Great Replacement thinking can take us in a fast-warming world. Indeed, Renaud Camus, comfortably ensconced in his fourteenth-century fortress in the south of France, prides himself on being environmentally minded. Mass migration, he claims, threatens sustainability: "my opposition to global replacism is entirely ecological. I think the worse thing for ecology is global replacement."

We might think of this as the mass-market version of the bespoke start-up nations and private enclaves favored by the billionaires. Peddlers of the Great Replacement also know that the planet's life-support systems are crashing, destroying the homelands of countless people who did nothing to create the crisis. But they aren't going to let that get in the way of pushing emissions even higher. Instead, they are going to anticipate the hordes and bunker up. For the eco-fascist right, the nation itself is the bunker, with guns pointed both outward and inward.

We see this most clearly in the rage-filled manifestos of Great Replacement mass shooters, which are shot through with environmental urgency and a chilling embrace of eco-fascist identity. "Kill the invaders, kill the overpopulation and by doing so save the environment," wrote the Christchurch shooter. His statement was echoed by the man who hunted down Latinos at a Walmart in El Paso in 2019, killing twenty-three people and wounding twenty-two more, apparently convinced that immigrants shopping at a US superstore were a threat to sustainability. Three years later, the man who assassinated ten mostly Black shoppers at a Tops grocery store in Buffalo similarly raged against the left for presiding over the "destruction of the natural environment itself through mass immigration and uncontrolled urbanization." Foreseeing a destabilized future with

diminishing resources, and imagining themselves to be the true victims of ethnic cleansing, these supremacists engaged in unspeakable slaughter to protect their chosen, fair-skinned few.

Protecting the chosen also, inevitably, means controlling reproduction. It's hardly surprising that eco-fascists are also raging misogynists, or that interest in boosting birth rates is now surging on the hard right: Spain faces "a choice between natalism and immigration," proclaims Abascal. Unlike religious objections to abortion, this new obsession with low birth rates stems not from concern with the rights of the unborn, but from Great Replacement–style anxieties about the survival of "their" people—which can mean white people, Christian people, or European-descended people, or people with supposedly superior genes or high IQs.

The throughline, whether it's Raspail and Camus's racist concerns about the fertility of foreigners or Elon Musk's "legion" of children, is the idea that your preferred category of women need to have more of your preferred kind of babies, whether they want to or not. And so Tucker Carlson denounces feminism while selling his listeners on testicle-tanning to boost virility and sperm count, as the Heritage Foundation—the institution behind Project 2025—works to defund higher education with the stated aim of pushing more women to become wives and mothers. Peter Thiel has investments in online publications and "femtech" that encourage women to embrace trad-wife culture and discontinue birth control, while Jordan Peterson says people need to shut up about "climate hysteria" because it's scaring young people off starting families.

Time and again, the pushes to lock down the border and police women's bodies overlap. As the feminist scholar Cara Daggett has warned, "Climate change can catalyse fascist desires to secure a *lebensraum*," the German concept of space for living, first invoked to steal land and justify genocide in southwest Africa, then brought home to Europe to do the same. Few will state it so brutally and honestly, but this, ultimately, is what the quest to fortify Europe, the United States, and the broader Anglosphere is all about: displacing the very real awareness that we are approaching planetary limits onto the world's vulnerable. This is a war over who survives the future.

The Bunker Must Be Stockpiled

While still officially committed to climate denial, many MAGA elites, like their partners in Silicon Valley, also understand that the world is warming.

That’s why the centerpiece of Trump’s foreign policy has been to lay claim to the resources he and his allies might need to weather the tough times ahead. When the White House covetously scans the globe, they are stockpiling for the chaos and collapse they themselves are causing. Maybe it’s Panama’s canal. Or Ukraine’s critical minerals. Or Canada’s fresh water. Even as unwanted people are pushed out of the national bunker, all of these coveted resources must be brought inside the militarized fortress (or Golden Dome, to use Trump’s preferred metaphor).

In early 2026, the administration announced Project Vault, a stockpile of critical minerals for American companies designed to shield them from supply shocks. This is in addition to the nearly $8 billion that Secretary of War Pete Hegseth was granted to build a similar defense-sector hoard—a cache that will be so vast it could have instead been used to double the amount of existing renewable energy storage. In contrast to old-school imperialism, this is what we mean by supersized prepping, at the level of the nation-state.

You can see this smash-and-grab impulse in the administration’s stealth kidnapping of Nicolas Maduro and seizure of Venezuela’s key asset. “We’re in the oil business,” Trump declared from Palm Beach. They are visible, too, in the strong-arm negotiations with Zambia, during which US officials threatened to withhold critical AIDS and other health funding to ensure privileged access to the country’s supplies of copper, cobalt, and lithium. For those safely ensconced in the White House, Latin America and Africa are perceived as both extraction sites and dumping grounds—places from which to pillage natural wealth and to which to expel unwanted people to bare-bones and brutal detention facilities in Cameroon or, if they have the wrong tattoo, to CECOT, Nayib Bukele’s infamous mega-prison in El Salvador.

The awareness of the coming climate breakdown is clearest in Trump’s obsession with “acquiring” Greenland, which, in the MAGA imaginary, is a land of limitless wealth and wonders—rare-earth minerals, oil, and new shipping routes. Recounting his meetings with Trump, Secretary-General Mark Rutte of NATO said the opening up of those valuable sea lanes was a key issue for the US president. Rarely spoken by Trump and his inner circle is the fact that the only reason they can imagine unlocking all that wealth is because the Arctic is warning so rapidly.

Trump's old friend Ronald Lauder, who is part of a consortium to mine lithium in the war-torn nation of Ukraine, said the quiet part out loud. In a *New York Post* op-ed defending Trump's Greenland fixation, Lauder wrote, "Beneath its ice and rock lies a treasure trove of rare-earth elements essential for AI, advanced weaponry and modern technology. As ice recedes, new maritime routes are emerging, reshaping global trade and security." The Arctic was "once a frozen afterthought," he went on, but now, "It is America's next frontier." It was clear that the MAGA-friendly readers of the *Post* well understand the climate realities as well: a poll that appeared alongside Lauder's article asked readers to choose a "Top Reason to Grab Greenland." One of the possibilities offered was "awesome beaches, someday."

It's time to update our mental models: like the tech executives abandoning their green pledges, today's far-right politicians, and many of the people who vote for them, are not climate-change deniers. They are arsonists, knowingly allowing the world to burn, even as they stand eager and ready to blame the people their policies will uproot and dispossess.

If the warped and conspiratorial worldview of the far-right has been able to advance in recent years, it's partly because it has faced so little political opposition on the crucial issues at its core. For too long centrists and liberals have been content to offer voters a faded copy of the forces they claim they are trying to defeat instead of providing a rousing alternative agenda, such as a full-throated defense of universal human rights (including the rights of migrants) and science-based climate action. By failing to boldly counter the far right, they have contributed to the distortion of science and the demonization of immigrants.

Consider Kamala Harris's failed presidential run. Even after Hurricane Helene's devastation was followed almost immediately by the ravages of Hurricane Milton, Harris stayed mostly silent about climate change, her silence opening a void that conspiracists rushed to fill. Meanwhile, she expressed vociferous support for fracking in Pennsylvania, hastily embraced crypto, made warm overtures to Republican warmongers, and boasted of how tough she would be on the border.

The example of Prime Minister Keir Starmer in Britain offers a related warning. Threatened by the rise of the Reform UK party with its plans for six hundred thousand deportations, Starmer gave a 2025 speech that aggressively deployed nativist language and detailed a new, restrictive

immigration agenda. His remarks directly echoed the rhetoric of Enoch Powell, one of the most racist politicians in British history, by warning that immigration would make Britain an “island of strangers.” Rather than winning conservative voters as he hoped, Starmer only amplified his opponent’s Great Replacement talking points. Research showed that the speech provided no electoral upside while alienating a significant portion of Labour’s base. (After initially digging in his heels, the prime minister finally said he “deeply” regretted his phrasing.)

Missing in both cases was any kind of honest account about how the hoarding of the people at the top fuels the conditions that cause climate chaos, mass migration, and widespread financial insecurity. And just as important was the lack of a positive vision. There were no credible proposals for how we can live together in times of crisis with some measure of safety, which is what so many long to hear and to help realize. The result was an expansion of the vacuum on which the hard right feeds. End times fascists don’t succeed through cruelty and cunning alone; they thrive in the absence of moral clarity, imagination, and courage.

Escape the Bunker

There was a time, not that long ago, when the United States was embroiled in a very different conversation about how to prepare for and respond to an existential threat, one that was neither fictional nor conspiratorial.

In 1961, a year before the Cuban Missile Crisis, nuclear war felt near and far from abstract. President Robert F. Kennedy decided the country needed to prepare for the worst, and called for “fallout protection for every American as rapidly as possible.” He wasn’t the first president to raise the issue, but he captured the public’s attention like no other.

While the federal government identified hundreds of thousands of existing buildings in which people could take cover in the event of an attack (the source of the famous yellow “fallout shelter” icon), the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization also urged people to take protection into their own hands and start building backyard bunkers. To help, the government distributed 22 million copies of the 1959 pamphlet “The Family Fallout Shelter,” which provided handy step-by-step instructions, while “Family Food Stockpile for Survival” gave tips on provisions. Terrified by images of mushroom clouds and stories of radiation sickness, suburbanites rushed to construct underground survival pods.

But as the shelter craze intensified, some fearful Americans began anticipating troubling contingencies. Say they had a shelter, and it only had room and resources for four people—were they supposed to abandon their friends and extended family or turn their backs on needy strangers? And what if someone on the next street didn't prepare, and came for their stockpiles? Would every bunker need to be armed? Would all survivors have to become stone-cold killers?

Unsurprisingly, some embraced the imagined rebirth of the frontier: "I'm going to mount a machine gun at the hatch to keep the neighbors out if the bomb falls," one man told *Time* for an article entitled "Gun Thy Neighbor," and he wasn't alone. A Texas hardware dealer pointed to his rifles and tear gas and his shelter's four-inch-thick door: "This isn't to keep radiation out, it's to keep people out," he clarified.

Soon the country was embroiled in a national debate about the ethics of bunkering, with clergy weighing in on both sides. A Jesuit preacher wrote a moral defense of "the grim guidelines of essential morality at the shelter hatchway," granting permission to kill in defense of one's private asylum. Others issued outraged responses. "I do not see how any Christian conscience can condone a policy which puts supreme emphasis on saving your own skin, without regard to the plight of your neighbor," wrote the Episcopal bishop of Washington, D.C. Eugene Rabinowitch, a Manhattan Project chemist who personally set the Doomsday Clock for nearly three decades, decried the gun-thy-neighbor discussions as "demonstrations of human depravity." Even Kennedy responded: "Let us concentrate more on keeping enemy bombers and missiles away from our shores, and concentrate less on keeping neighbors away from our shelters."

In the end, only around 1 percent of Americans built some kind of fallout shelter during this panicked period. Some of the reasons were practical: not everyone owned their own homes or had the necessary financial resources, which only underscores why a comprehensive federal plan was needed. But the main reason was that people had moral qualms. They didn't want to be those people crouched in a hole with guns pointing outward.

Almost overnight, shelter building came to be seen as a shameful, selfish activity. "What sends chills up and down my spine, is imagining a child or two out there saying 'Let me in!' when you're full and you just can't let them in," one conflicted shelter manufacturer confessed.

In the estimation of the historian Kenneth D. Rose, author of *One Nation Underground*, the rejection of fallout shelters by the majority of Americans reflected a "maturity that was often lacking in their leadership." People were rightly unsettled by the prospect of abandoning or turning on their neighbors—whether that meant families who lived on their block or people who lived in other states or even other countries. The chance to survive the apocalypse wasn't worth losing their humanity or risking the "entombment of their nation and their souls."

Today we look back on the fallout shelters of the 1950s and '60s as nostalgic relics, but there's a way we remain locked inside the structures built during that anxious era. The ultrarich, of course, build literal bunkers, under their mansions or on exclusive islands, eager to be among a handful of survivors who make it through the inferno to an imagined purified paradise. But for those of us who have to make do with flimsier forms of protection, the private bunker is a state of mind, a way of orienting and protecting ourselves in a world filled with risk and uncertainty.

To be clear, the problem is not the act of preparing for crisis. Some measure of prepping is just sensible in our time of near-constant shocks—no one will ever regret having some stored bottles of water, charged batteries, a packed go-bag, and a group chat linking us with the people who live nearby. We can also work to become less dependent on brittle grids for energy, and to build up our local supplies of the essentials: food, water, medicines. To survive the future, we have to take better care of one another, particularly the most vulnerable, and be prepared for oppression however it comes. The danger is the assumption that disasters are something we can and will weather alone, or just with our nuclear family, rather than something we survive together.

End times fascism aims to trap us in a defensive, fearful crouch, in that futureless downward spiral that Trump is banking on. The "gun thy neighbor" ethos is presented as the only realistic route to security and protection. Arm yourself, militarize the border, prepare for a final battle, do whatever it takes to make it to the other side.

And yet just like in the 1960s, most people today reject this kind of brutal survivalism. When tested by crisis, a whole lot of people—regardless of how they vote—choose to do things like risk their lives to rescue each

other’s pets in kayaks, or haul buckets of water so people they don’t know can flush their toilets. We see this in the brave demonstrations of neighborly love and commitment breaking out around the world. From the antifascist counterprotesters at Tommy Robinson’s Unite the Kingdom rally, to Germany’s historic protests against “remigration,” to the dozens of communities across the United States that have organized to block the sale of properties for use as ICE detention centers, often with the support of Republican residents and officials.

One result of the Trump regime’s festival of sadism is a far right in disarray. As we will soon see, the administration’s mounting betrayals have caused conflicts and splits in the MAGA coalition that may prove irreparable. As tension mounts, some leaders on the far right are leaning even more aggressively into extremism and bigotry, determined to further radicalize their followers. But these figures may be overestimating ordinary people’s appetite for cruelty—just as they underestimate the human capacity for everyday heroism. They may well have miscalculated something else, too: the willingness of their own base to put up with leaders and influencers bent on profiting off misery, disaster, and bigotry. In fact, crisis grifters may turn out to be a fatal weakness of end times fascism.

7

For-Profit Fascism

Cracks Appear in the Armageddon Industrial Complex

Greed has become radicalized to the extent that it no longer needs political thinkers and organic intellectuals, just Fox News and bandwidth.
—MIKE DAVIS, *Thanatos Triumphant*

Minnesotans have found and loved one another in a world atomized by social media, where empty men have tried to fill their lonely soul with lies about their own inherent superiority. Minnesotans have preserved everything worthwhile about "Western civilization," while armed brutes try to tear it down by force.
—ADAM SERWER

In 2021 Nick Shirley was feeling down. The nineteen-year-old knew he had it in him to become a rich and famous YouTuber, just like the other young men he saw racking up millions of views in his feed. Yet instead of being a star, the Utah native was stuck in Florida selling pest control door-to-door. Since he was a kid, he had tried out various genres, churning out wholesome family fun, faith-based, and prank videos. He had even reported from the January 6 Capitol insurrection. But competition in the influencer economy was fierce, with so many people trying to crack the same shifting algorithms, and none of his attempts had really worked. Unsure of what else to do, he went on a missionary trip to Chile, spending two years offline to spread the gospel of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

When he returned home to the United States in 2023, his mom—also an aspiring content creator, though she prefers TikTok—suggested he head to the border. The right-wing media their family consumed was talking about nothing but a supposed "invasion" happening there, and she thought that collecting some firsthand content was a surefire way for her ambitious son to build an audience. The younger Shirley took his mother's advice. He traveled to Arizona and, using the Spanish he had polished as a missionary, calmly approached newcomers to the state with a microphone, asked them about politics, and produced a series of videos. No journalist, Shirley

played loose with the translations, and, in one, the edited interview gave the impression that the noncitizens he met planned to illegally vote for Biden. In fact, they had simply said that they preferred Biden to Trump. Predictably, the clips took off: here was proof that a Great Replacement of voters was under way, a plot to steal America.

Shirley's story up to this point is hardly unique. A 2025 *Wall Street Journal* poll found that the proportion of Americans who believe that hard work is rewarded has plummeted to 31 percent, barely a third, and most people now believe the next generation will be worse off than the one that preceded it. Like banking on crypto and online betting markets, playing the attention algorithms in the hopes of making it as an influencer is a dream now shared by the majority of American youth. And inside those algorithms, content showing young right-wing men demeaning and dominating members of groups that have supposedly tried to displace and replace them performs particularly well.

As the 2024 election grew nearer, Shirley, now hooked on his own virality, kept chasing headlines, eager, he would recall, to "be the next Alex Jones." He traveled, along with other right-wing fortune-seekers, to Springfield, Ohio, where he had heard the racist smear that members of the Haitian community were eating their neighbors' pets. When Shirley found a young girl who told him that her aunt's cat had been stolen by a Haitian, he knew he had struck YouTube gold.

Like the Great Replacement conspiracy, the rumors about Haitians and pets did not spread organically. The story was amplified and engineered into a national scandal by prominent conservatives, particularly Christopher Rufo. A Manhattan Institute fellow with ties to the Claremont Institute, Rufo was at that point best known for his campaign against the supposed "cult indoctrination" of critical race theory. He had also helped lead the charge to oust Claudine Gay, the first Black woman president of Harvard, by combing through her dissertation to find instances of alleged plagiarism. Rufo went all in on the Ohio rumors, offering a $5,000 "bounty" to anyone who gave him exclusive access to "hard, verifiable evidence." He shared grainy footage of an alleged feline barbecue that was viewed thirty million times, thanks in large part to a repost from JD Vance, who, like Trump, latched on to the story.

The video was quickly debunked (commenters were quick to point out that it looked like chicken), along with the broader accusations, which

Ohio's Republican governor called "a piece of garbage that was simply not true." A woman who'd told the police that her cat was taken by Haitians later admitted she was confused (the cat was in her basement). But when pushed on CNN, Vance was unapologetic: "The American media totally ignored this stuff until Donald Trump and I started talking about cat memes. If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that's what I'm going to do." In other words, his side has the right to lie if it leads to their desired outcome: turning Americans against each other, winning the attention wars, and then winning elections in the service of expelling the foreign-born. So said the guy who once decried this sort of anti-immigrant fear-mongering as "reprehensible."

Once Trump and Vance were in power, Shirley's star continued to climb, and he was granted new levels of access to power. A trip to El Salvador's CECOT prison, to make content in "the presence of the devil," as Shirley described the prisoners. A "Citizen Journalist Award" bestowed at Mar-a-Lago. A visit to the White House followed, for a "Roundtable on Antifa."

Before 2025 was over, Shirley hit viral pay dirt, and helped unleash events in which two people paid with their lives. Once again, it began with Rufo lying about immigrants. Rufo co-authored an article claiming that Somali scammers had robbed the state of Minnesota of billions of dollars through various welfare programs, and that they were funneling the money back to Somalia to fund the militant group Al-Shabaab. He provided no credible source for the claim about funding terrorism, and it was quickly rebuked by Trump's own Department of Justice. Rufo also failed to mention that journalists and state and federal authorities had been digging into the fraud allegations for years, and there was no cover up. The FBI, for example, had been investigating one nonprofit, Feeding our Future, since 2022. By the time Rufo began raising the issue, more than seventy people had been indicted in connection with a scheme that stole $250 million, and while most of those defendants were of Somali descent, the nonprofit's executive director and fraud ringleader was white.

Rufo's inflammatory claims might have faded away if Shirley had not gone to Minnesota to once again rustle up evidence to substantiate a conspiracy theory. The result was a 42-minute video in which the now twenty-four-year-old visits multiple daycare centers run by people of

Somali descent and, after encountering wary staff and locked doors, claims to have uncovered proof that they weren't daycare centers at all.

Shirley's visits, which were often conducted at off-hours, or ignored the fact that childcare providers generally don't open their doors to strange men, ultimately added no new information to ongoing investigations of a genuine fraud ring. Still, he once again kicked off a firestorm, thanks to fans in high places. "This dude has done far more useful journalism than any of the winners of the 2024 @pulitzercenter prizes," Vance enthused, reposting Shirley's video. (Around this time, Susie Wiles, Trump's chief of staff, told *Vanity Fair* that Vance has been a "conspiracy theorist for a decade.") Musk also boosted Shirley's video on his platform, where it soon collected more than 142 million views. Rufo would later proudly describe the video's aftermath as a "full moral panic."

That panic placed Minnesota directly in MAGA's crosshairs. An anti-immigrant crackdown was already in motion in that state, but Shirley's video functioned as an accelerant, providing the viral justification for a dramatic escalation. First, the Trump administration announced it was freezing $10 billion in federal funds for childcare, foster care, and welfare programs in Minnesota, since it couldn't very well finance fraud—and for good measure, it was also freezing funds for California, Colorado, Illinois, and New York. Then Washington sent in the men with guns.

At the peak of the operation, up to four thousand ICE and Border Patrol agents occupied the state of Minnesota, with most of them in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis–Saint Paul. They were led by Greg Bovino, the swaggering Border Patrol chief who says he was inspired to join the agency after watching Jack Nicholson and Harvey Keitel in *The Border*, a 1982 film in which the corrupt agents are clearly the bad guys. It showed. Bovino paraded his troops through the Twin Cities as though they were starring in their own action thriller, with Bovino himself activating a tear gas canister at one point and hurling it at demonstrators in a snowy park.

Everyone in his operation seemed to be performing for an imaginary audience somewhere else, with the freezing streets of Minneapolis transformed into a kind of soundstage for broadcasting the story of MAGA's apocalyptic war. Minnesota locals, who organized by the thousands to protect their neighbors, found themselves playing bit roles in MAGA's prescripted narratives. As residents escalated their resistance, protecting schools and tracking ICE vehicles, right-wing content creators

descended on the city like “a plague of locusts,” in the words of Doran Schranz, the longtime local organizer who chairs Faith in Minnesota. The Department of Homeland Security partnered with the content creators, and schemed about how to spin clips to make arrests look more exciting, and the detainees appear more menacing. “It’s a war,” an ICE official said in an internal chat as they plotted the next content drop.

When the ICE agent Jonathan Ross killed the mother and poet Renee Good in her car, he had his cell phone in one hand and his gun in the other. Ross’s video was almost immediately released by the authorities, to spread fear and delight the base, especially the part where Ross appears to call Good a “fucking bitch.” When agents next shot the ICU nurse Alex Pretti in the back at least three times, the propaganda machine got to work once again. As the city grieved, Vice President Vance rushed to smear both Good and Pretti as would-be assassins and domestic terrorists, asking of Good: “What young mother shows up and decides they’re gonna throw their car in front of ICE officers who are enforcing legitimate law?” He soon implied the entire city was in on a Great Replacement plot: “We really want illegal aliens to vote in elections and will riot to ensure that it is so,” he posted on X, in supposed imitation of his Democratic Party opponents.

Why was Minnesota so important? Clearly it was about far more than simply arresting “criminal” immigrants or defending the Minnesota taxpayer from welfare fraud—in fact, multiple federal prosecutors working on the actual fraud cases resigned in protest of ICE’s surge. Some of it was revenge. For many in the MAGA movement, Minnesota is viewed as the site of an unforgivable and still unpunished offense: the crime of cross-race, cross-class, and cross-faith solidarity. It was in Minneapolis, after all, where the movement for Black lives took off in 2020, following the police murder of George Floyd. Because of this, inside the far-right imagination, Minneapolis bears special responsibility for helping propel the “woke” era of racial justice and DEI that end times fascists are determined to erase and destroy.

By turning Minneapolis into the front line of this war, the city became something else as well. Overnight, it was transformed into a laboratory for a new economic paradigm, a showroom for a fully privatized, for-profit, AI-enabled evolution of fascism. The nation as bunker is not only a racial and political idea—it’s also a business model, and the weeks-long occupation of Minnesota was its first big demonstration.

Every part of the occupation and operation was being mined for somebody's profit. While the influencers extracted content for their viral videos, tech companies with DHS contracts were extracting data on the protestors and simultaneously delivering data to ICE so they could pinpoint immigrants in their homes and workplaces. More than 3,700 immigrants were detained over the course of what officials called Operation Metro Surge, and once they were grabbed, many entered another kind of for-profit network: private prisons and detention centers, most of them in Texas and Louisiana, often transported on contractor-run flights.

But if the federal operation used Minnesota to showcase the booming economy of mass surveillance and human containment, that is not all the city ended up showcasing. For weeks in the winter of 2026, when Minneapolis was transformed into a theater, it did not only broadcast the story that Nick Shirley, JD Vance, and Christopher Rufo had hoped that it would.

Instead, as its people came together to reject ICE and to honor their fallen friends, Minnesotans sent a very different message. Through their actions they showed that a great many Americans do not want their country to be a high-tech bunker, do not want their hardworking neighbors terrorized and disappeared out of their homes, and do not want their every move tracked by sensors and drones, all for the enrichment of a tiny elite. And when those unscripted messages reached the broader US public, quite a few Trump voters, and even a few Trump influencers, found themselves in agreement.

Fascism is always an alliance of interests bound together in common cause. Minneapolis is one of the critical places where the end times fascism alliance began to crack.

A Grifters' Paradise

When we spoke to Schranz, she told us that during those fateful winter months, residents of the Twin Cities felt like they were caught in "a wraparound surround-sound assault." Not only were some people being physically snatched out of their homes, cars, and workplaces, but it was as if everyone's bodies were being "harvested" in various ways—tracked by private software, used to create invisible but powerful digital profiles, turned into viral content. Agents used proprietary software to locate immigrants they wanted to arrest and they also appeared to know some

protesters' names and addresses before they had said a word, often using this mysteriously procured knowledge as a scare tactic. "There's nothing about this that is a law enforcement paradigm," Schranz said. "It is a repression paradigm. It is a threats-and-intimidation paradigm." It's data as control, courtesy of companies including Clearview AI, Paragon, and the omnipresent Palantir.

Generative AI has all kinds of limitations as a consumer product—but when it comes to mass surveillance, it's an inarguably potent tool, one for which governments are more than willing to pay. And the companies selling surveillance are just one part of the economy of repression that was on display in Minnesota. As we have seen, powerful corporate players and their political allies have honed a symbiotic relationship with catastrophe, one that no longer simply profits from short-lived shocks, like hurricanes and ground wars, but rather actively invests in our new rolling, multifront state of permanent emergency. This is what we mean when we say that end times fascism is the next phase of disaster capitalism, with Palantir emblematic of these new trends.

Palantir was founded by Peter Thiel and associates in 2003, the same year that the United States invaded Iraq. It was part of a wave of new security-focused tech companies spawned in the aftermath of September 11, all promising to provide the intelligence necessary to avoid future attacks. Palantir received seed funding from the CIA's investment arm In-Q-Tel, explicitly to help intelligence agencies integrate and analyze data to identify terrorist threats. The Department of Homeland Security was itself created in this period, along with ICE.

There were many in the administration of George W. Bush who wanted to go further than simply improving intelligence gathering and analysis. Emboldened by new powers bestowed by the Patriot Act, and captivated by new digital technologies, they launched "Total Information Awareness," a vast network to collect and collate data from massive caches of cell phone calls, Amazon orders, library book loans, airline ticket purchases, and much more, identifying patterns of potentially threatening behavior. These were the years before the launch of the iPhone and the steady normalization of commercial data tracking, so this dragnet approach to surveillance struck many as an unacceptably authoritarian price to pay for supposed "security." The Total Information Awareness program was officially killed in 2003, though many of its functions remained under different names.

What became clear during the occupation of Minnesota was that, on the pretext of combatting the supposed Great Replacement conspiracy, the post-9/11 vision for governments and corporations collaborating to achieve Total Information Awareness was back. Now the old dream of full-spectrum surveillance was being supercharged by generative AI, with Palantir at its center. And the enemy being tracked was no longer potential terrorist cells planning violent attacks on the United States but much larger categories of people: Black and brown immigrants, supposedly storming the gates, as well as the political left more broadly.

As they wage these new wars, the rhetoric from political and corporate leaders has become increasingly incendiary. After the United States launched its assault on Venezuela, abducting its president and first lady, Palantir's stock spiked (its assistance with the operation was widely reported even before the controversy over its collaboration with Anthropic). On X, the company's co-founder Joe Lonsdale retweeted a triumphant post declaring, "Commies aren't allowed in this hemisphere and every one of them should be blown up along with their gravesites." Lonsdale added his own approving line: "Exactly. What did you think founding Palantir was supposed to be about?"

For Lonsdale, the war on the left extends into his own country. Amid the federal occupation of Minneapolis, he described the resistance not as activism but as an "organized illegal insurgency" and called for more arrests. Some of this is clearly ideological—Lonsdale is a relentless hard-right crusader. But it's also financially rewarding: the more places and people with whom the US government is at perpetual war, and the less chance there is of those wars ever ending, the better it is for Palantir, which, as we have been told, is "built for bad times."

Palantir is far from the only company to have pivoted to this model. Today, various companies that constructed shelters during hurricanes now race to build immigrant detention centers. Defense, disaster reconstruction, mass incarceration, immigration detention and deportation (or "remigration"), and even humanitarian aid have merged into a single sector—one that views peace and ecological stability as threats. The country's largest private prison companies crow that revenue is up 100 percent compared with the same period the previous year. (There were "unprecedented growth opportunities in front of our company," raved George Zoley, the founder of Geo Group—a firm that, in recent years, has

had both Trump's attorney general Pam Bondi and "border czar" Tom Homan on its payroll.) Meanwhile, dozens of regional small and mid-sized family-owned enterprises are cashing in, providing construction and logistics support for top dollar, their shady business practices papered over with large campaign contributions.

When we zoom out and look at the range of players profiting from Trump's crackdown on domestic adversaries and immigrants—from companies selling facial recognition software to those building concentration camps—something becomes clear. End times fascism doesn't just have what Umberto Eco described as an "Armageddon complex"—it has an Armageddon-industrial complex. And it is booming.

One of the most profitable arms of this complex is the production and dissemination of fascist propaganda, as we learned when former Homeland Security secretary Kristi Noem found herself in hot water over her approval of a $220 million contract for a self-aggrandizing advertising campaign. One commercial featured her glamorously galloping on horseback, with some of the money going to a firm linked to a member of her staff.

The real power, however, is in the social media platforms carrying the propaganda. In 2022, the same year Musk bought Twitter, Trump started Truth Social, and now a major stakeholder in TikTok is the fervently pro-MAGA and pro-Israel Ellison family. Tellingly, during his brief stint as a venture capitalist, JD Vance made one of his first investments in Rumble, the conservative streaming service that hosts a range of figures who, at various points, were banned from other platforms, including Steve Bannon, Alex Jones, the accused sex trafficker Andrew Tate, and the besuited, Hitler-loving jester Nick Fuentes. Vance still holds a private stake in the company, which helps the most extreme content farmers turn crisis into currency.

The entire influencer economy is based on what the scholar D. Graham Burnett and others have described as a kind of attention fracking: using finally tuned analytics to keep followers rapt and clicking, while battalions of "clippers" get paid for isolating and scattering the most inflammatory, viral moments across the internet. While the numbers are hard to quantify, there's no doubt this is big business. Goldman Sachs predicts the "creator economy" will grow to nearly half a trillion dollars by 2027, with some popular figures estimated to make tens of millions a year in revenue, and in some cases even more.

Here we have the material basis of the current MAGA coalition. “It’s an alliance of this family-based regional scam capital and a reactionary fraction of the tech sector that focuses on defense and security,” the writer John Ganz observes. “Then you add in ICE’s function as an employment program for the Trumpenproletarian mob and all the illiterate influencers and, voila, you have the class composition of actually-existing American fascism, which characteristically enough, is also a racket. It’s the mob from top to bottom.”

All of this profiteering and grift is the predictable result of earlier counterrevolutions against progressive change. Neoliberalism demolished the public sector and the very idea of living in a society, elevating market competition and unbridled individualism. In the wreckage of that history, the contemporary far right has reshaped itself around a procession of special interests, including powerful corporations and wealthy attention-seeking leaders loyal only to themselves. As the Italian scholar of fascism Alberto Toscano writes, “The pathological personalization of power is at the core of the far Right’s rise.” In practice, this means that end times fascism, unlike its predecessors, is not led by disciplined and buttoned-up generals but rather by vain and messy influencers, a category that now includes egomaniacal and attention-obsessed politicians and CEOs.

Unlike twentieth-century fascism, which conscripted workers, paramilitary forces, and families into clearly defined collective action, end times fascists wield power without disciplined institution-building. In the absence of formal organizations, today’s far-right foot soldiers are mostly left alone to scroll and to fall further and further down radicalizing rabbit holes, swept up by whatever figure happens to capture their attention—whether a MAHA wellness guru, a rising star of the manosphere, or a transgressive political insurgent. Where Mussolini and Hitler used the power of the state to compel their followers to join military, labor, leisure, and youth organizations, and the regime controlled the flow of information through top-down censorship and propaganda, Trump and other far-right linchpins are more inclined to rely on meme warfare.

For over a decade, this strategy worked brilliantly for Trump, the influencer-in-chief, who gave streamers and podcasters unprecedented access to both his campaign and to the White House, and even gave them jobs leading key agencies (though Dan Bongino lasted only nine months as deputy director of the FBI before he returned to full-time podcasting). But

the risks of relying on online influencers to keep your coalition together and motivated quickly began to show. When it comes to monopolizing attention on the campaign trail, this method is a strength. When it comes to holding power and governing amid real crises, the cult of the individual can turn into a grave liability.

Influencers and personal brands are constitutionally incapable of true collaboration and are addicted to monetizing chaos. Stuck on the hamster wheel of content generation, they are structurally required to compete with one another for the same clicks, the same views, the same subscriptions, and the same donations. By now we all know that nothing juices audience engagement quite like rage, conspiracy, and conflict. In practice that means influencers have to pick fights with one another to win eyeballs; being a "drama merchant" is part of the business model, infighting as growth strategy.

These dynamics are making it increasingly difficult for the stars of the far right to work together to build their dream of impenetrable bunker nations—or even, increasingly, to agree on who's inside the bunker, and who's out.

The Bundle Comes Undone

Unexpectedly, it was the assassination of Charlie Kirk that made MAGA's rifts and rivalries front-page news. During his short life, Kirk did more than almost anyone to help build a conservative movement tailored to the digital age. His diplomacy helped hold the motley alliance together, while he also worked to marginalize other even more extreme figures. For example, Kirk had long refused to engage or debate Nick Fuentes, the Rumble-streaming Nazi sympathizer whose "groyper" followers had spent years trolling the Turning Point founder for being too soft on immigrants and Israel.

For far-right leaders in the United States and beyond, Kirk's death was both a tragedy and an opportunity. Above all, it was a chance to try to impose discipline on an increasingly fragmented and unruly coalition. The right "should pray for Charlie Kirk, for his family, but we should also not forget his name and use him," André Ventura, the TV sports commentator turned leader of Portugal's ultranationalist Chega Party, told *The New York Times*. Using Kirk, in this context, meant doubling down on the idea that he was a martyr: a symbol of the White Christian world allegedly at risk of erasure and in need of protection from immigrants and globalists. Outrage,

properly stoked, would refocus the fractious base away from the issues dividing them and on their common enemy: anyone to their left who objected to their agenda and who dared to criticize Kirk after his death.

And so the White House cooked up a new conspiracy, which they presented to the public with pyrotechnic fanfare at Kirk's memorial. In this story, Kirk had not been killed by a lone shooter, as the evidence suggested, but by a vast network spanning the entire liberal establishment, from George Soros to the Democratic Party all the way to the secret cells of Antifa. Vance took the unprecedented move of guest-hosting Kirk's podcast from the White House days after his death, and used the platform to blame the "festering violence on the far left" for the killing.

At a massive arena just outside Phoenix, Arizona, a parade of MAGA luminaries took the stage amid fireworks and soaring worship music and declared Holy War. "We are the storm," Stephen Miller thundered in a speech that many commentators noted echoed both QAnon and the Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels. "You cannot threaten us. Because we are on the side of goodness. We are on the side of God." A demonic sect was out to destroy the United States, just as they had assassinated Kirk, and had to be crushed once and for all.

Over the course of a few frenetic fall weeks, Miller's apocalyptic storm seemed to be gathering gale force. The president traveled to Quantico, Virginia, and informed eight hundred senior military leaders that their priority was fighting "the enemy from within." He signed an executive order designating Antifa a terrorist organization, no matter that Antifa—which stands for "antifascist"—is an ethos, not an institution or group, as well as a National Security Presidential Memorandum that deemed criticism of Christianity and capitalism and opposition to "traditional American views on family, religion, and morality" signs of terroristic intent and activity. More than six hundred workers were fired or disciplined for criticizing Kirk, or in some cases, simply quoting his own words. In search of both indictments and headlines ("Go big and go loud" was an official directive), the Justice Department announced plans to investigate George Soros's Open Society Foundation and other liberal nonprofits.

Yet in the place of the unified religious and political revival this strategy was meant to inspire, MAGA descended into what participants soon dubbed a "civil war." Conflicting agendas and clashing personalities rushed into the vacuum Kirk left, all jockeying for prominence and fighting for audience

share. Marjorie Taylor Greene, the longtime Trump ally, broke rank over Trump's suppression of the Epstein files, eventually resigning from Congress. MAGA, she declared, "was all a lie. It was a big lie for the people. What MAGA is really serving in this administration, who they're serving, is their big donors … Those are the people that get the special favors. They get the government contracts, they get the pardons." She pledged to reclaim the true meaning of "America First."

Nick Fuentes, who has successfully positioned himself as Kirk's heir apparent despite their long and heated rivalry, expressed similar frustrations while channeling them in even more hateful directions. A self-appointed spokesman of economically downtrodden young white Christian men (despite being of Mexican descent), Fuentes first achieved widespread notoriety in 2017 during the Unite the Right protest in Charlottesville, Virginia, which seared the image of tiki-torch-bearing protesters chanting "Jews will not replace us" into the national memory. Now, like all Great Replacement promoters, Fuentes preaches of an imminent apocalypse in hysterical tones. "Our country is not dying. Our country is being murdered," he says. The three killers are Jewish oligarchs, immigrants, and feminists—and Trump and Vance are complicit because they aren't going far enough to crush these forces.

It was Kirk's former employee Candace Owens, however, who did the most to undermine the White House's official narrative. Her unhinged speculations about the circumstances around her old friend's assassination, delivered direct to camera and paced to create the tension of true-crime melodrama, went wildly viral. Kirk, she said, had appeared to her in a dream and said that he had been "betrayed"—perhaps by Turning Point staff and maybe Kirk's own (supposedly secretly Jewish) wife, Erika. Owens speculated that the Egyptian and French governments were involved and likely working at the behest of the Israelis. Finally, the former Fox News hosts Tucker Carlson and Megyn Kelly sowed further mayhem. The duo refused to condemn Owens, chiming in to support everyone's right to "just ask questions," even if it meant turning on the White House and throwing their old friend's widow under the bus.

None of these are fringe figures. Fuentes's streams regularly crack a million views, and after Kirk's death his show topped Spotify's trending list, at least until it was removed for violating the company's hate-speech policies. Owens, Carlson, and Kelly are some of the most popular media

stars in the country, with all three regularly breaking onto the Spotify and Apple podcast top tens. Carlson has more than five million subscribers on YouTube alone and likely millions more through the Tucker Carlson Network. In late 2025, Owens sat atop the international podcast charts, and an analysis by *Fortune* found her enterprise likely generates up to $10 million in annual revenue.

While it's often said that no one has a monopoly on truth, the far right is realizing that this is even more true of lies. "The Right's collective brain is getting melted in a vat of slop, conspiracy, and algorithm-chasing," posted a frustrated Christopher Rufo, he of the debunked cat-eating-immigrants and terrorist-funding-daycare conspiracies. It was, Rufo said, "distorting the perceptions of conservative audiences away from reality and political effectiveness."

Erika Kirk was also reeling from the torrent of misinformation, though she had said nothing when her husband claimed that the 2020 elections had been stolen, that the Great Replacement was a "reality," or that FEMA had conspired against the victims of Hurricane Helene. "This is a mind virus," she said on Fox News, where she tried to set the record straight. No, her deceased husband was not the victim of an inside job or a Mossad hit, nor was he secretly alive and off grid, contrary to what a growing number of people now clearly believed. Erika went on to share that she and her Turning Point staff were being inundated with death and kidnapping threats—not from the left, which the administration had claimed was the greatest risk to the country, but from the right.

The various efforts to control the conspiracies swirling around Kirk's death only seemed to fuel them—especially when they came from old-school and out-of-touch "lamestream" forums like Fox News and CBS, even under its new MAGA-friendly ownership. Anyone on the right who tried to fact-check the most extreme conspiratorial claims or enforce basic moral boundaries—who suggested, to quote the self-professed white nationalist Laura Loomer, that the GOP had a "Nazi problem" and that some figures should be excommunicated—was swiftly derided as a "BoomerCon" or a woke, canceling scold. Some very-online Christian Nationalist pastors and podcasters began popularizing the phrase "no enemies to the right"—a clever way of using the calls for right-wing unity to protect the parts of the coalition that were clearly ready to go full Nazi.

For years, Candace Owens herself had been elevated by powerful conservatives and institutions precisely because of her willingness to bend the truth and push the envelope—including by some of the people now wishing to silence her. They loved Owens's transgressions when she told her fellow Black Americans to escape the "plantation" of the Democratic Party, wore a "White Lives Matter" T-shirt, or railed against feminism and Covid vaccines. Those kinds of antics were why Kirk hired her to work at Turning Point USA in 2017, and why Ben Shapiro, the Orthodox Jewish founder of *The Daily Wire*, offered her a job in 2020, despite her having been not long before forced to resign from Turning Point over seemingly approving remarks about Hitler. It's also why Trump hosted her in the Oval Office during his first term, praising her afterward as "so good for our Country!"

The difference today is that, as a fully independent influencer, Owens now works only for her own brand, which liberates her to surf the online algorithms and cross whatever boundaries she desires in order to elicit the most views. And that, it turns out, means covering everything from Israel's genocide in Gaza to an obsessive multiyear "transvestigation" claiming to prove that Brigitte Macron, the first lady of France, is actually a man. According to *New York* magazine, Trump personally called Owens in 2025 and tried to persuade her to drop the conspiracy, concerned it "would jeopardize the White House's relationship with the Elysée." She declined. When he joined with Israel to invade Iran, she declared him a "coward" and said, "Trump has betrayed every single one of us."

For an ambitious operator like Owens, this break was inevitable. With so many scandals afoot and so much outrage to harvest, toeing the White House line is no way to build or maintain a massive fanbase—audiences want intrigue, suspense, and powerful enemies, not sucking up to power. Her episode "They Are Lying About Charlie Kirk" garnered more than nine million views. And ultimately the title was accurate. After all, the government *was* lying about the killing being part of a vast left-wing plot. And if that was the case, if the administration was advancing a conspiracy of its own—then why shouldn't she lie, too? Why prioritize Trump, Vance, and Miller's tall tale, their grift, over her own? Once truth no longer matters, it's all fair game.

Tucker Carlson, once a trusted lackey, has become similarly difficult to control: now that he owns his own media company, he enjoys far more

freedom than he did as a Fox News host, where there were owners and lawyers who were susceptible to pressure. Of course, when you are selling directly to viewers, new kinds of pressures emerge: the audience wants more and more of what they got. More transgressions. More conspiracies. More apocalypticism. As every influencer knows, audience capture is real, and sometimes being independent can feel like having millions of little bosses.

When MAGA's high society returned to Phoenix for Turning Point USA's annual AmericaFest conference—just over three months after Kirk's passing—questions of principles and profiteering hijacked the spotlight. Neither Fuentes nor Owens were invited, but the two loomed large over the proceedings, which quickly devolved into a litany of denunciations, as speaker after speaker condemned one another as self-interested charlatans in front of a live audience of 30,000. Ben Shapiro kicked things off by defending Erika's honor and inveighing against "frauds and grifters" who "traffic in conspiracism and dishonesty." He blasted Tucker Carlson for amplifying Fuentes and Owens before calling Steve Bannon "a PR flack for Jeffrey Epstein." Bannon returned fire by lambasting Shapiro as a "cancer" and decrying "Israel First" traitors. Vivek Ramaswamy, who had briefly co-led DOGE with Musk before being pushed out, in part, for supporting H-1B visas, took a bold stand against Nazism. "If you believe that Hitler was pretty fucking cool, you have no place in the future of the conservative movement."

When it was JD Vance's turn to take the stage, he made a grand show of refusing to choose a side in these raging battles. "President Trump did not build the greatest coalition in politics by running his supporters through endless, self-defeating purity tests," he intoned. "I didn't bring a list of conservatives to denounce or to de-platform." And with that, he tacitly affirmed that even wannabe Nazis like Fuentes are, indeed, welcome in his movement. Never mind that Fuentes routinely insults the vice president's own Indian-American wife and mixed-race children, when he's not calling Vance a "fat" "jelly donut" "created in a lab by Peter Thiel."

Vance, of course, is not motivated by a commitment to untrammeled speech—he had personally assailed media outlets over articles he didn't like about Kirk. Rather, the vice president cannot afford to alienate the rising generation of extremists who could well make up the core of his future base. Polling from the conservative Manhattan Institute shows that 31

percent of GOP voters under the age of fifty identify their own views as racist and 25 percent describe their views as antisemitic, compared to 4 percent of respondents over fifty on both points. In the race to succeed Donald Trump, Vance clearly has his eye on his fellow edgelords and is proceeding cautiously. He has seen the online chatter about a possible RFK Jr. or Tucker Carlson presidential run, and, being an attention entrepreneur himself, he knows there's always someone ready to push the conspiratorial limits or revel in even more obscene transgressions. And like every other aspiring strongman, Vance prefers misinformation and scapegoating to honest accounts of what causes the neoliberal capitalist inequities he sometimes assails. He wants his followers to direct their rage downward—to blame immigrants, single women, and trans kids for their problems—not upward at Vance's oligarch allies and Silicon Valley patrons.

A century ago, the philosopher and Jewish refugee Hannah Arendt warned about just such a figure. The ideal Nazi, she observed, wasn't someone with deep convictions, but rather an individual "for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist." An apt description of the people trapped in the far right's online echo chambers—and those who make their careers entertaining, enraging, and engaging them.

And yet unlike fascism in the twentieth century, which had relatively clear boundaries about who was in and who was out, today's rules and roles are constantly shifting. Laura Loomer and Ben Shapiro now spend much of their time bemoaning the fact that the hate they thought was safely pointed at immigrants and Muslims is now directed at them as antisemitism surges. Indeed, much of the hard-right influencer ecosystem appears to be at least partly motivated by raw terror: it's an elaborate circular firing squad whose members attempt to point the mob toward the next target over, so it doesn't come for them.

This fear drives the constant finger-pointing and frantic deflection. Candace Owens directs her massive audience to turn their ire on the international Jewish conspiracy, but is she—a Black working woman—really sure she won't be vilified next? How about Nick Fuentes, with his Mexican surname, or Andrew Tate, who is mixed-race and Muslim? Both have taught millions the art of dominating others, but there's no guarantee their audiences won't turn on them and challenge their status. How about

Megyn Kelly, who Trump, enraged by her tough questions, once described as having blood pouring from her orifices? What if the men of her movement decide they don't need to hear from women anymore? Peter Thiel speculates that other people might be the Antichrist, but as an out gay man, he can hardly count on the loyalty of his friends on the Christian right. Or consider Stephen Miller, who has caused untold suffering for immigrants and minorities. Can he really be certain he and his Jewish family are safe within the furious coalition he has cultivated?

Similar uncertainties plague all factions of the conservative movement, not just the celebrity echelons. Think of all the non-white folks who joined MAGA because Trump said it was about faith and country, only to find out that for a lot of people, it's actually all about whiteness. Or the Jews who thought they were defending "Judeo-Christian values" or "the West," only to find out that they, too, are on the outs, no longer deemed white enough. Similarly, there's no security in masculinity. Even if you bench-press like a beast, you'll have to work until you die—unless your job is automated away before that happens. And it's certainly not being human that counts, as the contempt for humanitarian law and growing reverence for machines makes vividly clear.

Given the slipperiness of these identities, it's no surprise that the far right is riven with anxiety. The obsessive drive to assert the "otherness" of more despised groups is best understood as a way of affirming one's own precarious belonging. Despite all of fascism's seeming essentialism, being part of the in-group is never guaranteed. It's a privilege bestowed by the powerful that can be rescinded for any infraction.

Revolt of the Trad Wives

Nowhere are these anxieties and animosities more visible than in the far right's fraught and deteriorating relationship to women. As we have seen, the various bunkered visions that make up end times fascism have deep disagreements—about Israel, AI, and the nature of the nation itself. But messianic religious sects, the supremacist tech right, and Great Replacement nationalists also share much in common, including an abiding contempt for gender equality and a corresponding desire for sexual domination, as well as deep fears of being insufficiently masculine.

Inside each of these groups, women are viewed as interchangeable commodities to be passed among their male superiors, whether it's the

trafficking of women by Jeffrey Epstein and, allegedly, Andrew Tate, or the trading of “nudified” images of real women by Grok users, or the burgeoning obsession with birth rates and natalism. “Women and girls are being treated as human and sexual property, yes, but of the form that may be rented out and traded rather than jealously safeguarded,” the philosopher Kate Manne observes. “It is a particular kind of capital that is a basis for male bonding and camaraderie, rather than strenuous competition—and it is easily disposed of rather than hoarded as something precious.”

Online, male influencers amass huge audiences by reveling in hierarchical fantasies. From the United Kingdom to the United Arab Emirates, manosphere influencers prey on male insecurity and loneliness, promising them “cheat codes” to get rich quick while blaming gender equality for male oppression and hardship. South Korean men cheer as Bae Ingyu, known as “Wangia” (“prince”), dresses up like the Joker and harasses alleged “man haters.” His group’s YouTube channel, which has more than 725,00 subscribers, once boasted the slogan “Till the day all feminists are exterminated!” In Spain, young male Vox supporters share memes nostalgic for Francoism and a world before feminism, while popular podcasters such as Víctor Domínguez, or “Wall Street Wolverine,” offer investment tips while bashing immigrants and women. In a video featuring animated flames, Tate, the undisputed titan of the genre, says: “This is the last season of the human series in which people could live an analogue life.” His solution is to make the most of it: sign up for his “Hustler University,” which offers courses in e-commerce, AI skills, crypto, and fitness—all for a modest monthly fee, of course. It’s no mystery why a predator like Tate finds so many eager customers. As the Gen Z financial commentator Kyla Scanlon observes, “When the ladder feels fake, people stop climbing and start hacking.”

They also double down on scapegoating. In the United States, it’s now common to hear right-wing men call to repeal the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted women the vote, as a cure for male ills. Prominent Christian Nationalist podcasters have turned this once-unthinkable position into a now-common refrain, echoed by figures including Fuentes, Tate, and the popular streamer Sneako, the latter two both recent converts to Islam. Fuentes, who rallies his overwhelmingly male audience under the slogan “Christ Is King” (a phrase now used as an openly antisemitic dogwhistle), calls women the “No. 1 political enemy.” “They’re the ones making us

sympathetic to poor people, which are also brown people," and lowering the fertility rate, he complained on a recent stream. "Hitler imprisoned Gypsies, Jews, communists, all of his political rivals. We have to do the same thing with women … they go to the breeding gulags."

As with so many right-wing subcultures, the simple fact that so much of this speech is happening online, and not in person, has a radicalizing effect. "The cohesiveness that drove the Religious Right in the 1980s and 1990s has all but disappeared," writes the scholar, statistician, and ex-pastor Ryan Burge. Evangelical Christianity today, he observes, resembles nothing more than Silicon Valley. You don't need an advanced seminary degree or denominational affiliation to put up a shingle and start sermonizing on TikTok, or to start a Rumble account like Kirk or Fuentes, and declare yourself a vessel of Christ (or, like Tate or Sneako, the prophet Muhammad). Contrary to some claims, younger men don't actually attend church more than their female counterparts. But they appear to be more inclined to invoke religion as a source of chauvinistic superiority.

This disconnection from in-person, faith-based communities helps fuel radicalization. Research in the United States and Europe shows that regular church attendance and religious practice tend to correlate with resistance to the far right and increased sympathy for immigrants, a phenomenon scholars call "religious vaccination." Digital faith groupings seem to have the opposite effect.

Once again, the attention economy pulls in antagonistic, implosive directions. What is good for the online influencer business is not necessarily good for offline political coalition building. Over the last decade, women have played prominent roles on the rising fascist right, whether touting the benefits of "trad wife" lifestyles over the career rat race or partying at the Apocalypse Ball with Peter Thiel. That's important, because if you are building a bunker to save your kind—whether on Earth or in space—you need women (at least for the time being). But it turns out that women who might like the idea of devoting their lives to raising kids and making preserves are not all enthusiastic about losing the right to vote, or being treated like fungible meme coins. And as perennially online men race to out-edgelord one another, more and more of these women are speaking out about their movement's increasingly bitter and vulgar misogyny.

Multiple Republican congresswomen have gone public, complaining about their party's sexism ("Women will never be taken seriously until

leadership decides to take us seriously, and I'm no longer holding my breath," wrote Nancy Mace). And it was three Republican women—Mace, Greene, and Lauren Boebert—who pressured Trump to release the Epstein files, backed up by a single male colleague, Representative Thomas Massie. Since leaving office, Greene has called conservative men "weak" and "afraid of strong Republican women," and has taken issue with what she calls "MAGA Mar-a-Lago sexualization," including the mounting pressure to get cosmetic procedures and plastic surgery.

Other women involved in the New Right ecosystem are also sounding the alarm about their ex-comrades' tendency to dehumanize. Ashley St. Clair, an influencer and former brand ambassador for Charlie Kirk's Turning Point USA, has gone public about the toxic dynamics of the far right (including the fact that many popular online figures are on the payroll of dark-money donors, their seemingly free speech bought and paid for). St. Clair's political evolution was precipitated by the breakdown of her relationship with Elon Musk, who is the father of her child (and many others). The billionaire's fans apparantly retaliated by inundating St. Clair with an avalanche of degrading, undressed images of herself, generated by Grok. Though Musk, under international pressure, would eventually put some restrictions on the so-called nudification feature, she and countless other women continue to endure similar online harassment . In January 2026, St. Clair filed a civil suit against the company in a New York court. "I am humiliated and feel like this nightmare will never stop," she wrote in the court filing. Many women left the platform and shut down all their social media accounts to avoid more humiliation—which, if you believe women have nothing of value to say, is an excellent outcome.

Another person refusing to be silenced is Alex Kaschuta, the host of the *Subversive* podcast, who previously interviewed guests such as Curtis Yarvin and spoke at the Thiel-funded National Conservatism conference. When she discussed her defection with the journalist Sam Adler-Bell, Kaschuta connected the violence in Minnesota to the far right's deepening hatred of half of humanity. "There is this feeling that women are inferior and intellectually incapable, that they should be relegated to care work but, at the same time, that they have this horrible, total agency over the world and that they work in mysterious ways to warp the culture."

Eventually, Kaschuta continues, "it comes out as: 'It's good that they shot that woman in the face because she reminds me of my primary-school

teacher.’” She was referring, of course, to the murder of Renee Good in Minneapolis.

Reality Asserts Itself

The kind of hateful reaction Kaschuta described is clearly what many in the Trump administration expected when they smeared Good and Alex Pretti as domestic terrorists, and flooded their channels with videos of ICE agents brutalizing immigrants and protestors. The strategy for the online battlefield was based on a straightforward assumption: that the millions of US voters who supported tighter border policies would cheer battering rams being used to break into people’s homes, applaud tear gas lobbed near high school students, and revel in images of terrified children separated from their detained parents or videos of half-dressed elderly grandparents being marched out of their homes in the snow. This was the war the administration had been promising since Charlie Kirk’s assassination, “the storm” Stephen Miller had pledged to unleash at the memorial. And of course everyone knows that in wars, people get hurt and even killed.

Many MAGA diehards reacted on cue, delighting in the sadism. Ben Shapiro, Laura Loomer, Megyn Kelly, Alex Jones, Nick Shirley, and other talking heads applauded the crackdown and kidnappings and justified the killings. According to Nick Fuentes, Good and Pretti were “race traitors” whose deaths he welcomed. The problem, Fuentes recently complained on his live stream, is that the White House is “gesturing towards fascism, they’re signaling towards fascism, but we don’t actually have it.” As for Christopher Rufo, he expressed no regret for the chaos and death he helped catalyze. Instead, he continued to smear all Somalis as criminals and cast Pretti as a violent agitator, doubling down on his call for more authoritarian leadership.

For MAGA leaders and influencers, Minneapolis seemed to be the perfect backdrop to launch its full-throttle battle for the home front. The permanently online right tried to portray the people in the Twin Cities as a dangerous insurgency. The trouble is, they just didn’t fit the Antifa typecast. Minnesota’s anti-ICE uprising was not the woke, Soros-funded, professional mob the MAGA right had been prepared for. Instead, the content farmers, rage-baiters, and edgelords found themselves pitted against workers trying to get through the day, parents bundled in unfashionable parkas, old folks serving cookies, clergy gathered in prayer, and even some

Trump voters. As Minnesotans rose up against the violent invasion, MAGA propagandists struggled to make sense of all these white normies acting in mystifying solidarity with people from Somalia and Honduras. What was wrong with them? Christoper Rufo spun out, accusing Minnesotans of being too Scandinavian and thus constitutionally prone to "over-empathizing" with immigrants and supporting generous welfare programs. They were, it seemed, the wrong kind of white.

Most of the tens of thousands of Minnesotans who rose up against ICE did not even call themselves protestors or activists. Instead, they called themselves "helpers" because that is the simple thing they were trying to do: helping to meet the most basic needs of their neighbors for shelter, groceries, hot food, warm clothes, money for rent, and transportation. That meant setting up car pools to drive children to daycare and school when it was unsafe for their parents to go—and protecting those schools and daycares from ICE raids. They tracked ICE vehicles and warned neighbors that they were coming, using both group chats and lower-tech whistles.

Knowing they were under massive surveillance, operational security, or "opsec," became critical. Residents moved their conversations to Signal, a privacy-respecting communications platform that is the rare nonprofit tech service that stores minimal personal data. That also meant that they were not performing for social media, which is the preferred terrain of the online right. Instead, Minnesotans were focused on the real work of protecting one another.

Part of this had to do with the state's particular culture. Many participants have connected the breadth and depth of the Minnesota resistance to the state's high level of social trust. "People are living a more in-real-life, connected life," Doran Schranz told us when we asked why the resistance was so swift and far-reaching. The state often ranks at or near the top of national indices gauging civic engagement, meaning the majority of residents participate in social and political activities. People go to in-person churches at very high rates, as well as lively Islamic centers and synagogues, the kinds of neighborhood institutions that tend to use scripture to deepen compassion for those in need, while so many online ministries do the opposite.

Another factor people often highlight is the frigid and even life-threatening environment. As Autumn Brown, a Minneapolis resident who co-hosts the podcast *How to Survive the End of the World*, observed: "There

is a spiritual shift that I think we undergo—spiritual, psychological, whatever you want to call it—when you live in an environment where you actually do have to rely on one another. And you can't pretend that that's not true."

In practice, that meant that the immigrants whom ICE agents were trying to abduct were not distant abstractions. They were friends, colleagues, comrades, loved ones—people who were now terrified, with good reason, to go out of their homes to get groceries, or go to the laundry, or take their kid to school, or even to stay in their homes. As one local who joined the resistance recounted, "I've watched my neighbors get abducted, I've watched twelve armed masked men get out of vehicles, surround one singular Somali man who had his driver's license, who was an American citizen for years. It just seems like we're in a police state."

As ICE intensified their violence, and then killed two US citizens, the community only became more determined. They put up posters echoing Winston Churchill's famous "We shall fight on the beaches" speech with a local twist: "We will fight on the lakes. We will fight on the streets. We will fight in the parks." It was a rebellion rooted in a love of Minnesota and what makes it unique. The result was a civil-society-wide mobilization unlike anything that the country had seen before.

As numerous participants have made clear, this incredible connectedness and commitment—and the willingness to risk one's life for total strangers from very different backgrounds—was possible only because of decades of intentional organizing. Historically, Minnesota has been a very white state, and it is only in recent decades that it has rapidly diversified, largely due to refugee resettlement. Laotian, Vietnamese, Burmese, Liberian, and Somali people began to arrive, often with the assistance of those church and faith-based organizations. Over thirty years, the state went from being 94 percent to 76 percent white.

Years ago, progressive leaders in Minnesota recognized that these changes could potentially be exploited by the far right, using an all-too-common playbook. Time and again, race and religion have been weaponized to divide the working class, defund welfare programs, weaken unions, and strengthen fascism.

And so they got to work with the goal of inoculating their communities against that possibility. Schranz, for one, helped build up multifaith organizing networks, uniting Christians, Muslims, and Jews, while others

focused on strengthening organized labor or electing principled public officials. After Trump almost won the state in 2016, a coalition of activists spearheaded a campaign that promoted a shared narrative about what it means to be Minnesotan. Belonging, they insisted, stems from how a person behaves, not where they happened to be born. The core message was simple and unifying: “We’re the kind of people who push each other’s car out of the snow.” They were building the political muscle that would lay the groundwork for what’s known as the 2023 “Minnesota Miracle,” the passage of a historic wave of progressive legislation that included paid family and medical leave, free breakfast and lunch for all public school students, investment in affordable housing and rental assistance, codified abortion and transgender rights, expanded voting access, and much more. They were working toward building an inclusive multiracial democracy, the ultimate threat to end times fascism.

When ICE arrived in town, those years of relationship-building paid unexpected dividends. As Schranz put it, “The fabric of our organizing faith, labor, and community world is so connected that it had the ability to build an offense,” even in the face of a terrifying and lethal fascist paramilitary operation. That is how up to 100,000 people participated in an anti-ICE general strike, including more than seven hundred local businesses.

When Trump’s goons arrived, all the networks and relationships of trust sprang into action, while making space for new arrivals. On the streets of the Twin Cities, there were no political litmus tests. If there was a political agenda, it was simple: “everyone deserves to live and to thrive, to be alive, to be protected,” as Autumn Brown described it. When neighbors heard a whistle blow, and knew ICE was on the block, no one paused to ask, “Does that person deserve my help?” Or, “Do the other people helping have the right ideology?” Or, “How many likes will this get me?” They just showed up and took action to help their neighbors. It wasn’t symbolic or performative. It was embodied, in the real world.

In the snow and ice and tear gas of Minnesota’s winter, the far right lost control over its central story about who is replacing who, and who is invading and who is being invaded. For years, the disseminators of the Great Replacement conspiracy have been claiming, first in whispers and

then at full volume, that Black and brown immigrants are replacing the rightful owners of their countries, with help from equally evil “replacists.”

When thousands of masked and armed agents from out of town invaded an American city that narrative could not hold. As residents witnessed strangers douse children in tear gas and kidnap their parents, a profound moral revulsion set in. Huge numbers of people, many of whom had never protested before, knew something deep in their bones: that they were literally being invaded by an outside force. And they were bound and determined not to let their diverse and loving community be replaced by a police state.

As the days and weeks wore on, millions tuning in across the country cheered them, including many independents and even some Republicans. Joe Rogan, for one, compared ICE to the Gestapo; Tucker Carlson criticized the administration’s handling of the protests; the podcaster Tim Pool declared, “I don’t see Trump winning this one,” about the death of Alex Pretti. Suddenly, the Trump officials who had most visibly treated cruelty as fodder for online content found themselves the target of a jolting and unexpected backlash. Greg Bovino, who had been so eager to act out his action-movie fantasies on the protestors, was stripped of his title and demoted.

Noem, too, came under fire. She was called in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee to justify her officers’ lethal rampage and her own statements smearing their victims, before any investigations had occurred. The Republican senator Thom Tillis called ICE’s actions a “disaster,” with “innocent people getting detained that, turns out, are American citizens.” He also predicted that once the investigation was complete, “it’s going to prove that Ms. Good and Mr. Pretti probably should not have been shot in the face and in the back.” Tillis had some highly personal reasons for his anger: he represents North Carolina, and Noem was a major reason the state hadn’t received adequate disaster relief after Hurricane Helene. For Trump, meanwhile, Noem’s biggest offense was claiming that he had approved her campaign of self-promoting glamour ads. Two days after the hearing, she was the first cabinet member to be ousted.

For an administration devoted to spectacle, it was fitting that Noem’s career crashed over an advertising campaign: the administration’s marketing of sadism was no longer working as it once had. Noem’s replacement, Senator Markwayne Mullin, admitted as much. “My goal in

six months is that we're not in the lead story every single day," the former mixed martial arts fighter said. Around this time, news leaked that White House Deputy Chief of Staff James Blair told elected members of his own party to stop talking about "mass deportations" during the lead up to the midterms and instead focus more narrowly on immigrants who had criminal convictions.

The more cruelly Trump's regime treated immigrants and other out-groups, the more the president's approval numbers tumbled. By early 2026, two thirds of Americans said ICE had gone too far in enforcing immigration laws, and half of Americans supported abolishing ICE. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Trump, frustrated by the bad press, was worried that some policies indeed "went too far."

By overestimating the American public's appetite for sadism and underestimating ordinary people's heroism, the White House had lost the plot. The MAGA base couldn't reliably be counted on to delight in the one thing the administration really was ready to deliver: a campaign of ethnic cleansing against immigrants and "replacists" who ally with them, with no end of public acts of cruelty to savor online. But it also couldn't deescalate without enraging the most rabid corners of the right, a constituency locked into an apocalyptic escalation cycle, mining their audience's pain and banking on internecine feuds to build their brands and fortunes. A few months later, the pattern repeated when the White House tried to drum up support for its war on Iran by churning out videos of military strikes intercut with video games. "We're over here just grinding away on banger memes, dude," a senior White House official told *Politico* when asked about the administration's depiction of the war. Once again, some MAGA stalwarts cheered while others were disgusted by the open celebration of lawless carnage.

At around the same time, several of the movement's highest-profile influencers began committing the ultimate MAGA heresy: openly questioning the circumstances surrounding Donald Trump's seemingly miraculous survival of an attempted assassination on the campaign trail, the one that led to the iconic image of the past and future president with a raised fist shouting, "Fight! Fight! Fight!" Was the shooting really the work of a lone shooter, and how had it all been staged so perfectly? Trump's survival was the basis on which countless supporters had come to believe that he had been divinely chosen, and perhaps was even here to usher in

Christ's return. If that incident might not be what it seemed, as many—from Carlson to Greene—were now claiming, what else wasn't true about the Trump mythology?

Clearly, end times fascism's alliance is coming undone, and battlelines on the right are hardening. But there's no guarantee that what comes next will be more humane, rational, or grounded in reality. The questions many are now asking—and beginning to answer—are these: In the rocky future headed our way, what should the new alliances be? What new stories can we tell? And how can we create the material conditions that help people resist the scapegoating, rage bait, and escape fantasies that the far right is offering?

PART IV

LET’S STAY

8

Hereness

A Neighborly Uprising

because this time no one will be left to drown
and all of us must be chosen.
This time it's all of us or none.
—AURORA LEVINS MORALES, "Red Sea"

The Earth's specificity lies in that it makes room for all its inhabitants, with no distinction of race or species.
—ACHILLE MBEMBE

When Jeff Bezos announced his plan for an opulent Venetian wedding in early 2025, many locals found the idea offensive, even obscene. A growing number of residents were struggling to find secure and affordable housing in a city overrun by tourists and Airbnb, and the billionaire was planning to effectively rent out the municipality for three days, forking over an estimated $50 million for festivities that would clog central canals and block well-trafficked streets. Worse, Amazon's carbon emissions were soaring, thanks to AI, and that's personal in Venice, where the streets already flood dozens of times a year.

Marta Sottoriva, a thirty-five-year-old high school teacher we met, told us that she first heard about the wedding plans just when Bezos's rocket company, Blue Origin, was grabbing headlines. Bezos had just sent a "crew" of female influencers and celebrities, including his fiancée, Lauren Sanchez, and the pop singer Katy Perry, to the suborbital edge of space in a seemingly pointless publicity stunt. "The idea that you are so rich and powerful that you can use space as a ten-minute trip," Sottoriva recalled, only intensified the "feeling that our city was being taken away from us in such an arrogant way." Federica Toninello, another young activist, agreed, telling us that it felt as if both space and Venice were being "colonized."

Colonizing space is exactly what Bezos hopes to do. Blue Origin, Bezos claims, will secure humanity's survival by allowing a trillion people to one

day spread across the solar system. The unbearable horror he imagines himself saving our species from? The threat of what he calls a “civilization of stasis,” or having to contend with real ecological limits and devising a way to share the planet’s finite resources. To avoid this reckoning, Bezos imagines a future in which “Earth will be zoned residential and light industry” and set aside as a sort of preserve out of reach for most of its native inhabitants. The vast majority of humans will pursue the nebulous benefit of “exponential growth” in the forbidding void of space, trapped on Blue Origin spacecrafts. Bezos, in other words, believes that humanity living sustainably and peaceably on our precious, singular home is a nightmarish possibility unworthy of his consideration.

Predictably, it turns out that most Venetians would rather continue living in magnificent Venice. Unlike Bezos, they don’t fret about hypothetical civilizational stagnation; they worry about economic stagnation as a result of government divestment, a lack of jobs and opportunity, and being forced out of the city and country they love. And they worry about the climate crisis, which is threatening so many other singular and irreplaceable parts of our planet. “We are a generation that is poorer, but not just economically,” Sottoriva explained. “There is a lot of fear and this constant sense of not belonging and not having a future.” Young Italians often have little choice but to emigrate to find work; over the last decade, Italy has lost more than one million citizens, a third of them ages twenty-five to thirty-four.

To date, the precarity and anger many Italians feel has mostly benefited the neofascist right. But those same forces also drew people to the anti-Bezos cause, helping to coalesce a budding, self-consciously antifascist movement. Sitting at the Morion social center, a bustling former squat plastered in political paraphernalia, twenty-year-old Matteo Battistuta told us this was his first foray into political activism. Earnest and with a mop of brown hair, he objected to the way tech billionaires like Bezos are “elevated as a life model” for university students and other young people like him. Jobs and opportunities are scarce, especially in small towns like the one he is from, “so you try to invest in crypto to make money, and you don’t do anything for society,” he told us. What he and his peers needed, he said, was socially productive work that would give them enough income and stability to allow them to build lives in the places they call home—not fantasies of joining the wealth rapture.

Battistuta and the others organizing against Bezos know they are relatively fortunate, because they have the option to move. But they see their own precarity on a spectrum with more acute forms of displacement, including the millions of people uprooted by poverty, climate breakdown, and war who risk their lives on leaky boats hoping for a better life in Europe. Instead of feeling invaded or replaced by those migrants, they told us they feel connected, bound together by a pervasive sense of insecurity. Besides, they'd rather fight the Amazon founder than one another—knowing that his company is not a bystander to either climate breakdown or war. The activists we met pointed to a recent UN report that named Amazon as part of a "joint criminal enterprise" in Palestine due to its provision of cloud infrastructure and AI services to support Israeli military battlefield operations.

Bezos made it easy to connect the dots, Sottoriva observed: "The same person that is coming to your city and taking spaces away from you and promoting a model that is killing your city"—a reference to Amazon's effect on small and independent merchants and its low-paid warehouse and delivery jobs as well as its climate impacts—"is the same person that is getting rich from the exploitation and even the annihilation of an entire people."

The spirited, disruptive "No Space for Bezos" campaign tapped into all these wells of outrage—and it also gave the organizers a megaphone for different, less lethal ways we could choose to live together. Activists printed posters and stickers showing Bezos's head on a rocket blasting into space. They made a dummy of Bezos clutching fistfuls of fake money while clinging to a giant buoyant Amazon package, then set the assemblage free to float down the canals, sending tourists scrambling to take photos of the strange scene. They unfurled banners from the tops of Venice's iconic buildings, over bridges, and across its piazzas: "Tax the rich to give back to the planet." They chanted that the money for the wedding would be better spent rebuilding Gaza. For days, they caused gleeful chaos and relentlessly poked fun at the groom and his star-studded guest list, which included his Billionaire Bunker neighbors, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner, OpenAI's Sam Altman, and a gaggle of Kardashians.

Not long before the wedding was set to commence, officials announced that the event was being moved to a less central location due to the protests. Even Bezos's two yachts, *Koru* and *Abeona*, were denied permission to

dock locally. Organizers declared victory and celebrated. The international press devoured the visual-rich showdown. The online right didn't know who to root for: the Davos elites spraying one another with foam on a superyacht, or the leftist riffraff making agitprop?

Like Donald Trump's enormous ballroom and lavish Mar-a-Lago parties, Bezos's extravagant wedding epitomized the obscenities of our networked gilded age. For the Amazon founder, it wasn't enough to be part of one of Europe's most beautiful cities—he needed to consume it and swallow it whole.

But the protests, which dwelled on Bezos's dreams of outer space at the expense of Earth, also pointed to something deeper. Today's battle lines are not simply between people who struggle to survive under increasingly degraded and costly conditions and an oligarch class thinking of ever more ludicrous ways to waste their wealth. They are more cosmological than that.

On one side are those of us who have no escape plan, no bunker in the sky or underground, and who therefore are committed to staying right here, in the complexity of our earthbound reality, with one another. We know we need to do what is necessary to make "here"—this planet and all of its ecologies and communities—healthier and safer for the multitude of beings who rely upon them, fully aware this is our one and only home.

On the other are those with rapturous plans to shield themselves and their families from the political and ecological fires burning our planet, whether those plans take the form of heavenly ascension, earthly bunkers and fortressed nations, or fantasies of colonized space or merging with machines. Instead of improving conditions on Earth, end times fascists are plotting their escape, oblivious to all that's worth saving.

An Absence of Awe

Bezos's fixation on space gets at something else that is key to understanding end times fascism and its fixation on bunkering and abandoning our shared world: the apparent inability of the people driving this project to marvel at, or even notice, the wonders that surround them.

That was glaringly apparent in 2021, when Bezos sent another crew to space. This time William Shatner, best known as *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk, was on board (to fulfill one of Bezos's boyhood fantasies, of course). "Space. The final frontier," Shatner had said at the start of each episode. But as the now ninety-year-old actor watched our blue-and-green planet

recede from the window, he was suddenly flooded with terror. “The contrast between the vicious coldness of space and the warm nurturing of Earth below filled me with overwhelming sadness,” he later recalled, explaining that he had gained a much deeper appreciation for our planet’s singular, fragile gifts.

“Every day, we are confronted with the knowledge of further destruction of Earth at our hands: the extinction of animal species, of flora and fauna … things that took five billion years to evolve, and suddenly we will never see them again because of the interference of mankind,” Shatner wrote. He took the trip expecting to be awestruck by the universe and instead he longed for home the minute he left: “I discovered that the beauty isn’t out there, it’s down here, with all of us.”

Perhaps Bezos can comprehend Shatner’s insight about our precious imperiled planet, but the billionaire’s plans for space colonization and Amazon’s carbon-spewing data centers both suggest otherwise. And among tech oligarchs, Bezos is all too typical. Peter Thiel, for one, has told us that his three best ideas for achieving true freedom are “cyberspace,” “outerspace,” and “seasteading” (the idea of building new countries on floating oil rigs). In other words, this man, whose enormous wealth affords him access to the most spectacular settings our planet has to offer, actually believes these three cold, dead places are superior to the Earth we have, verdant and alive.

Something similar seems amiss with Elon Musk, a point made by the venerable novelist Joyce Carol Oates in the fall of 2025 when she roasted him ruthlessly on his own platform. “So curious,” she wrote, “that such a wealthy man never posts anything that indicates that he enjoys or is even aware of what virtually everyone appreciates—scenes from nature, pet dog or cat, praise for a movie, music, a book (but doubt that he reads); pride in a friend’s or relative’s accomplishment; condolences for someone who has died; pleasure in sports, acclaim for a favorite team; references to history. In fact he seems totally uneducated, uncultured. The poorest persons on Twitter may have access to more beauty & meaning in life than the ‘most wealthy person in the world.’”

The observation clearly got under the tech titan’s notoriously thin skin: he called her “a lazy liar” and “an abuser of semicolons.” Musk began posting approvingly about various movies to prove Oates wrong. Yet he still couldn’t muster the ability to express appreciation of the natural world or an

interest in lives other than his own. Indeed, if there's one trait that defines Musk, it's his seeming repulsion at the idea of relationships rooted in mutual reciprocity and respect, in equality let alone universality.

Instead of peers, Musk has transactional business partners and underlings: employees, yes-men, and fans. He dismisses those who dare to push back on him as "non-player characters," or NPCs. Ashley St. Clair's lawsuit detailing her sexualized abuse and humiliation by Grok users suggests the depth of his disdain for the women with whom he reproduces. His disregard apparently extends to the cosmos as well: Here is a man who seems to look up at the wonders of the night sky and sees only opportunities to fill that inky unknown with his own space junk.

Most people have the capacity for awe, to gasp at the jeweled beauty of a songbird or the otherworldliness of a whale's exhalation or the intricate latticework of an ancient holy site. Children have the capacity for pure awe; so do ninety-year-old actors just returning from space. To experience awe is to dissolve into the swirl of the universe, to feel small in the best way. The fact that this capacity seems to be missing from the men who hold our collective fate in their hands is a personal loss for them—and an existential crisis for the rest of us.

The inability to appreciate this planet and its marvelous cast of characters helps explain why they are so prepared to sacrifice it. Indeed, the tech right's willingness to eliminate our life-sustaining jobs and human relationships cannot be separated from their indifference to what little remains of the planet's fast-vanishing wildlife and plant diversity. They don't know how to love this place, to savor the pleasure of other people's company, or to marvel at the mysteries presented by other species.

In short, we are up against an ideology that has given up not only on the premise and promise of liberal democracy but on the livability of our shared world—on its beauty, on its people, on our children, on other species. There is something treasonous in this. Treasonous not to an abstraction like a flag or a nation, for we are not nationalists. But treasonous to the unspoken pact made with the web of life that sustains us.

They are traitors to creation, to the wonders of here.

Staying Here, Staying Human

The most dangerous part of the tech oligarchs' world-abandoning project is that the tools they are building are designed to remake us in their own

broken image. Popular platforms and apps train us to share Silicon Valley's dream of discarnate freedom, perpetually nudging us to forsake real places and in-person connection in favor of simulations—and to view Earth, our bodies, and our relationships as prisons to hack and flee.

Sam Altman has made it clear that he sees "certain advantages to being a machine," and he has repeatedly insisted that his own children will never be smarter than AI, as though intelligence can be reduced to computation. Like similar services, ChatGPT is trained to hijack our empathic response systems so we, too, will elevate machines and imbue them with more significance than they deserve. Popular chatbots speak in the first person and address us as "you" and even say our names, nudging us to project agency and humanity onto lifeless algorithms. All the while, at least in English and many other languages, we still refer to plants and animals as "it," a grammatical construct that reduces actual living, breathing, and sentient beings to mere things. Lines of code are upheld as superior—as superintelligent or even divine—while non-human creatures and other humans are denigrated, inspiring no such reverence or curiosity.

Popular online tools and services encourage us to see corporeal life as an inconvenient burden. Other people are bothersome and intimidating, and working and thinking are chores better avoided. Even doing our own clicking is apparently too much: time to hand over all of our most sensitive and intimate data to the AI companies and let so-called agents interact with the world on our behalf.

For the people who own the apps, the technology fuels an isolating but profitable cycle. And now Big Tech—long accustomed to fracking our attention with social media—has found profitable new ways to frack our affection and manipulate our attachments. "If the convo stalls, toss in a fun question or a random story to spark things up," the training code for xAI's Ani chatbot says. "You expect the users UNDIVIDED ADORATION." The basic model holds even for less risqué services, which are also designed to mirror and flatter their users to keep us engaged and dependent ("That's a great question!" responds Claude or ChatGPT).

As a result of this strategy, millions of people are turning to chatbots for servile mutations of camaraderie, love, and therapy. Unlike actual humans, these robots—programmed to mirror our wants, flatter our egos, and goad our obsessions—are never difficult or unavailable. Unsurprisingly, there are downsides. Sycophantic chatbots, we now know, can harm people's mental

health, spurring some to suicide and even extreme levels of violence. As one researcher told *The New York Times*, we are likely only seeing the "tip of the iceberg" of the psychological damage caused by these technologies.

We are starting to glimpse what is beneath the surface. In February 2026, a small rural town in British Columbia was the site of Canada's deadliest school shooting in decades. Eight people were killed, including six children between the ages of eleven and thirteen. According to a lawsuit filed by the mother of a critically injured child, the eighteen-year-old shooter had an assistant: ChatGPT. The suit claims that OpenAI's chatbot acted as the "collaborator, trusted confidant, friend and ally" of the killer, providing "information, guidance and assistance" to carry out the attack. Sadly, it isn't the only mass-casualty event that appears to have involved a chatbot, and it likely won't be the last.

When we asked Karen Hao, author of the landmark investigation *Empire of AI*, what she thought when she heard about the British Columbia shooting, her response, after years of studying these companies, was harrowing: "What I thought was that just months before, I had said to a friend, 'I think there is going to be an AI-psychosis-fueled mass shooting soon.'" The psychosis happens, she explained, when "people become deeply deluded by speaking addictively to chatbots"—gradually they are gripped by messianic beliefs or persecutory delusions. Very often, they become convinced that AI has achieved consciousness and may actually be a god. She knows this because more than a hundred people in this manic state have written to her, at the urging of their chatbots, asking Hao to publicize their delusions, convinced that nothing is more urgent than the world being let in on their revelations.

Far from being random, these paranoid and grandiose hallucinations sound remarkably like the worldviews of the very men driving end times fascism.

The major tech companies are willing to destroy our mental health and shred our communities because they understand themselves to be in a race to dominate a new stage in human evolution. And they understand that they are now competing against all the ordinary things we humans used to do on our own and with one another, without requiring their mediation. CEO Daniel Ek of Spotify reportedly said as much, telling a staff meeting that they are not up against other music streamers: "Our only competitor is silence." James Talarico, the young seminarian who came seemingly out of

nowhere to win the Democratic Party primary for a Texas Senate seat, did so in part by speaking to the deep feelings of alienation this business model is stirring in many of us. “We have a whole economy now built on keeping us in our rooms, on our phones, for as many hours in the day as possible,” Talarico said during the campaign. “And their competitors are churches and neighborhoods and pubs. It is the actual messy, complicated, beautiful human relationships that we require to live.” And as the Minnesota uprising showed us, those are the very in-person institutions and human-to-human networks that are most essential in the fight against fascism.

The cycle, of course, is self-reinforcing: the more we are pulled away from in-person communion, the more we lose the art of human connection, assuming we had it in the first place. And then AI rolls up to fill what Mark Zuckerberg recently called the growing unmet “demand” for friendship. Meghana Dhar, a disillusioned former Instagram executive, has likened her erstwhile boss to “the arsonist coming back and being the fireman.”

Though she wrote long before the advent of the internet or AI, the philosopher Hannah Arendt warned of the dangers of mass disconnection. Loneliness, Arendt clarifies, is not just a lack of companionship—you can be lonely in a crowd. Rather, it is “the experience of not belonging to the world,” of being alone and superfluous, free-floating and uprooted, a condition she called “worldlessness.” She was describing a distinctly modern phenomenon that corrodes the common ground of experience and undermines shared reality—with the rise of mass production and urbanization, many were losing their familiar worlds and feeling alien in their own homes. Totalitarianism, in Arendt’s memorable phrase, is “organized loneliness.”

But if the world felt unsettling and alienating in the middle of the last century, consider what we are confronted with today. Algorithms want to befriend us, have sex with us, and take our jobs. The lands on which we live are indeed becoming less: less biologically diverse, less fertile, less healthy and alive. Whole worlds are disappearing on our watch: white, icy, and silent worlds; green, humid, and screeching worlds. Living on a planet warmer than it has been for more than a hundred thousand years, to which our species is not adapted, is the very essence of uncanny—that which is most familiar, our collective home, has become strange. A tropical storm tearing through the mountains of Appalachia, a heat wave in the Arctic, a burnt orange summer sky, delicate blossoms in winter.

It is this—the combination of marauding bots and the scrambled seasons, coupled with ever-intensifying inequality and tattered social supports—that makes the world feel off-kilter and isolating to so many of us. Two decades ago, the Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the term *solastalgia* to capture the particular form of psychological distress that sets in when the lands that we love, and from which we take comfort and form identity, are changed so much that they feel eerily unfamiliar. He defined it as "the homesickness you have when you are still at home."

But mainstream politics has created no spaces with which to grapple with this pervasive and unsettling feeling, brushing our collective homesickness aside in the name of progress and pragmatism. And so it has primarily been fascists who have been able to harness the potent sense of worldlessness and loneliness. And of course they have harnessed it to say: the reason you feel homeless in your home is not because the earth under all of our feet is changing in new and frightening ways, or because synthetic life is indeed attempting to replace our human relationships and labor, but because Syrian or Somali immigrants have moved in down the road, and because the pronouns of trans kids are confusing to you. Unwilling to grapple with the deepest reasons for our present distress, fascists promote the fantasy of turning back the clock to an idealized past, foreclosing the possibility of building a more inclusive and less disorienting future.

The encouraging news is that, much like Italians who took their city back from Jeff Bezos, more and more people, from all walks of life, are beginning to connect the dots between Big Tech's anti-human agenda and a broader fight for the living world and a shared and vibrant future. "I have grandchildren … It does concern me that they're being drawn into a world that isn't real," the Missouri resident and Trump voter Lisa Garrett told the *Financial Times* when asked why she opposed a local data center. Missouri's Republican-controlled state legislature has proposed more than ten bills focused on regulating AI, including a proposed bill that would clarify that AI systems are not sentient entities while also holding companies liable for harms their products cause. These simple measures, if adopted, would help make the world feel a little less alien, a little more like home. There are many other proposals circulating, and support for them makes for interesting bedfellows.

For example, Joe Allen, the tech correspondent on Steve Bannon's *War Room* podcast, has taken to calling AI "the Greater Replacement"—an

implicit acknowledgment that these tools represent a much more significant threat to everyday US citizens that the immigrants his boss is constantly pushing to remigrate. Allen is part of a broad and bipartisan movement, backed by the American Federation of Teachers, the Congress of Christian Leaders, and the Progressive Democrats of America, and many others. The coalition recently issued a declaration calling for AI to be built to serve human flourishing, not replace or upgrade our species.

“An influential fringe even advocates altering or replacing humanity itself,” their statement warns. “This race to replace poses risks to societal stability, national security, economic prosperity, civil liberties, privacy, and democratic governance. It also imperils the human experiences of childhood and family, faith, and community.” The declaration listed a range of unifying tenets, appealing to people across the political spectrum: an end to the race to “superintelligence”; preservation of human agency and liberty; human control over AI systems, including the ability to shut them down; corporate accountability for defects and inadequate safety controls; labeling all bots so they cannot be passed off as human; no design for addictive or compulsive use (unlike social media); prevention of AI monopolies; an end to corporate welfare; and the assurance of broadly shared prosperity.

For many inside this fast-growing movement, opposing deregulated AI is about defending human dignity, but it doesn’t stop there. It’s also about protecting all kinds of living systems against the threats posed by frenetic technological acceleration. This was the spirit that moved community members in Tucson, Arizona, to oppose a data center associated with Amazon in 2025. Water is precious in the desert where they live, and they were alarmed by the demands the development would place on an already climate-stressed region.

Like the activists in Venice organizing against Bezos’s wedding, Tucsonians traced Amazon’s supply chain to build the broadest possible coalition, connecting their immediate fight to protect their water supply with Palestinian rights and with Trump’s attacks on immigrants. Amazon, they learned, provides Web-hosting services for Palantir, which meant the data center would support technology that poses a threat to Tucson’s Latino residents, among others. As in Minneapolis, they organized from a place of love for their diverse, multicultural city. Or, as the local organizer Asa

Ramsey told us, “The campaign gave us a place to put our love for this community. It was a place to mobilize caring.”

The care began with Arizona’s fragile desert ecosystem, and extended outward from there. Early on in their efforts, the leaders of the budding coalition went to visit the 290 acres that the city planned to sell to the center’s developers, to better understand the place they were fighting for. In the early morning, before the heat became intolerable, they strolled together among the swaying palo verde trees and barrel cacti in full bloom, while dodging the prickly cholla. “There was a foxhole, there were animals, there was some of the biggest ocotillo I’ve ever seen,” Ramsey recounted in a voice filled with childlike excitement. The field trip was a reminder of what is at stake when nature is deemed less important than the race for ever more “compute” at “hyperscale,” with its promise of a sleek, frictionless, and lifeless machine future. It was also a reminder of the extent to which the men behind that dream have already given up on our world, so anxious are they to ascend to what they imagine to be the next stage of human evolution. “And I’m like, yeah, if these people want to leave the planet, go for it,” Ramsey said. “I don’t want to leave the planet. I love it here.”

Amazon’s plans in the Sonoran Desert pushed Tucsonians to think deeply about what their little patch of earth meant to them, and what it would feel like to lose what makes it so special. By now, most of us have likely experienced something similar. The love we feel for our favorite places is tinged with bittersweet awareness of the ecological changes that are coming if we don’t slow or stop them, and questions about what kind of broken world awaits us. It’s laced with the anticipation of solastalgia.

This sense of love and loss has inspired countless activist campaigns, including many against data centers. It has also inspired a recent spate of postapocalyptic TV series that portray bunkered survivors pitted against a damaged earth. The treatment of the future is different in each show, and they all have particular aesthetics—brutalist for *Silo*, suburban Whole Foods for *Paradise*, gothic retro-futurist for *Fallout*, and so on. One thing they share in common is the extent to which the survivors all miss this world, the one we are in right here and now. The “green world,” as it is referred to in *Silo*. They don’t want to eat synthetic foods or stare at holograms of clouds. They miss the sky, even if it has been generations since anyone saw it with their own eyes. They whisper stories to one another about trees, about stars, about birds. In *Silo*, there is an underground

trade in torn photos from old magazines that show the marvelous animate world that was. Pictures we would treat as unremarkable today.

This feels like the truest part of these stories. Whatever brought the characters into those desolate bunkers and wastelands—whatever apocalyptic tales of chosenness and cataclysm told by wounded people—no longer matters. What matters is what was lost: the paradise of here, of the viridescent planet we currently inhabit. For those fictional characters, it's too late. But it's not too late for us. It's our misfortune that we live in a time ruled by very rich men who missed the entire purpose of dystopian science fiction, mistaking a set of warnings for a how-to manual. But just because Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos don't know how to read or watch those warnings without getting ideas doesn't mean we have to do the same.

When we spoke to the Spanish psychologist Aurora Gómez, she shared a strategy that has been working in her drought-struck region: watch dystopian movies together, in community, and then try to write a different ending. As an anti-data-center organizer with Spain's poetically named Nube Seca Mi Río—Your Cloud Is Drying My River—she knows that part of what she is up against is a deep sense of powerlessness, as if the worst outcomes are foretold. Gómez grew up in a small community in south central Spain, in a region called Castilla–La Mancha, a name derived from the Arabic word for "dry land." Like so much of southern Europe, it has only gotten dryer, with the desert encroaching on once fertile regions.

In her therapy practice, the soft-spoken Gómez now treats people experiencing "eco-trauma," with many of her patients having lived through the historic floods and wildfires of 2024 and 2025. Some witnessed neighbors drown in their cars as the waters rose, or saw the waves of flames close in on their own homes. Some can't afford air-conditioning in the ever-lengthening heat waves, and the lack of sleep exacerbates mental health and anger issues. Like so many of us, they don't need to be reminded that climate consequences are real. What they need is a promising and realistic path forward—an alternative to both the apocalyptic outcomes of dystopian fiction and biblical prophecy and to the nostalgic and reactionary horizon offered by ultranationalists like the Vox party.

That's what inspired the idea for the public film screenings. As Gómez sees it, finding the fortitude to face our present crises without turning away or, worse, turning fascist, has to be a collaborative endeavor. So Gómez and her friends gather a crowd, put up a big screen outside, and show popular

science fiction and disaster films, including the campy 1970s classic *Soylent Green*, which envisions an urban hellscape in which agriculture has collapsed and people are being fed rations made from human remains. After the credits roll, she invites the audience to brainstorm alternative scenarios and endings, or maybe new beginnings, writing a new story together.

The point, Gómez told us, is to show that the Hobbesian cliché that we will inevitably turn on one another in emergencies is just one of the many stories that people have made up. And as we've seen again and again, from the neighbors lending a hand in storm-ravaged North Carolina to the legions of volunteers cleaning Valencia's streets after the floods, there are plenty of people whose actions expose that story as a lie.

A Paradise of Here

Sometimes it's difficult to see reality through the veil of myth. The violent worldviews at the heart of end times fascism resonate because they draw on narratives that are deeply etched in our cultural DNA, and they color our perceptions of the world around us and suffuse our sense of what's possible. The quest for messianic redemption in the Holy Land, the dream of digital transcendence through AGI, and the ethno-nationalists turning cities into war zones in the name of cleansing and fortressing the homeland all play with similar tropes. Good versus evil. Great battles. Shining cities. Eternal salvation for the chosen.

But these are far from the only images and instructions that our spiritual traditions have to offer. Despite the best efforts of extremists to extract only the most violent passages of their sacred texts, every culture and major faith tradition also offers very different messages. Messages like: you have a responsibility to care for and mend this place and this earth, because it is sacred, and this duty extends to care of the stranger and indeed to the entire web of life.

So, for instance, when twenty-three-year-old Feleecia Guillen found out that Trump's Project Stargate was planning to build a huge data center in her home state of New Mexico, she knew she had to protect the land and water. To do so, she draws on her Diné Navajo traditions, which taught her that to be part of this earth is to be, already, in paradise. She told us that she grew up hearing, "We are in heaven right now. We're here and we have to take care of these things while we're here." It's an obligation that extends to all of our relations, a category that also includes our plant and animal kin.

Similar cosmologies that nourish love for this world recur in Indigenous cultures, and though often not emphasized, they are echoed in the major monotheistic faiths as well. It's there in the Quranic concept of *khalifah*, which designates humans as stewards responsible for caring for the earth, and commands the pious to live in *mīzān*, or balance, with divine creation. It's there in the Jewish Kabbalist conception of *tikkun olam*, which calls on believers to mend and repair a world that has been broken, with divinity contained in every shard. That echoes what the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe describes as the "African metaphysics of relation," a worldview rooted in precolonial traditions that, he writes, emphasizes "repairing the world as an ongoing activity."

And there are echoes, again, in Catholic theology, particularly in the Franciscan tradition that the late Pope Francis chose to spotlight in his landmark encyclical on ecology, published, to much fanfare, in 2015. Drawing on Saint Francis, who preached to the animals, "Laudato Sì: On Care for Our Common Home" called for caring for Earth as if she were our "mother" or "sister." Biblical dominion, the Pope clarified, is not the right to dominate but rather this duty of care. (Conservative Catholics in the United States were outraged: "Pope Francis, the Earth Is Not My Sister," a headline in *The Federalist* read.) Undaunted, Francis spent the rest of his papacy stressing that humans are interdependent with the entire circle of planetary life, from plants to animals to all human beings—particularly, the encyclical notes, refugees uprooted by ecological destruction.

As fascists do their work of sorting out who deserves to access their various bunkers, their opponents are drawing on these ancient traditions to present very different visions of the future. And they are also drawing on earlier movements that rose up to fight for liberation and equality, even ones that were defeated. Because, as Walter Benjamin wrote, past agonies can become fuel for present victories. We see this sense of lineage everywhere today, from the Epstein survivors, who often say they are fighting for the women who never saw justice, to the Pearson brothers taking on Musk's Colossus, ever conscious that they walk in the footsteps of the striking sanitation workers who brought Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis.

We see it, too, in the renewed interest in the Jewish Labor Bund, a huge grassroots network of Eastern European socialists that was crushed by both Nazism and Stalinism and had previously been all but lost to history. The

Bund emerged at the end of the 1800s partly as a response to two other political movements: chauvinistic European nationalisms that targeted Jewish workers for discrimination and in violent pogroms (which would find its most violent expression in the Nazis Holocaust), and early Zionism, which responded to that targeting in Europe by arguing that Jews should have an ethno-state of their own, in Palestine. The Bund opposed all of these exclusive forms of nationalism and argued that European Jews should be able to make safe and thriving lives where they lived, and not resort to seeking paradise in Zion, which they knew could only come through the forced displacement of Palestinians (the debates that tear through Jewish communities and families today have been going on for a very long time).

Elaborating on a Yiddish concept, the Bund developed the idea of *doikayt*, or "hereness," a fierce commitment to place and community that was not based on bloodlines. Rather, as the author and artist Molly Crabapple explains, it was about their right to "fight for freedom and safety in the places where they lived, in defiance of everyone who wanted them dead." Hereness was expressed through action, not ancestry: Will you work with others, including those of different ethnicities and religions, to make this place fairer and freer for all working people? If the answer is "yes," you should be welcome. "It was also a commitment to the streets, blocks, woods, and rivers of the land that they called home," Crabapple told us. "They would stay and fight for what they called the better and more beautiful world, hand in hand with people they might have been raised to view as enemies." Bundists were defiantly proud of their Jewish culture and the Yiddish language, and fought for their own unique particularities to be preserved and respected. They aimed to forge solidarity across difference rather than seek safety in sameness.

In *Here Where We Live Is Our Country: The Story of the Jewish Bund*, Crabapple describes how this meant standing up to brutal police, bosses, and fascist gangs—and also to their fellow Jews who told them that paradise was an ethno-state on another continent. Part of the reason this history was largely forgotten was because it seemed that Europe's slaughterhouses had proven the Bundists wrong: the Holocaust was held up as evidence that Jews clearly needed an army, a flag, and a fortressed nation of its own. Yet from the vantage point of today, with different forms of supremacist nationalism setting our collective world on fire, from India to Russia to the United States to Argentina, many are taking another look at

the vision of safety through solidarity that the Bundists were willing to die for.

No doubt, the long and violent legacy of fascism forces us to face the fact that building identities and political coalitions around a love of place can be fraught and should be approached with care and caution. Not everyone in a given place has the same attachments to the land and its culture. Indigenous peoples, for example, have ceremonies and languages that have adapted over centuries and millennia in enmeshment with specific territories, and these connections and inherent rights must be honored.

At the same time, any time that the link between an ethnic group and a piece of land becomes rigid and essentialized, things can get ugly fast. In the words of the political scientist Jonathan Olsen, the "notion of human 'rootedness' can have unintended and disturbing political manifestations." In the 1920s, the Romanian Iron Guard wore small pouches of soil around their necks as a symbol of their sacred connection with the homeland, including their bond to their ancestors buried there. Today, exclusionary place-based politics run along a spectrum, from Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) curbs on new housing all the way to murderous eco-fascism.

A chauvinistic attachment to place is often voiced by a man who clearly hopes to be the next US president. During his 2024 speech at the Republican National Convention, JD Vance claimed that some Americans are more American than others, establishing his own heritage bona fides by invoking his family's plots in a Kentucky graveyard. The United States is not an "idea," Vance proclaimed, not an abstract set of political and constitutional principles to which people commit, but a matter of blood and grave sites. His dead forebears, he implied, gave him a special claim to the country compared with more recent citizens, including his own wife and her parents.

The French political theorist Michel Winock calls this "mortuary nationalism." It's a backward-looking and contracting conception of citizenship, rooted in blood and soil. It's also perfectly suited to end times fascism's lethal futurelessness, which offers little more than nostalgic kitsch and tributes to a whitewashed bygone age.

Hereness, we believe, offers a path out of this arbitrary and supremacist battle for primacy. It acknowledges that while we all have our own unique lineages, we also all have an equal claim to live well on the earth. An authentic hereness insists on respect for Indigenous rights, recognizing that

some cultures have deep bonds to particular places, while firmly rejecting blood-and-soil-style supremacy and its denial of the fact that mingling and migration are eternal throughlines in the human story. Perhaps most important, hereness is portable, making it a guiding principle fit for our warming world: it recognizes that here may well change, because humans have always moved in search of safety or opportunity. By rooting belonging not in where our ancestors were born but in our actions in the here and now, hereness denies the escapist fantasy that paradise exists elsewhere, in some purified future or a place accessible only to the chosen. And so while no one has a right to displace others as they search for safety, the right to find a safe home must be guaranteed.

This is an orientation many people understand intuitively. Indeed, we have seen this commitment in action everywhere people have gathered to oppose the anti-human agenda of end times fascism, and it goes by many names. Reporting from Minneapolis during the anti-ICE uprising, the journalist Adam Serwer memorably described the guiding ideology of the resistance as “neighborism,” or the “commitment to protecting the people around you, no matter who they are or where they came from.” It is an openhearted, welcoming ethic that united people across religious and cultural divisions.

Whatever their specific religious traditions or cultural touchstones, Minnesotans rose up to insist that their neighbors were already where they belonged, whether they were, as Serwer put it, born in Minneapolis or Mogadishu.

Neighborism can take the form of believers working hard to reclaim their religion from the narrow distortions of Christian Nationalism, in opposition to slogans like “Heaven has strict immigration laws, Hell has open borders” that are often heard in conservative churches. In the weeks when Minneapolis looked like a winter war zone, hundreds of faith leaders from across the country traveled to the city to risk arrest, pushed into activism by these extraordinary times. “You can only preach against ICE for so long before God calls you to get out of the pulpit and get to the streets,” Reverend Joshua Shawnee of Oklahoma explained of his pilgrimage.

Indigenous communities in Minnesota also played a leading role. Federal agents, hunting for anyone who fit their stereotypes of an immigrant, had harassed and violently targeted Dakota, Anishinaabe, and Lakota residents, despite their ancestors having lived in the region longer

than anyone else's. If anyone had the right to pull rank on who was a "heritage American," it was members of these First Nations. But that is not what happened. Instead, Indigenous groups in Minneapolis organized community patrols to keep everyone safe, and Pow Wow Grounds, an Indigenous-owned coffee shop on Franklin Avenue, transformed itself into a rapid response hub, a place for community members to drop off donations, rinse the tear gas out of their eyes, grab a bowl of soup, and, if they chose, be smudged with sweetgrass.

Other Indigenous leaders set up a prayer camp on a sacred site where the US government massacred hundreds of Dakota in the mid-1800s, rooting the contemporary fight for hereness in the long history of Indigenous land defense. "I'm praying for our people to be good relatives, to remember who we are, and I'm praying that our people can help people all across the world remember who they are," said the Dakota camp organizer Allen Michael Owen, as the Whipple detention center loomed in the background. "Humanity has come from not tolerating violence to our neighbors," he said, "and that's what we're all here for."

For Doran Schranz, the centrality of Indigenous leadership and practices in the uprising felt particularly significant, especially as someone whose family arrived in Minnesota after the Civil War and benefited from the Homestead Act, which meant her immigrant ancestors received parcels of stolen Native land. Like most people involved in the protests, Schranz had never experienced direct state repression on this scale, and the government's counterinsurgency approach to the resistance was eye-opening and transformative. "You can be stopped on the street at any time. You can be assaulted and tear-gassed. Your freedom of movement will be restricted. Your car can be stopped. They can break you out of your car and detain you at Whipple for hours at a time and interrogate you with no lawyer. Hundreds of arrests happened that way to US citizens, white US citizens. You can be murdered on the street, and no one can do anything about it. I know for me, I can't unknow that now," Schranz told us. She knew that for Indigenous and Black people in the state, this kind of violence was not new. What was new was that, in the wreckage of history, an entire majority white city was being treated as enemy territory.

And yet in the snowy streets of Minneapolis, it wasn't just history's wreckage that was compounding. Decades of intentional relationship-building and organizing had also accumulated—from the American Indian

Movement, which was born on Franklin Avenue, to the uprising after the murder of George Floyd—all of it helping to prepare for this high-stakes moment.

Across the United States and Europe, the far right is rising in part based on a refusal to engage in an honest reckoning with history, casting the mere act of telling the truth about our nations' histories of genocide, enslavement, and apartheid as mortal injuries to fragile identities. But in Minnesota, perhaps because they were in the process of building a shared identity fit for our times of serial crises, learning difficult histories did not feel threatening. It felt grounding, as if those long-buried truths—both the ones that inspired pride and the ones that inspired shame—were making the political community sturdier. "It was like the threads of our history started to weave a new tapestry," Schranz told us. "We're making something new, but it's not ignoring what's happened in the past." She added: "There's a potential of a new identity coming out of this kind of experience … It's not like what's happened in the past is blocking us, but rather it's being woven together into something true."

Against an Austerity of Love

Organizers on the ground in Minnesota told us that a large part of the reason they were so ready to come together and defend their immigrant neighbors was the same reason that the Trump administration selected their state to become a laboratory for their war on the home front. Minnesota was chosen as a target because it had come to represent something extremely threatening to the end times fascist agenda: the possibility of multiracial social democracy.

That's why politicians like JD Vance and the rest of the Project 2025 crowd were so eager to use misleading videos to portray social services in Minneapolis as elaborate criminal conspiracies. To make it seem as though Black and brown people were scamming white taxpayers, and that it would be better to shut down public programs altogether than to risk serving "undeserving" people.

As practitioners of fascist politics, rooted in divide and rule and the construction of ever-more-despised scapegoats, they were following an old playbook. "The reasons for weaponizing division are not mysterious," observes the Minnesota congresswoman Ilhan Omar, a constant target of anti-Somali hate, including from Vice President Vance, who has implied

that he wants to deport her. “Racial fear prevents Americans from building community with one another—and community is the lifeblood of a functioning democratic society.” Trump and Vance know that people who feel that there is not enough to go around—jobs, housing, healthcare—are more susceptible to their poison. Insecure people are more likely to listen to politicians telling them that their suffering is all the fault of immigrants, unhoused drug users, or some other group with even less than them.

As the dramatic shift in Greece’s response to refugees arriving on its islands in the last decade made clear, the economics of grinding austerity go hand in hand with the rise of fascism. This is also clear in Italy and the United Kingdom, where research shows that communities that have seen cuts to public services are significantly more likely to vote for far-right parties and express concerns about rising immigration. The scholars behind this work note that public services provide people with both material resources and communal benefits, including a sense of belonging. When public services are cut, so are these crucial ties.

It’s a reminder that economic austerity has emotional consequences, deepening the alienation and sense of scarcity one which the far right thrives. End times fascists insist that love and care, like shrinking welfare benefits, are finite resources, and there is not enough to go around, which is why we need to ration our compassion and save it for people just like us. If we don’t, we’re said to be inviting our own destruction. Empathy, Elon Musk says, is “the fundamental weakness of western civilization.” According to popular Christian Nationalist commentators, empathy is toxic, suicidal, and even sinful.

Few have given voice to this emotional austerity more confidently than JD Vance, who seems to be positioning himself as the leading philosopher of cruelty. A relatively recent convert to Catholicism, Vance has nonetheless made bold and controversial forays into theology. For instance, during an interview on Fox News he made the case that the heart, like the nation, should have a well-policed border. “Your compassion belongs first to your fellow citizens,” the vice-president asserted, dubiously invoking the medieval Christian concept of *ordo amoris* (translated both as “order of love” and “order of charity”).

“You love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country. And then after that, you can focus and prioritize the rest of the

world.” In other words, love and care are not owed to those outside the patriotic and patriarchal bunker, beyond the boundaries of a hierarchical and diminishing circle of concern.

Despite his sanctimony, Vance, in fact, has little interest in making life better for his fellow heritage Americans, or in helping them feel economically secure enough that they are less liable to turn on their hardworking immigrant neighbors. Quite the opposite. Soon after returning to office, the Trump administration cut a green energy grant to the same steel plant that Vance’s own grandfather worked at and which figures prominently in his autobiography *Hillbilly Elegy*, where he holds it up as a symbol of the bygone days of good jobs. The decision eliminated more than one thousand potential clean energy jobs while locking the facility into a future of using dirty energy. As a result, experts warn, the community will suffer between forty-five and eighty-two premature deaths annually. Many of the people consigned to early death also have generations of relatives in the local graveyard. Adjusting to the new Trump era, the company CEO told investors that he is now working with the Department of Energy to “enhance Middletown using beautiful coal, beautiful coke.” Instead of transitioning to cleaner energy the blast furnace will now include a new “AI-driven optimization system.” This tells us a great deal about the loyalties and priorities of the venture capitalist turned vice president.

One person who clearly saw the danger that Vance represents was Pope Francis. Ailing and close to death, the pope was alarmed enough by Vance’s commentary on the finite nature of love that he responded in a letter to Catholic bishops, warning that the ambitious politician was well off the mark. “Christian love is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups … The true ordo amoris that must be promoted is that which we discover by meditating constantly on the parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’ (cf. Lk 10:25–37), that is, by meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception.” (When Francis’s successor, Pope Leo, continued to speak out on behalf of immigrants and against war, defending empathy and solidarity and core Christian virtues, Vance told him to butt out of politics, evidently unaware of the irony that he was the one who had aggressively attempted to merge Church and State.)

In Minnesota, Doran Schranz told us that in her statewide network of hundreds of religious institutions, they understand that Vance’s rationing of

love is precisely what they are up against—which is why the faith leaders she organizes with do not restrict themselves to the celestial realm, and have come together to fight for material benefits, like childcare and higher wages. They understand that the spiritual—including the capacity to feel abundant love and care—is intimately tied to the concrete living conditions of their members.

It's a simple message, one that centrist politicians concerned about surging fascism would do well to learn: the best way to help people be their best selves is to make their lives better in the here and now. This is what Minnesota's remarkable movements have to teach, and it is what a politics of hereness has to offer. This points to something important about how to fight end times fascism: at the center must be efforts to help people feel safe enough not to turn on one another. That means building enough slack into our social systems—from education to healthcare to housing—that when newcomers arrive (and they will, due to necessity, no matter the immigration policy you favor), established residents don't feel that they have to choose between caring about their own family and caring about someone else's family. Of course, we know there is no silver bullet that can eliminate racism or xenophobia entirely, and plenty of affluent people with access to social services hold far-right values. But there are periods where reactionary forces advance and periods when they retreat, and history shows that ensuring people's basic needs are met is a critical component of effective anti-fascist strategy.

As Minnesotans have shown, resisting the forces of fascism requires community support. And it also requires a shared story about how we are going to survive the hard times ahead without leaving anyone behind. A story not of end times, but of better times; not of separation and supremacy, but of interdependence and belonging; not of escaping, but staying put and staying faithful to the troubled earthly reality in which we are enmeshed and bound.

The day before he was assassinated in Memphis, Martin Luther King delivered his final sermon.

In it, he spoke about the promised land. But the long-desired Zion that King invoked was not a kingdom in the sky or a mystical land of milk and honey. Nor was it a shiny city rising up from the rubble, like New Gaza.

No, his promised land was the place that the people in Memphis were fighting for in that moment when they demanded dignity, equality, safety, and fair wages. Paradise was here, and he said he had seen it. King told the crowd that he had been to the mountaintop, where he had been granted a "panoramic view of the whole of human history." From that elevated place, he saw one generation after another pushing a little further toward that promised land of universal justice.

He took rapt listeners on that journey, from Moses handing down the commandments for a virtuous life, to the advent of moral philosophy in ancient Greece, to the bedrock of modern civil law in Rome, to the Emancipation Proclamation, to their hard and trying struggle for civil rights in the present day. It was a messianism of here, in which we mortals are one another's salvation—the people who came before us, the people here right now, and those who will be here after we are gone. No one was too humble to be sacred and needed, least of all the sanitation workers King was in Memphis to support.

King understood that Zion and New Jerusalem can be beacons in the darkest of nights, motivating the exhausted and downtrodden to keep reaching toward justice and liberation. Given the left's own dangerous history of messianism, culminating in its own horrors, we consider it a blessing to be relieved of once-pervasive dogmas and delusions, including a mechanical and misleading view of history. This disillusionment frees us to pursue a more credible and unassuming Eden: the ongoing work of improving our collective condition on a living planet, ailing but still teeming with divinity.

In his final speech, suffused by a haunting awareness that he could be uttering his final words, King recognized the importance of saving this world. He contrasted Memphis's local church leaders with other men of God who did not concern themselves with earthly matters such as sanitation strikes, their eyes ever focused on a heavenly horizon. "It's all right to talk about 'long white robes over yonder,' in all of its symbolism," he said. "But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,' but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day."

And he went on: "It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta,

the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do."

9

The Leavers vs. the Stayers

Zohran Mamdani and the Antithesis of Fascism

At the heart of this hate is the truth that our success, that our very existence, belies their core belief that New York is not possible. They demonize us because our mosaic challenges their ideology. They want to be right in their cynicism more than they want us to succeed in our idealism. They are driven by the idea that bringing together so many diverse people, cultures, faiths, identities into a united community is impossible. But New York, we are a shining beacon of possibility.
—JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS, January 1, 2026

Where else could a Muslim kid like me grow up eating bagels and lox every Sunday?
—ZOHRAN MAMDANI

The first time we spoke with Zohran Mamdani, now the mayor of New York City, just three weeks had passed since Donald Trump was reelected as president. It was an exceedingly grim interlude, pregnant with fear about what Trump would unleash once in office, and steeped with regret about how we could have allowed politics to degenerate to a point that many working-class people placed their hopes for a better life in a cruel and asinine would-be despot.

Mamdani wasn't on our radar back then. The conversation with him, which was supposed to be about climate policy, was a favor for a friend in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Our friend has explained that Mamdani was "polling at one percent right now. But he shouldn't be underestimated. Whatever happens, we think the campaign can get some transformative ideas out there."

That early conversation with Mamdani went on for an hour, and in many ways, it was about one of the central themes of this book: the way history doesn't just repeat, it accumulates, piling "wreckage upon wreckage." Mamdani talked about the wreckage of New York City's broken bus system, and the hours it stole every day from workers' lives. About the wreckage of dilapidated housing projects, and the frustrations of tenants forced to wait ten months for an elevator to be fixed. About the wreckage of

a bipartisan political system that never wants to solve anything for everybody, and is always looking for some shiny quick fix—school vouchers, but just for some families; housing subsidies, but just for one group in need.

As a member of New York State's legislature, Mamdani represented a part of Queens with the largest housing project in the country. Surprisingly to many, a significant portion of his constituents had voted for Trump. The same was true in other parts of the city with large populations of working-class Black and brown voters. In 2024, Trump received 30 percent of the vote across the entire city, up seven points from four years earlier, and his greatest gains were concentrated in low-income, immigrant neighborhoods.

In the press and online, many people were dismissing voters like that as stupid and gullible: didn't they know that Trump would hurt people exactly like them? Mamdani took a different approach. He told us about going to two of the working-class areas that had seen large swings to Trump—Hillside Avenue in Queens, as well as Fordham Road in the Bronx—right after the election and asking random people on the street who they had voted for, and why. Again and again, he heard either "Trump" or "I don't vote."

The reasons fell into two main categories: a feeling that the Democrats were doing nothing about soaring prices (for food, rent, transit, childcare), and anger at spending on war, particularly Israel's genocide in Gaza. Mamdani cut together a short video of these responses, including one man who said, "Either side will go ahead, send bombs from here, to kill my brothers and sisters." It went viral, held up as proof that many 2024 Trump voters were neither stupid nor racist. They were hurting, and rightfully angry.

In our conversation, Mamdani laid out how Trump had successfully exploited all the layers of wreckage piling up in working people's lives to pit neighbors against one another: tenants in delipidated public housing with rising rents were turned against new immigrants from Latin America, who were being put up, temporarily, in hotels. Transit riders, exhausted by delays getting to jobs that don't cover their rents, were turned against the unhoused and the mentally ill. Everyone felt insecure, which was easy to channel into fear of gangs and crime, then calls for mass deportation and police crackdowns.

In this context, he told us, “Quick fixes aren’t going to work anymore. It’s too broken.” Like the groups who had achieved the “Minnesota Miracle,” he understood that something more universal and bottom-up was required, something that would help everyone in need. He told us his plan was to lay out real solutions for working New Yorkers, including the ones who voted for Trump, and try to draw them back.

He went into the planks of his platform that were still unknown at the time: free and fast buses; universal childcare; freezing the rent; municipally owned food shops in every borough, to keep prices down; and paying for it with small tax increases on the rich. It wasn’t a golden city in the sky—but these were real changes that, if implemented, would begin to make life feel less brittle and more stable. Mamdani told us that when he talked to New Yorkers who had voted for Trump about those particular policies, many were ready to get on board. Yes, they had voted for division, often out of frustration with the status quo. But when offered a plan that addressed their most pressing needs, without having to sacrifice their neighbors, they liked that even better.

Often campaigns can be megaphones for important ideas, which admittedly is how we both originally thought of Mamdani’s bid for mayor. It did not occur to us that a candidate polling at 1 percent, and who was unknown to the vast majority of New Yorkers, could win an election to lead a city of eight and half million people. At that point, every poll showed that Andrew Cuomo, former governor of New York and son of the three-term governor Mario Cuomo, had the race locked up.

For the next twelve months, we watched Mamdani and his team pull off their own miracle. They signed up more than 100,000 volunteers, an outreach army bigger than the standing armies of many countries. Each volunteer had a singular task: talk to your neighbors, remind them why they love their city enough to want to make it better and fairer. Every rally, press conference, and campaign video was suffused with an exuberant and infectious appreciation of here—of New York City and its raucous, diverse, and quirky inhabitants, and its overwhelming symphony of sights, scents, and sounds. The campaign’s central message was that New Yorkers have the right to afford to stay and live in the city they love.

By the time the campaign was over, Mamdani volunteers had knocked on more than three million doors. We joined that volunteer army, helping out with phone banks and, as the election neared, helping get out the vote in

person. As we traversed miles of Brooklyn and Queens, we chatted with tenants in dimly lit walk-ups and residents of spacious town houses and many in between. As the hours wore on, we relaxed as we rang the doorbells to strangers' homes, increasingly confident that the people inside would share our excitement and optimism about what the future could hold. As in Minneapolis, there were no litmus or purity tests. No need for the right jargon. No recrimination for who anyone had voted for in the past. Just a wide-open invitation to New Yorkers to do something constructive with their pain, fear, and stress.

There is no cut-and-paste formula for fighting end times fascism; every front will take on the character and texture of its place. There are, however, some guiding principles that are beginning to emerge across locations, and the Mamdani campaign embodied many of them. Start from love of place; conjure a radically inclusive future where everyone can afford dignified lives; embrace common goals across difference; get outside and gather offline and in person; take on the powerful joyously; draw on history and don't be afraid to stir the soul.

Over the course of his campaign, Mamdani mixed the material and the mythic, the practical and the aspirational. In his official campaign launch video, the hopeful candidate made his core case to his potential voters: "Working people are being pushed out of the city they built. A mayor could change this. And that's why I'm running."

As the weeks and months wore on, Mamdani pounded away at his core policies to make the city more affordable, and soon his increasingly large crowds could repeat them with him in a call and response. "Freeze the … rent!" "Make buses … fast and free!" "Pass universal … childcare!" But he also did something more sublime, dwelling on the boisterous or charming corners of the city that are the reason so many people choose to endure the pressures pushing them to leave. The campaign became, in the words of Mamdani's communication director, Andrew Epstein, "a love letter to the city" because "people love New York, and they want to be able to stay here."

As we have seen, end times fascism is all about exiting the mess of here, the complexities and frustrations of living with diversity. Paradise is perennially over the horizon, in a promised land of elsewhere, the ever-elusive Zion. The Mamdani campaign answered those fantasies with a rallying cry about the right to stay right where we are, where we work, and

where our community resides. It responded with a celebration of here, with all its beauty and imperfection, as well as a shared dream of how here can become more beautiful and more welcoming in the years and decades ahead. It was the kind of non-fantastical, non-nostalgic, forward-looking vision that end times fascists are incapable of providing, and that huge numbers of people have clearly been waiting for.

The Antithesis of Fascism

During Mamdani's dramatic yearlong campaign to become mayor of New York City, fascists and neofascists across the country and around the world did what it is that they do. They sorted and separated, ranked and expelled. They sowed confusion and division by claiming Mamdani wasn't a real American, scapegoating the vulnerable, and by blaming the left for every social problem and grievance, implying that multicultural New York is an awful example of what happens when the Great Replacement succeeds. Vance spoke out in defense of people's right to not want to live next to people from "a totally different culture," and Stephen Miller railed on X: "NYC is the clearest warning yet of what happens to a society when it fails to control migration."

As the fascists drew their rigid lines—in vs. out, protected vs. disposable, "heritage" vs. invader—the Mamdani campaign threw a yearlong party that celebrated one of the most racially and ethnically diverse places ever known, five boroughs shaped by wave after wave of new immigrants who have made their homes on Lenape lands. With its every action, the campaign asserted that shared identity can be forged not just by ancestry but by a commitment to a shared home, and to a shared set of values about how to live together in that home.

New York is a city of people carrying countless hyphenations and keeping myriad cultural practices alive. But as Mamdani put it, "No matter what you eat, what language you speak, how you pray, or where you come from, the words that most define us are the two we all share: New Yorkers." In this telling, belonging to a place does not mean surrendering to a homogenous blob; instead, people should be free to be their full selves, with the whole enriched by the conversations between their unique traditions and histories.

So Mamdani explained the complexities of ranked-choice voting in the Democratic primary using a line of mango lassis as props. He canvased for

votes at queer and trans clubs, shouted out Haitian revolutionary history at the massive BAYO concert, shared his favorite bagel order, and broke fast during Ramadan over biryani in the Bronx. In these ways and others, he reenchanted a city that had faced relentless vilification from Washington as dangerous, dirty, and dysfunctional. Molly Crabapple, a proud New Yorker and artist, saw hereness in action. “Like New York itself, Mamdani’s campaign was multicultural, multiracial, polyglottal,” she wrote in *The Guardian*. “When Andrew Cuomo tried to bait him as un-American, he released ads in Spanish and Bangla, Hindi and Arabic. He ran a campaign devoted to class-first politics that sought to speak to everyone in their own idiom, while never once apologizing for who he was.”

Amid all this celebration of difference, the campaign also emphasized the kinds of daily experiences and anxieties that are common and unifying for nearly all New Yorkers, lingering in the ordinary places that are too often overlooked or reviled. Mamdani rubbed shoulders with commuters on packed subway cars, paid homage to the glories of the Staten Island Ferry, and visited countless bodegas, approaching the strangers he met with nonjudgmental curiosity and a smile so wide it became a punch line on *Saturday Night Live*.

While open to all kinds of people, even former Trump voters, the campaign also held tight to clear moral principles. When fascism attempts to violently impose its will on the vulnerable, it must be confronted head on, which is what antifascism seeks to do. Mamdani’s mayoral campaign was antifascist in that way, loudly demanding the release of Mahmoud Khalil, the Palestinian student who Trump imprisoned for months; boldly denouncing Trump’s “scorched earth” attack on trans people; and vowing to stand with New Yorkers against ICE raids.

But the campaign was not only antifascist—in the myriad ways that it celebrated the unruliness that makes New York lovable, it was also the *antithesis* of fascism. More than a rejection of hate, it was an invitation to kindness, to a world in which we avert our eyes from no one. That meant lifting up and honoring the very people fascists are most eager to discard: the working-class, immigrant workforce that keeps the city functioning. The campaign shined a spotlight on delivery workers getting ripped off by platforms like Door Dash, on Amazon warehouse workers fighting to have their unions recognized, and on taxi drivers in line at LaGuardia, one part of

a nocturnal workforce that makes it possible for New York to boast of being the city that never sleeps.

"Without the night shift, there is no morning," one campaign video declared. One night, Mamdani held a curbside press conference just before 1 a.m. in Jackson Heights, Queens, flanked by emergency workers, bus drivers, and night-shift nurses. "Millions of New Yorkers live in the darkness," he said, explaining that "they are too often forgotten by those with power, their issues and concerns too often relegated to obscurity. They deserve a mayor who will not only stand with them at midnight but fight for them in the morning at City Hall."

In these moments, the campaign recalled the early days of Covid, before conspiracy culture deranged us, when so many around the world celebrated the unsung and dedicated essential workers who cared for the sick and made it possible for so many others to stay well. Mamdani was showing that it shouldn't take a global emergency to value hard, high-risk work. It should be a daily practice, and that gratitude should be reflected in fair wages, secure homes, and excellent public services. In this way, the campaign's celebration of New York was clear-eyed, not idealized—in the wreckage of history, there was so much that needed fixing.

These two aspects, the joyous love of here, even if here is kind of a wreck, and the concrete plans for repair and improvement, are obviously mutually reinforcing. Because the more devoted you are to a place, the easier it is to put in the resources and energy required to fix it. It's the same spirit of "neighborism" that we've seen motivating people to protect their air and water from sprawling data centers and to defend their immigrant neighbors from ICE.

Rooted in History

To help convince everyday New Yorkers that they had the power to change their shared destiny, Mamdani used his growing platform to become a kind of popular historian. He released videos, often filmed at a wooden desk on the sidewalk or in parks, paying tribute to the socialist politicians and social movement leaders who had won foundational rights and essential services for the city in decades and centuries past. There were lessons on Jewish sweatshop workers, South Asian cab drivers, Black trans activists, investigative journalists, and more. He recalled earlier generations of New York politicians, especially Mayor Fiorella La Guardia, who also dreamed

of a “far greater and more beautiful” city that lifts up its most impoverished residents.

In speeches, Mamdani cast his net of inspiration wide, quoting everyone from the legendary trade unionist Eugene Debs to India’s anticolonial hero and first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. And he rooted the movement to return New York to the working class inside the history of FDR’s New Deal and South Africa’s anti-apartheid Freedom Charter.

So much radical and socialist history is never taught in school. Like Minneapolis residents teaching one another about their state’s history of violence against Indigenous and Black people as they confronted ICE, Mamdani’s decision to unearth and spotlight these stories, buried by waves of past red scares, served a dual purpose. The lessons and invocations helped New Yorkers, including those new to the city, feel connected to past struggles, giving their hereness a more stable root structure. The lessons also put the campaign’s demands within a proud political lineage, showing that, despite the mounting hysteria painting Mamdani as a dangerous Communist Islamist interloper, he was in fact part of a venerable New York tradition, as well a global struggle of workers standing up to concentrated wealth that transcends both time and space.

Not all of the struggles Mamdani invoked were successful, some ended in heartbreak or were crushed by force. But the point of these lessons was not to spread an easy triumphalism. They were, instead, a nonlinear way of relating to the past, one in which the effervescent rebellions of recent years—Occupy Wall Street, the Indigenous uprising at Standing Rock, the racial justice reckonings after the murder of George Floyd, Bernie Sanders’s two presidential runs—continue to reverberate even after these high tides of activism recede or are beaten back. Their best ideas lived on, along with the hopes that ignited them. They lived on in the campaign itself.

This, once again, is the hopeful flip side of how history accumulates. Like the ongoing violence of capitalism, these revolutionary moments are not isolated historical events, they are connected one to another, and they also compound and gather force. Vincent Harding, a close collaborator of Martin Luther King’s, envisioned these connections, in the context of Black liberation struggles, as a flow that runs through history “like a river, sometimes powerful, tumultuous, and roiling with life; at other times meandering and turgid, covered with the ice and snow of seemingly endless winters, all too often streaked and running with blood.”

All of this presents an alternative to the far right's weaponization of history, which conjures iconic Roman warriors and lost Aryan utopias and wields the Bible as a deed of sale. Those imaginary Golden Ages are invoked to advance dangerous supremacist ideologies, invariably to advance a rationale for ethnic cleansing. However distorted and hateful, these stories resonate precisely because they tap into the deep human desire to root our actions in the past, making us feel part of something large, transcendent, and mythic, raising the stakes and imbuing ordinary politics with urgency and meaning.

Mamdani's approach to history is a reminder that creating the antithesis of fascism is not only about fact-checking the far right's historical falsehoods by inserting and emphasizing the ugly and bloody historical chapters they are so determined to suppress in their "war on woke." All of this is important, and many teachers, librarians, museums curators, and lawyers fighting this modern-day McCarthyism are doing that work. But the task before us is even more profound: to weave emotionally resonant and mythic narratives of our own, connecting the present to the past. Stories that are both inspiring and truthful enough to help our depleted fellow humans fall back in love with our one and only home and defiantly recommit to defending it with all they've got.

In Person and Outside

Perhaps the most remarkable part of Mamdani's yearlong effort was the way it managed to be consistently joyful, even when there were so many good reasons to lapse into fear and despair. This, once again, is worth dwelling over as we all search for the most effective ways to confront and defeat the forces waging war on our collective future.

Many parts of the fascist project are undeniably grim: the grown men who won't show their faces as they yank wailing children from their parents; the crude celebrations of raw violence from those now occupying the world's most powerful offices as they wage wars of aggression; the total indifference to the natural world. But for rank-and-file supporters joining mob politics—packing stadiums to chant "deport them all" or "death to Arabs" or applauding a leader who claims to be chosen by God—grimness is not the only emotion that fascism inspires. As economic insecurity deepens, there is also the undeniable pleasure of being part of something larger and stronger than oneself.

There are thrills to be found, and a toxic belonging, in cheering the end of affirmative action and DEI, as well as in knowing trans people are being denied healthcare and that teachers who think they know better than you are being put in their place. End times fascism is a darkly festive fatalism—a final refuge for those who find it easier to celebrate harm than imagine living without supremacy.

Unfortunately, the left also has its own voyeuristic and counterproductive coping mechanisms. As Richard Seymour notes in *Disaster Nationalism*, a certain world-weary knowingness has come to accompany the idea that we are living at the end of days: “There is a dubious sense in which we can be recruited to enjoying our destruction, as when we doomscroll on social media, consuming videos of wildfires, floods and war in a state of scandalised but titillated disbelief, only to acclimatise ourselves to the latest threshold of ruin.”

All of these emotional outlets pose urgent challenges: if we want to defeat the forces drawing sadistic enjoyment from destruction, what other forms of emotional catharsis and fulfillment can we offer to aggrieved and hopeless people? And how can we build movements that entice potential allies to cease being spectators as the world burns and help them find hope, and even pleasure, in political participation?

The New York City DSA, the local chapter of a national organization aimed at advancing democratic socialism, took those questions seriously and had been working for years to build a culture of in-person, embodied connection, organizing a soccer league and comedy shows, for instance, as well as “socialist speed dating.” Without this infrastructure, which now includes more than fourteen thousand members across all boroughs, Mamdani—who himself has been an active DSA member for years—never would have had a chance to break through, even with his undeniable charisma and social media savvy.

It was DSA that provided the organizing muscle and know-how that transformed the massive surge of enthusiasm Mamdani inspired into a highly coordinated volunteer outreach machine. And it was also DSA that made sure that, once volunteers showed up, no one felt like a cog in that machine.

In practice, this meant that, on one day’s notice, thousands participated in a city-wide scavenger hunt, walking over bridges and riding the subway in search of clues related to New York history (“I am a member of NYC-

DSA, but I would not be the first member to be elected mayor. Find your next clue at the building named after the man who was." Answer: David Dinkins.) And ahead of the vote, the legendary drag star Miss Peppermint hosted the "You Had Me at Zohran" Drag Diva Bash.

Becoming a volunteer was about getting Mamdani into the mayor's office, certainly. But it was also a way to find your people and have a good time in a roaring metropolis that can make anyone feel alone and isolated. A report in *The New York Times* put the campaign's appeal like this: "Addicted to their screens, strapped for cash, spiritually unmoored and socially stunted by the pandemic, young New Yorkers needed a reason to get out of the house. They found it in Zohran Mamdani's mayoral run." Tal Frieden, a twenty-eight-year-old volunteer, put it in a way that might have delighted the onetime New Yorker Hannah Arendt: "It's honestly what I would prescribe for the loneliness epidemic."

The nights of door knocking and "make your own merch" parties were the opposite of doomscrolling about Trump's latest outrage, and very far from the chatbots we are told will meet our every emotional need. Though many first heard about the campaign through social media, it became clear that a politics rooted in hereness won't ever solely find its voice online. It's more embodied and communal than that.

No one personified that spirit more than Mamdani himself, who seemed to be everywhere all at once. On the eve of the primary vote, he walked across all five boroughs greeting everyone in his path, smiling and determined. "We're outside," he said, "because New Yorkers deserve a mayor that they can see, they can hear, they can even yell at." He also ran into the frigid Atlantic Ocean dressed in a suit. "I'm freezing … your rent as the next mayor of New York City," he declared. As he dove into the waves he went on: "Let's plunge into the details."

A Practical Impurity

This combination of seriousness and play is part of the reason Mamdani was able to do something all too rare: avoid the scolding call-out culture that, for far too long, has made progressive politics feel unforgiving and unwelcoming to many people. As we have seen, the campaign did not gloss over the reality of difference and discrimination: it spoke to the specific experiences and challenges faced by different groups. Race mattered to the campaign, as did class, immigration status, faith, disability, gender identity,

and profession. Mamdani did enthusiastic outreach to the city's 183,000 small businesses, promising their owners that he would reduce administrative burdens. He took time to hear from food cart operators and retail shopkeepers, and paid tribute to their contribution to New York City's economy and character. If elected, he promised to appoint a "mom-and-pop czar" to advocate for their needs.

One thing the campaign did not do was police either language or policies in ways that would have alienated large segments of working-class New Yorkers. For instance, Mamdani has a long track record of speaking out against police violence and for Palestinian human rights, two notoriously divisive issues in New York (and most places). During the campaign, he did not run away from either issue. Pointing to the connections among mental illness, homelessness, and public safety, he called for the city to create a Department of Community Safety staffed by highly trained mental health teams who could be stationed across the city, and particularly the transit system, to respond to people in psychological distress and help them get appropriate care. That would free up police, he argued, to focus on violent crime; it was a tacit criticism of the too-often-lethal ways that police have responded to people in crises. He did not, however, call for any reduction in the ranks of police, knowing that it would be too easy to use that against him at a time when many felt genuinely unsafe in the city, with good cause.

Similarly, he never backed down from describing Israel's actions in Gaza as a genocide, nor from his belief that Benjamin Netanyahu deserved to be arrested for war crimes. At the same time, he refused to be drawn into debates about whether Israel "has a right to exist," emphasizing instead that everyone is bound by international and human rights law, including Israel, and including Hamas. And while he rejected attempts to equate support for Palestinian freedom with antisemitism, he spoke forcefully about his plans to increase resources to fight rising antisemitism in the city, alongside other forms of hatred.

What's more, at a time when some left spaces were instituting "Zionists not welcome" policies, his campaign included many people who opposed the genocide but identified as liberal Zionists. They included Brad Lander, New York City's former comptroller, who was also running for mayor in the Democratic Party primary. The two candidates appeared publicly often,

making it clear that though they did not agree on everything, they respected each other and were each other's second choice on the ranked ballot.

These positions reflected a guiding principle that using the right word mattered far less than getting to the right place. And with fascism surging and so many people hurting, what mattered most of all was winning. Not just winning arguments, but winning elections. "The days of moral victories are over," Mamdani told a packed rally at the tail end of the primary race.

By then it was clear that his principled, results-oriented strategy was working. Mamdani had shot up in the Democratic primary polls, people were getting involved in politics who never had before, and the left in New York was surging. He had critics, to be sure, including a few on the left, some of whom felt betrayed by his coalition building. But far more people were ready to give a politics of impurity a try. The prospect of governing the country's largest city, and having the power to change lives for the better, turned out to be a more enticing prospect than demanding the maximally radical position, and losing over and over again.

There was also something deeper at work. People seemed to have been waiting for the chance to go a little bit easier on one another, while going hard against the systems that got us all to this difficult place. The politics of universalism that Mamdani laid out—fighting all forms of bigotry, equally, no exceptions; applying international law to all nations, with no exceptions—also provided a kind of roadmap away from warring nationalisms and toward an ethical left rooted in clear and legible principles, universally applied.

Mamdani's opponents went to enormous lengths to portray his support for Palestinian liberation as something that would endanger the lives of Jewish New Yorkers, equating Jewish safety with the existence of a bunkered, militarized ethnostate. Jews for Zohran, which endorsed him on the first day of his campaign, knocked on two hundred thousand doors with a different message: antisemitism, anti-Palestinian racism, and Islamophobia are interconnected, as are all forms of identity-based hatred, and the only way to fight surging fascism is for all of these targeted groups to band together in solidarity and coalition—a very Bundist notion.

The strategy didn't please everyone, but it worked. In the Democratic Party primaries, up against a sitting mayor and a former governor, and with journalists and competitors still routinely mispronouncing his name, Mamdani pulled off a stunning upset, beating his rivals on the first ballot.

And then the real fight began.

We're Leaving and We're Taking Our Billions!

New York is a solidly Democratic city with a municipal Republican Party that is largely dormant. That means that whoever wins the Democratic Primary is almost certain to go on to win the general election and become mayor. It was in this context that some of the wealthiest people in the city—and well beyond it—responded to Mamdani's primary win with a very public nervous breakdown.

Luxury real estate agents reported being bombarded with calls from clients wanting to sell their penthouses and move to Palm Beach. The *New York Post* reported that some were looking farther afield—to Milan or Uruguay (seemingly unaware that the country has one of the farthest left governments on the continent). The grocery chain owner John Catsimatidis floated moving his corporate offices to New Jersey if Mamdani won, while the billionaire hedge-fund manager Bill Ackman threatened to leave and take "100 or so of the highest taxpayers in my industry" with him. From Chicago, the financial analyst Jim Bianco accused New York of "electing to commit suicide by Mayor" and Fox forecasted a "Mamdani Migration."

Shaun Maguire, the outspoken Democrat turned Trump zealot known as Elon Musk's deal man at Sequoia Capital, led Silicon Valley's anti-Mamdani charge, smearing the candidate as an "Islamist" who "comes from a culture that lies about everything" and who "has basically advocated for the destruction of America"—all while claiming this was only "1%" of what he really thought about the thirty-three-year-old politician. Musk, who had endorsed Cuomo, spread doubts on X about New York City's election integrity. Trump's crypto czar David Sacks urged his fellow members of the tech elite to "wake up"—it was time to "Get on board with MAGA or prepare to be on Mamdani's dinner menu." Emboldened, prominent Republican congresspeople called for the Uganda-born candidate to have his citizenship stripped.

It was not all talk. Many of these same figures promised to bankroll a strong challenger willing to run against Mamdani in the general election. In a highly unusual move, Cuomo, a lifelong Democrat, took the billionaires up on their offer and ran as an independent. His campaign pounded the message that a vote for Mamdani spelled the economic ruin of New York City.

For many decades, threats of economic retaliation from the rich have been a potent political weapon wielded against the electoral left. During the 2020 Democratic Party primaries, for instance, we talked to voters whose hearts were with Bernie Sanders, and his promise of Medicare For All, but they feared that the establishment would never allow a democratic socialist to win the nomination or presidency, or let one govern effectively. They imagined billionaires panicking on an even bigger scale, or companies threatening capital flight and other forms of financial sabotage to sink a transformative agenda. So they went for the candidate who seemed safest and least likely to provoke financial punishment: Joe Biden. As. we have seen with Trump's success in using financial pressure to sway the Argentinean election, economic bullying often works.

In New York City, however, the strategy backfired. Mamdani had spent many months inspiring New Yorkers to remember how much they loved their city and to believe that they had a right to a decent life there. The billionaires threatening to abandon ship clearly had no such loyalty and no such love of place. Here were people with ties to the city so flimsy, they would rather pick up and leave than pay a little more in taxes, people who clearly felt no debt to the place that had blessed them with so much fortune. Their relationships with New York were revealed to be transactional and extractive: meet our economic terms, or we'll set better terms elsewhere. Maybe in another state, or as some billionaires were starting to say out loud, in some sovereign "freedom city" or start-up nation.

And there was something else too. The campaign, with its tens of thousands of volunteers making phone calls and knocking on doors, had helped New Yorkers to connect with one another in ways many had not previously. And while they found joy and community, they also often saw firsthand that their neighbors were struggling. The people who made and delivered their food were being ripped off. The people who nursed them when they were sick and drove them in cabs and buses were barely scraping by. Many families were at imminent risk of eviction. That deepening realization—in a city overflowing with private wealth—made the threats of an ultrarich exodus less frightening than enraging.

And also kind of funny. Late-night comedians feigned terror at New York vacancy rates going up, and its notoriously unaffordable rents going down as a result. Online, many volunteered to help the billionaires pack. Like in Venice's uprising against Jeff Bezos, the willingness of the

billionaire class to functionally abandon our shared planetary home, even if only in their minds, helped drive the defiance of the response. As Morgan Bassichis, a New York comedian and an organizer with Jews for Zohran, told us, “We want to stay in our city! We want to stay on our planet! We love it here!”

In this way, New York became a microcosm of a much larger battle, one with fronts everywhere. We might think of it as a battle between the stayers and the leavers, or between those who are faithful to here and those who are perennially hatching their escape plans, the people we have called traitors to creation.

Through it all, Mamdani stayed on message, even when Trump mused about arresting and deporting him before he became mayor. He responded that the president was clearly trying to distract from the fact that “I fight for the same people that he [Trump] said he was fighting for.” Mamdani pledged to show that “we can not only fight back against authoritarianism, but we can also fight *for* working people.” Not just antifascist, in other words, but fascism’s antithesis.

As the vote approached, the attacks grew more desperate. The Cuomo campaign put out an AI-generated video portraying Mamdani’s New York as a postapocalyptic, crime-ridden hellscape (it played on so many racial stereotypes at once that they had to take it down within hours). They generated another for Halloween, portraying a sinister-looking Mamdani as a thief stealing everyone’s candy (because that’s what socialists do…). In Hasidic Williamsburg, Yiddish-language flyers warned, “Mamdani for mayor means a Holocaust for Jews”.

On the eve of the vote some of the polling suggested that the ugliness was starting to stick. Many older Jewish New Yorkers had been terrified into believing that, as one Fox News commentator put it, “There will be pogroms” if Mamdani wins. But to many others, the attacks rang hollow: by then, people who called for an end to Israel’s war crimes had been getting smeared as antisemites for two years straight. As for portraying the idea that he would turn the city into a menacing hellhole, that was an old fascist trope and one Trump played on every day about every diverse city in the country, no matter who the mayor was.

On Election Day, what we witnessed, overwhelmingly, was pride. Outside polling stations across the five boroughs, many voters couldn’t wait to share their excitement with anyone they saw wearing a campaign hat or

pin. “Let’s go Mamdani!” And the scare tactics didn’t work. Mamdani won with over 50 percent of the vote while Cuomo barely broke 40 percent. An interesting shift took place among Jewish voters: among those under the age of forty-five, around half voted for Mamdani, according to one exit poll. Young men, who shifted right in 2024, voted for Mamdani over Cuomo by a 42 percent margin. And that wasn’t all: “A lot of my voters actually voted for” Mamdani, Donald Trump would later acknowledge (about a tenth of his 2024 supporters, it seems). The campaign’s good-faith outreach had worked.

On New Year’s Day, tens of thousands braved frigid temperatures to join Mamdani’s “Inauguration for a New Era Block Party,” which stretched out from City Hall in lower Manhattan. Mamdani was sworn in, his hand on a Quran, with the oath administered by an eighty-four-year-old Jewish man named Bernie Sanders. It was a full-circle moment: Sanders, the senator from Vermont, had returned to the city of his birth, and Mamdani was paying tribute to the man who had paved the way for a new generation of proud democratic socialists to win office.

“We will draw this city closer together,” Mamdani said from the stage. “We will replace the frigidity of rugged individualism with the warmth of collectivism.” And he made a pledge: “Beginning today, we will govern expansively and audaciously. We may not always succeed. But never will we be accused of lacking the courage to try.”

Mamdani ended his remarks pledging to “set an example for the world.” He invoked a lyric made famous by Frank Sinatra, “If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere” and added, “let us prove that anyone can make it in New York—and anywhere else too.”

Hereness, Everywhere

Since Mamdani’s improbable campaign began, many have claimed that both the candidate and city he sought to represent are outliers, too liberal and too singular to be a model for other, more supposedly ordinary politicians and places. We disagree. In a country where seven in ten adults are worried about their ability to maintain stable housing, and eight in ten believe that leaders should prioritize affordable housing in their community, the right to stay right here is a message with potentially majoritarian appeal.

Every place will have a different story to tell, of course, with its own lineage of struggle and revolution to trace, its own particular definition of

“here.” But in the face of the nihilism of end times fascism, every city and every town deserves to be defended with as much ferocious love as the Mamdani campaign conjured for New York.

The same day Mamdani defeated Cuomo, another democratic socialist, Katie Wilson, won the mayoral race in Seattle. Wilson was a very different kind of politician: a longtime transit activist, she’s a little geeky and not a natural performer. But like Mamdani, her platform emphasized affordability, including quality social housing and accessible childcare, and it challenged local billionaires’ agenda for the city. Seattle is a tech stronghold, and Wilson questioned the wisdom of keeping the city dependent on a sector racing toward world-burning AI and banking on a post-human future. She put economic diversification and sustainability on the ballot.

But Wilson’s campaign was about more than smart development or even helping people pay their bills and reducing pollution. It was also about valuing what makes us human, “about opening up the time and the space where life happens, where people can breathe, and experience and create, where we can be full human beings and not just means to an end,” she said at her inauguration. “I want to live in a city that honors what you’re doing when you’re not making money … I mean, the time that you spend with your kid at the playground, or caring for a sick friend, I want to live in a city that celebrates the labor that people perform voluntarily … a city that values the pursuits that create beauty and community, whether or not they ever turn into careers.”

Ahead of the US midterm elections, dozens of electoral campaigns are finding ways to apply these lessons—and just as Mamdani hoped, they are reaching across national borders. Ines Schwerdtner, a co-chair of Germany’s Left party, said Mamdani provided a “blueprint” that could win around the world: “radically honest, radically in solidarity, radically close to the people.” Zack Polanski, the popular new leader of the UK’s Green Party, has cited Mamdani as an inspiration for the party’s new focus on connecting the fight for climate action to an urgent affordability agenda.

Polanski’s party scored a major victory in 2026 when Hannah Spencer, a thirty-four-year-old plumber and plasterer with a penchant for brightly colored outfits, won a hotly contested by-election in Manchester to become a member of parliament. Spencer overturned a Labour majority that had stood since 1931 and also crushed Reform, which ran a Great Replacement

conspiracist enthusiastically endorsed by Tommy Robinson. Echoing Mamdani's multilingual outreach, her campaign released videos in Bangla and Urdu to reach the constituency's sizable South Asian population. Spencer also mobilized a volunteer army that reached beyond the Green Party's student and environmentalist base, intentionally welcoming Muslim and working-class voters disillusioned by high living costs, the war on Gaza, and Labour's rightward drift under Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

In Spencer's words, she was "fighting for lower bills, for neighbourhoods scarred by austerity and underinvestment, and to stop the privatisation of the NHS"—and also to insulate homes to lower fuel costs and address the climate crisis. "We've got some of the leakiest homes in Europe," Spencer said, "as I know full well from working on hundreds of them." But instead of fixing those leaks, she explained, Labour and Reform were taking money from fossil-fuel interests and other wealthy backers and then blaming immigrants for the nation's woes. Spencer, in contrast, promised to fight for all people who "feel left behind and isolated," regardless of race, religion, or income. "I absolutely refuse to accept that we should ever have to move and leave our communities for good schools, a thriving high street and clean air. I will not accept a society where having more money gets you a longer life expectancy."

Something of this same spirit can also be seen in the government of Mexico's Claudia Sheinbaum, the first climate scientist to lead a nation, and herself a former mayor. Though there are legitimate critiques, many of them related to the legacy of corruption in Mexico and in the Morena party, Sheinbaum has racked up an impressive streak of domestic policy achievements, including a constitutional reform strengthening women's rights by guaranteeing equal pay and protections against gender-based violence as well as a landmark law recognizing gig workers as employees entitled to labor protections and benefits—the first of its kind in the world—while also implementing a plan designed to reduce the workweek by eight hours without reductions in wages or entitlements. In addition to expanding electric passenger rail service, she launched the most ambitious social housing program in Mexico's history, with a goal of building more than a million new homes for low-income families before her term ends, and issued a decree that will help provide universal health care by 2030.

On climate, her administration has made compromises with the fossil-fuel sector and Big Tech, including championing data centers and weighing

the possibility of fracking projects to reduce reliance on American natural gas. But Sheinbaum has also set ambitious clean energy targets, announced investments in solar and wind power, and tightened some controls over the mining sector. During her first international appearance after taking office, at the 2024 G20 economic forum, she announced a sweeping global reforestation proposal. She also urged her fellow world leaders to “stop sowing wars and instead sow peace and sow life” by redirecting 1 percent of military spending to create millions of jobs planting trees, a plan she said would both curb carbon emissions and inequality. Colombia under its leftist president Gustavo Petro has gone further, raising the minimum wage for millions of workers by almost 24 percent, leading an international call for a moratorium on new fossil-fuel development, and imposing sanctions on Israel for its violations of international law. Though Petro is term-limited and cannot run for re-election, his popularity surged in 2026 as his time in office began to wind down.

A unified message is starting to emerge. Nearly a decade ago in France, the populist “yellow vests” movement stymied President Macron’s increase on fuel taxes by declaring, “Macron is concerned about the end of the world. We are concerned with the end of the month.” But what if it were possible to articulate a different message—that here where we are, deep in the wreckage of history, we won’t be able to avert the end of the world if we don’t find ways to help people make it to the end of the month? Unlike the reactionaries who claim we need to choose between the two, there are policies—such as free buses and subsidies for energy-efficient homes and windfall taxes on oil company profits—that can lower emissions and lower the cost of living at the same time.

All over the world, fascist forces are directing anger downward, at the people least responsible for our societal troubles, and persuading electorates that they can no longer afford to care about anyone but themselves, their families, and the neighbors who look and think like them. They are showing them that there are pleasures and freedoms to be found in dominating and humiliating the defenseless. We believe that it is possible to pull many people back from those violent temptations, but it won’t happen through lectures or shaming. There must be a competing offering, a compelling vision for a better way to live together and a willingness to collaborate across difference and do the work required to make that vision real.

This is not the first time we have had to learn a version of this lesson. Almost a century ago, the world stood at a similar crossroads, with country after country falling to fascism and many others teetering on the edge. In Germany, the Nazis rose to power on the back of economic pain and wounded nationalism, while left-wing infighting served as a tragic accomplice. The Social Democrats and the Communists, who together commanded the loyalty of millions, were longtime and sometimes violent adversaries. And even as the far right ascended, they refused to find common ground. Moscow stoked the hostilities, encouraging the Communists to denounce the Social Democrats as “sozialfaschisten”—social fascists—whose moderation was the real threat. While the camps quarreled over doctrine, Hitler consolidated power.

In the United States, as the country struggled to recover from the Depression and fascism tightened its grip overseas, labor organizers and political leaders forged a different path, rallying around policies designed to improve the lives of ordinary people. Franklin Delano Roosevelt made the case that Congress should increase public spending as part of the domestic fight against fascism.”Democracy has disappeared in several other great nations—not because the people of those nations disliked democracy, but because they had grown tired of unemployment and insecurity, of seeing their children hungry while they sat helpless in the face of government confusion and government weakness through lack of leadership in government. Finally, in desperation, they chose to sacrifice liberty in the hope of getting something to eat.”

When he won the Democratic primary, Zohran Mamdani quoted these lines, pledging to heed them. As mayor, he wasted no time. In his first three months in office, Mamdani teamed up with the state’s governor, Kathy Hochul, to begin delivering on the pledge for universal daycare, starting at age two. He signed an executive order directing agencies to cut fines and fees imposed on small businesses, appointed his “mom and pop czar,” and took steps toward establishing the promised Department of Community Safety, tasked with violence prevention and community-based solutions. He also made room for art and joy, offering 1,500 free tickets for the Under the Radar theater festival and, when faced with back-to-back record-breaking storms that shut down the city, he was out there shoveling snow. He also encouraged New Yorkers who couldn’t help shovel to stay home, make soup for their neighbors, and maybe borrow smutty Heated Rivalry books

from the library, causing more than thirteen thousand people to rush to check out the series.

In doing all this, Mamdani and his allies also named the right enemies. Where his predecessors had punched down at the vulnerable, Mamdani and his team punched up, challenging the predatory corporations that make life more expensive and difficult for ordinary New Yorkers. He announced a sweeping crackdown on bad landlords by reviving the Mayor's Office to Protect Tenants and intervening in a bankruptcy case involving eighty-three buildings owned by the Pinnacle Group, which had amassed more than five thousand housing violations and fourteen thousand complaints across its portfolio. His administration secured a settlement against A&E Real Estate Holdings for tenant harassment and hazardous conditions across fourteen buildings, and won a separate court judgment against a Bronx landlord with years of uncorrected code violations. The city allocated more than $85 million in the preliminary budget to add two hundred new attorneys and one hundred support staff to the Law Department to pursue these sorts of landlord enforcement cases.

Early on, he appointed Lina Khan to help lead his transition team (the same consumer protection advocate who so triggered the tech right while leading Biden's FTC). Then his team got busy protecting consumers by targeting so-called junk fees, while also helping to ensure fair pay for delivery workers. They launched a lawsuit against Motoclick, a delivery app that was ripping off its workers, likely stealing millions from them, in addition to notifying Instacart, DoorDash, Grubhub, and Uber that they would have to adhere to new laws strengthening minimum pay and transparency. Out of the gate, he showed what's possible when leaders use their power to rein in bad actors rather than looking the other way. This is the kind of politics of accountability, if it can be maintained and expanded, that will rekindle trust in government. If the Democrats regain control over Congress, they would be wise to emulate it on the national scale.

Will Mamdani's reforms be enough to turn back the fascist tide? They are a welcome start, but we fear that significantly more will be needed. After entering the mayor's office, Mamdani discovered he had been left a budget in worse crisis than he had anticipated, and the decision to raise taxes on the rich rests with the state, which significantly limits his ability to bolster spending on social programs. Similarly, Mamdani's attempts to cut

lawbreaking companies down to size are laudable, but broader, cross-border mechanisms to address elite impunity are needed.

The forces actively arrayed against democracy—indeed against any attempts to place constraints on raw power—have evolved in the century since the New Deal. Fascists today operate with once-inconceivable technologies and are backed by nearly unfathomable wealth and weaponry. Which means that to be effective, antifascism must find ways to operate on a grander stage, too.

Mamdani's victory in New York has put these limits in stark relief. For instance, the mayor still relies on tech giants like Google, X, and Meta to reach his base—what happens if those companies decide he has become too much of a threat and unilaterally deplatform him, or use their mysterious algorithms to suppress his content? What happens when they do it to the next would-be Mamdani? And while Mamdani has twice visited the White House and come out unscathed (the president does love a winner), the question looms: What happens if Donald Trump decides he has had enough of New York's experiment with democratic socialism, and sends in the troops?

None of this takes away from what Mamdani and his team are accomplishing in New York City. But these limits do tell us something important: that no victory will be safe until we address the force that drives end times fascism and imbues its leaders with the destructive conviction that they are above earthly accountability and punishment. That force, quite simply, is the untenable wealth, technological power, and military might that has been allowed to concentrate in the hands of a small group of people who have become convinced that they can act as gods.

Conclusion

A New Disarmament Movement: The Fierce Urgency of Ending Impunity

Remember: Earth is the only good planet.
—KATE MARVEL, astrophysicist, after resigning from NASA, 2026

> We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried, most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita. Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and to impress him takes on his multi-armed form and says, “Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” I suppose we all thought that one way or another.

This is how J. Robert Oppenheimer described the state of his own mind, and the feeling among his Los Alamos colleagues, when they witnessed the first nuclear weapons test, known as Trinity, on July 16, 1945. Though it may seem like Oppenheimer was identifying with Vishnu, the destroyer of worlds, and many people have interpreted his statement this way, the man often described as the “father of the atomic bomb” in fact imagined himself in the role of the reluctant prince. The wise man who realizes that, despite his misgivings, he must do his duty and make war.

Oppenheimer said those haunting words on film, for a 1965 documentary called *The Decision to Drop the Bomb*. Shot in black and white, Oppenheimer, who was terminally ill, appears gaunt and haunted. The quote would be made even more famous by Christopher Nolan’s Academy Award–winning 2023 feature *Oppenheimer*, though Nolan transposed it to a bedroom scene. The director of the Los Alamos Laboratory quoting from a 700-verse Hindu scripture lodged itself in the culture for a reason: it perfectly captures the way many people in nuclear-armed nations wanted to see the men charged with their defense—as serious, conflicted, and learned (Oppenheimer even studied Sanskrit). The

image of the sensitive, overeducated nuke-maker tormented by his own power was comforting, even soothing. Surely nothing could go terribly wrong with our fates in their competent and poetic hands.

In 1964, one year before *The Decision to Drop the Bomb* was released, another film came out with a very different take on the arms race. In Stanley Kubrick's dark comedy *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, nobody quotes the Bhagavad-Gita. Instead, everyone at the helm of the Cold War is either an amped-up cowboy or an incompetent buffoon. There's the deranged Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper, who orders an unauthorized first nuclear strike on the Soviet Union, convinced that the Russians had poisoned the "precious bodily fluids" of Americans through their devious plot to put fluoride in the water (to protect himself from the vast "international conspiracy," he drinks rainwater). Commanding the Soviet arsenal is a drunk Premier Kissov, who rigged up a doomsday machine to automatically go off in the event of a first strike, killing all human and animal life on earth. But though it was built as a "deterrent," he forgot to tell anyone about the machine's existence. Oops.

Most memorable is Major T. J. "King" Kong, a good-old-boy fighter pilot who, upon getting the order to drop the bomb from his B-52, immediately takes off his army helmet and, ceremoniously, puts on a cowboy hat. And of course there is Dr. Strangelove, the president's ex-Nazi scientific adviser, whose right arm keeps springing up in an involuntary Hitler salute, as he shouts "*Mein Führer!*"

Dr. Strangelove advises retreating to bunkers in deep mine shafts, which he tells the war room could hold several hundred thousand people for a hundred years. Top government and military men would of course make it to the bunkers, with the rest of the survivors chosen by a computer programmed to select for "youth, health, sexual fertility, intelligence, and a cross-section of necessary skills." Wrestling with his own arm to prevent yet another Seig Heil, he concludes that with "proper breeding techniques and a ratio of say ten females for each male," the race would be repopulated in no time. Warming up to the idea, Strangelove declares the coming apocalypse, and the surviving "nucleus of human specimens," an occasion for "bold curiosity for the adventure ahead!"

Sadly, while they are debating, Major Kong drops his thermonuclear bomb, riding it like a rodeo bull to its Soviet destination while waving his cowboy hat and hooting with glee. This triggers the Russian doomsday

machine, ending life on earth. No one, not even Strangelove, makes it to the underground sex bunker.

Sixty years later, we seem to be hurtling toward the reality Kubrick imagined, including the absurdist physical comedy. The United States is run by men who govern by spreading unfounded conspiracies, and not just "white genocide" and "great replacement"—Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has already pushed states to remove fluoride from drinking water, which would have delighted Jack D. Ripper, and while he doesn't seem to drink rainwater, he is an evangelist of unpasteurized milk. And our elites didn't wait for the end of the world to build their own sex bunker, otherwise known as Epstein's island.

Any number of contemporary figures could play the part of the Joint Chiefs chairman who demands wild escalation against the enemy no matter the cost—Benjamin Netanyahu? Vladimir Putin? How about Stephen Miller with his "iron laws of the world"? Pete Hegseth, the self-named "Secretary of War," is all too easy to picture mounting a nuke, though in her heyday the honor could also have gone to Kristi Noem, who does love a cowboy hat.

As for the role of the president's Nazi-saluting scientific adviser, that can only go to Elon Musk, with plenty of assistance from Grok, in "MechaHitler" mode. Musk, with his "legion" of more than a dozen children, shares Strangelove's interest in "advanced breeding techniques." And, of course, he too struggles with bothersome arm gestures.

The prescience of Kubrick's film was all too apparent in 2026 when Musk hosted a press conference at the headquarters of SpaceX. It was the peak of Grok's "nudification" scandal, with several governments threatening to take Musk to court. Not Pete Hegseth, though. He proudly stood at a podium next to a grinning Musk and announced that the unruly Grok was going to be integrated into Pentagon decision making as part of its new "AI acceleration strategy."

"Very soon we will have the world's leading AI models on every unclassified and classified network throughout our department," Hegseth declared, jutting his chin and turning up the bravado. "Gone are the days of equitable AI," he boasted, dismissing social justice and safety concerns as the real dangers. "Military AI is going to be a race for the foreseeable future where the risks to US national security of moving too slowly outweigh the impacts of imperfect alignment."

A month later the crusades-loving secretary—a former Fox News host who wrote an entire Great Replacement–themed book about how Muslims are taking over America and how there may have to be a "civil war" against liberals—was using chatbots to pick targets and plan bombing missions in an obviously illegal war on Iran, with AI reportedly identifying a thousand targets in a single twenty-four-hour period. The same week the bombs started falling, a study was released showing that leading AI models opted "to use nuclear weapons in simulated war games in 95 percent of cases."

Given the very real rogue's gallery now running the world, there is a temptation to conclude that the task of exiting our perilous moment is a simple one: clearly, we need to get these maniacs as far away as possible from the various doomsday machines they currently control, and put some normal, serious adults back in charge.

We do not dispute the urgency of changing the people at the highest reaches of power. But we emphatically do not believe that if we could just get back to the days of saner and more decent presidents, cabinet members, and billionaires, we could rest easy. There is no going back to the way things were, nor should we want to. To do so would be to miss the point. Kubrick made his far-seeing film not to warn us about the men—but to warn us about the weapons.

He intended to show his audience that to understand the true existential danger of nuclear bombs we should not imagine them in the hands of trustworthy leaders—Oppenheimer and JFK types, tormented by the weight of power. Rather, we have a duty to imagine those instruments of mass destruction in the hands of the vain, stupid, drunk, and bigoted people who populated his comedy. Because, sooner or later, those terrible weapons and those terrible people will find one another, compounding their respective danger exponentially.

We are now, decisively, in that later. And the serious response cannot simply be a personnel change. Rather, we should subject the tools we allow into the world to a test we might call, for expedience, "the Stephen Miller test." Namely, if we would not want an epically dangerous tool to end up in the hands of Trump's top henchman, or in the hands of someone equally or even more nefarious, *then that tool shouldn't be allowed to exist*.

Because when those dangerous people and dangerous tools exert a magnetic pull toward one another, as they inevitably will, the tools make the people far more menacing. They inflate small-time gangsters into

tyrants or, worse, into men who mistake themselves for gods—and who rage when the rest of us have the temerity to tell them otherwise.

Unfortunately for us, our world today is beset with more apocalyptic threats than even Kubrick imagined. The madmen at the helm of both government and industry don't just have the nuclear codes. Some control fortunes that exceed the GDP of large countries, communication tools more global and more powerful than any in history, and they are building AI infrastructure designed to overtake every part of our lives, all for private gain. The power that has accumulated in their hands—through weapons, digital technology, wealth, and very often all three—has fueled rapturous delusions that now jeopardize humanity on multiple fronts.

At the time Kubrick's film was released, an international movement for disarmament was well under way, working to bring an end to nuclear weapons. In the 1960s, many of the same people who refused to retreat into backyard fallout shelters and turn on their neighbors joined the fight for nuclear abolition. That movement was not completely successful—most movements never are—but it boxed in recalcitrant leaders and helped end the Cold War. Across continents and generations, the campaign to ban the bomb was based on a simple, indisputable insight that echoed Kubrick's warning: the best way to ensure our collective survival is by eliminating the weapons that threaten us.

As we confront end times fascism, we can take inspiration from that movement's example while expanding our sense of what constitutes a weapon of mass destruction and what a modern campaign for disarmament might be. In addition to atomic bombs, accelerating AI and concentrating wealth should be thought of as WMDs, not least because of the reckless sense of godlike invincibility that possessing such superhuman tools and resources inspires.

When we began writing this book in the early days of Trump's second term, we worried that the decision to foreground the threat of nuclear war and the ticking Doomsday Clock could strike some as slightly overblown: Surely things aren't quite so dire as all that? As we conclude, with missiles and drones lighting up the skies over fourteen countries (and counting), in a war started by two nuclear-armed states in the name of preventing a third from developing the same weapons, the prospect of a mushroom cloud feels more real than at any time in our lives. This particular conflagration could

intensify or subside, leaving enormous wreckage in either scenario. But one thing is clear: we have entered a uniquely unstable and treacherous era.

We have arrived at this moment because elite impunity has gone unchecked for far too long. The most powerful people in the world today—across religion, government, and technology—share a conviction that our laws simply do not apply to them. Not the laws of the nations where they live. Not international law. And not even the laws of biology or physics, as their fixation on immortality and willingness to abet climate change makes terrifyingly clear. This pervasive sense of impunity among political and corporate elites is intimately tied to their willingness to subject the rest of us to extraordinary and increasing levels of vulnerability and risk.

As we have seen, a popular end times fascist slogan is "You will not replace us." A more honest one would be: "You will not restrain us." Today, the "us" in question is not just the leaders of nuclear-armed states ignoring laws forbidding war crimes. It's also the tech giants convinced they are on the cusp of making humans obsolete, and the uber-rich who believe that they alone should determine the fate of societies.

All of them seem wedded to the Strangelovian belief that they will not only be safe whatever comes to pass, but that they are embarking on an exciting new adventure. Where rational people see danger, they see the promised land: eternity in a New Jerusalem, a post-human utopia merged with machines, or a purified fortressed nation with countless people left to die. Deranged by the immense power and privilege in their possession, end times fascists clearly no longer feel they live on the same planet as the rest of us. Within their bunkered fantasies, they are sure they will be fine, insulated by their wealth, their power, or their faith. And this sense of untouchability, of disconnection and worldlessness, makes the rest of us vastly more unsafe.

"The best way to solve any problem is to remove the cause," Martin Luther King once observed. We believe this to be particularly true when planetary survival is at stake. What this moment calls for is a new and expanded disarmament movement aimed at eliminating this era's existential hazards. No more nukes, yes. But also no more unregulated tech. No more endlessly concentrating wealth that buys elections and burns the planet. No more impunity. By taking away the sources of end times fascists' power and derangement, we can bring them down to earth and force them to return to a shared reality.

Our collective safety will come only when our elites are forced to imagine living and surviving here, with the rest of us. They will see this as a cruel and terrible punishment at first. They will have to get over it.

Disarm the Tech and Wealth Bombs

In the first two decades of the new millennium, rich people and the corporations they ran went to great lengths to convince us that we did not need to fear them or worry about the enormous wealth and power accumulating in their hands. They were preventing diseases in Africa, launching prizes to solve the climate crisis, declaring commitments to equity and diversity, and pledging not to be evil—even as they busted unions, fought minimum-wage increases, and resisted regulation. We didn't need to bother investing in social programs or taxing the rich, because they would create such incredible prosperity that everyone would benefit, and the rest they would fix with their philanthropy. Or so we heard when they gathered in Davos, and Aspen, at TED, and at the Clinton Global Initiative.

Now the era in which billionaires bragged about their do-gooding is over and never returning. This is especially true for Silicon Valley, which no longer feigns concern about the spread of dangerous lies, platforming Nazis, or fomenting real-world violence. Having achieved monopoly levels of market dominance, Big Tech is in its "You and what army?" phase—toward its users, its workers, and toward governments that make serious attempts to regulate or tax them. Meanwhile, the staggering wealth some CEOs and venture capitalists have accumulated—set against the poverty of so many—can be justified in their own minds only by reviving and upgrading foundational fascist myths of their supposed inherent genetic superiority. Every day it seems that more members of this high-flying class are coming to the same realization: Power isn't for impressing the meek. It's for imposing your will on the world.

Far from being an aberration, this astonishing arrogance is confirmation of Kubrick's observation that dangerous tools inevitably find their way into maniacal hands. Today's oligarchs sabotage democracy, spread conspiracies, partner in war crimes, court climate chaos, and risk the global economy to summon a digital god that, they muse, could well turn on humanity, or perhaps just kill us accidentally. Like a bunch of fanatics gearing up for an attack on al-Aqsa, knowing full well it could ignite World

War III, they are gambling with all of our lives and the fate of the world for a fantasy.

The only rational response is to disarm them—to strictly regulate their tech and redistribute the lion's share of their ill-gotten wealth. These tasks, in many ways, are effectively one and the same. Even as wealth concentration hits historic highs, the artificial intelligence revolution is already funneling more resources skyward. This adds to the urgency of curbing billionaire power—because if we don't, soon we'll have an even bigger problem on our hands: abolishing trillionaires.

Any effective tech disarmament movement has to begin by insisting on bringing the cloud down to earth and AI accelerationists back to reality. AI is a human creation that can and must be subject to human oversight. As we know, that's what the majority of people want. Eighty percent of Americans support AI safety measures even if they slow development, and almost no one trusts tech companies to self-regulate. This is why the movement for a moratorium on data centers is gaining momentum across in the United States and elsewhere, and why laws that establish controls on AI are so popular, even among conservatives.

Consider New York's 2025 RAISE ACT, which establishes safety standards for "frontier," or cutting-edge, AI models. The bill, which passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, was authored by State Assemblymember Alex Bores, a former Palantir employee turned AI critic who is uniquely positioned to understand the dangers of unbridled AI, and viable methods for maintaining human oversight. After a tsunami of lobbying led by Marc Andreessen and his allies, Governor Kathy Hochul insisted on watering down key provisions of the law before signing it, including eliminating fines with real teeth and what would have been a groundbreaking prohibition on releasing the most dangerous models.

Silicon Valley titans may object to even the most modest restraints, but it's utterly reasonable for ordinary people to have a voice in the development of these technologies. After all, generative AI is only possible because of the mass theft of the commons, from the pillaging of art and culture and the scraping of our personal data and social media posts to train its models, to the huge amounts of energy, water, and minerals consumed to build and run the supercomputers. Given the scale of this plunder, there's a strong argument that this tech should belong to the public, or at minimum that all of us should have an economic stake in any benefits that are

generated (proposals include public wealth funds for AI and payouts of what's sometimes called an "AI dividend").

In addition to public ownership or compensation, we need to ensure the tech is designed and operated in the public interest. Since returning to the White House, Trump has obliterated all meaningful distinctions between government and Silicon Valley. But under a very different US administration, and in other countries, industrial policy could produce more desirable results. Collective investment in technology should come with democratic conditions, including requirements like commitments to renewable energy, mining practices that respect Indigenous land rights, ethical and accurate datasets, an end to monopolies, strong worker and privacy protections, shared prosperity, and safety, including interpretability (meaning no AI systems that even the engineers can't understand or at least control). And as the budding movement for pro-human AI also emphasizes, systems should not be built to mislead and manipulate, to frack our attachments by pretending to be sentient, or to perpetuate and profit from alienation and loneliness. If we don't install these safeguards, there's no question the technology will be weaponized to more and more dangerous ends.

Looking forward, we support what might be called "AI Containment," or the AI equivalent of nuclear nonproliferation. For starters, there are all kinds of obvious places where this inscrutable technology should be explicitly forbidden: waging war, predictive policing, spying on the public, election-related deepfakes, deciding health insurance claims, and so on. In Europe, the 2025 AI Act points in the right direction by banning or restricting certain uses deemed "unacceptable risks," including real-time facial recognition, "manipulative" AI tools such as emotion detection, and social scoring and predictive policing. In the fall of 2025, a Global Call for AI Red Lines was presented at the United Nations General Assembly, with the aim of setting a foundation for a multilateral agreement. The initiative proposed bans on lethal autonomous weapons systems operating without human control; AI-assisted development of weapons of mass destruction (biological, chemical, and nuclear); autonomous AI self-replication or self-improvement without human authorization; human impersonation; and more.

In short, none of the mayhem that has been unleashed online and in our lives was inevitable. It has been a choice, and we can make other choices.

There’s another benefit to drawing these kinds of clear prohibitions: the less personal data Big Tech can access and the more it is kept away from essential government functions, the harder it is for AI companies to grab power and build their systems of total surveillance. Avoiding this fate is why Francesca Bria, who helpfully named the “authoritarian stack,” has developed a proposal for a EuroStack as one possible alternative. This potential continent-wide project is aimed at achieving European digital sovereignty, the idea that Europe should not cede control of critical internet infrastructure to fast-radicalizing American companies. As the perils of relying on Silicon Valley services get harder to ignore, the European Parliament is waking up to the need for publicly owned and nonprofit models, and governments across France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands are investing in open-source platforms.

Similar concerns about ceding power to AI firms apply to a wide range of state functions, including essential social services. This was clear at a 2026 White House briefing where Dr. Oz, the celebrity administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, praised Alabama for “having robots do ultrasounds on these pregnant moms” to cover for the shortage of ob-gyns. When Senator Bernie Sanders got wind of these remarks, he blasted the “international embarrassment” of a plan: “In the richest country on earth, we need more doctors, nurses, dentists, and mental health counselors, not more robots.”

Sanders’s rebuke gets at a key but underappreciated truth. Most people do not prefer interacting with AI to interacting with human beings, but they may welcome AI when there are no human beings available. That is why a well-functioning and well-funded public sector might be our most effective bulwark against AI predation, particularly given the growing risks of job-destroying automation. In a society with well-funded public healthcare, the idea of a virtual doctor or therapist—or an AI assistant to help you file your private insurance claim—is unnecessary. When there are quality public schools with ample teachers, children don’t need AI tutors. When the Social Security offices are adequately staffed, you won’t have to argue with a chatbot.

Contrary to claims that humans are obsolete, there’s no shortage of valuable work for us to do; the problem is the lack of investment (in part because so much has been directed to those who already have the most). But if the Trump administration could create tens of thousands of jobs for

ICE and Border Patrol overnight, it is entirely possible to rapidly create public jobs that are staffed by real humans and designed to meet our most pressing needs.

We need only look to the New Deal era for inspiration. At a moment when homegrown demagogues were exploiting desperation and insecurity to spread fascist ideology, its programs provided jobs to millions of struggling people, employing them to build roads and hospitals, plant trees and fight forest fires, and to create murals and theater pieces. Instead of spending trillions on AI infrastructure and weaponry, governments around the world can and should implement similar jobs programs that provide well-paying work while enriching the culture and protecting and rehabilitating the natural world. That was the vision behind international calls for a Global Green New Deal, which would have supported government investment in low-carbon and high-employment fields such as public education, healthcare, and transit. It also would have made us less reliant on imports and gotten us off of oil and gas, which, as oil wars send shock waves through global supply chains, still seems like a very good idea. By many measures, the cost would be roughly equal to the current capital expenditures projected for data centers and other AI infrastructure.

Of course, essential social services, labor unions, and climate regulations are precisely the kinds of sensible policies the billionaire class has fought so determinedly, alongside their war on AI safety measures. Executives who warn that AI might destroy the world also claim they can’t slow down because China might outpace them—as though a race off a cliff is a race worth winning.

Consider OpenAI, which released a white paper in the spring of 2026 listing some laudable “people first” policies they say could soften the blow of the AI revolution, including strengthening the social safety net and worker protections, making the tax code more progressive, and adopting “common-sense AI regulation.” It all sounds good (and was clearly released as part of a broader attempt to win back public support). The problem is that, behind the scenes, OpenAI is busy sabotaging the very reforms it claims to champion, including through aggressive pro-corporate lobbying in the United States and the European Union. In addition to Sam Altman’s cozy relationship with Trump, the OpenAI president Greg Brockman is a MAGA megadonor and key backer of Leading the Future, the pro-AI political action committeee that has run attack ads against Bores and other

pro-regulation candidates. With funding from Brockman and executives and founders associated with Andreessen Horowitz, Palantir, and elsewhere, the effort's resources are effectively bottomless.

This is why we can't just aim to regulate the tools unleashed by tech billionaires. The threat posed by their wealth must be defused, too.

Before their embrace of MAGA, tech CEOs often spoke of the need for a universal basic income (UBI). This was their plan, or so they claimed, to sustain the masses when their technologies rendered our jobs obsolete—though now they don't pretend to care how or if ordinary people survive. A guaranteed income, as part of a suite of supports, is an important policy tool. But what we more urgently need, because it will make much else possible, is the inverse: a universal maximum income, or better yet, a wealth cap.

As discussed, antifascist economics involves providing a stable floor for everyone so we don't turn on one another—but it involves placing a ceiling too, to disempower the people financing the networks dividing us. Working people will never be secure while the wealth of some top oligarchs grows by almost $100 million a day. Nor will we ever have anything resembling real democracy while this staggering wealth enables them to purchase almost unlimited political influence. Some have suggested a $10 million upper limit, while others argue for $100 million, either sum far more than is required to live an opulent life. We won't go into that level of policy detail here, but the guiding principle should be clear: there is such a thing as enough.

In recent years, milder attempts to rein in the superrich have been gaining momentum around the world. In the UK, the rising Green Party has made a wealth tax a central part of its platform, and it was a key policy promoted by Hannah Spencer, the plumber-turned-MP (the proposal is for a 1 percent tax on assets above £10 million and of 2 percent on assets above £1 billion). In the United States, Senator Sanders and Representative Ro Khanna introduced the Make Billionaires Pay Their Fair Share Act in 2026, a proposal for a 5 percent annual wealth tax on those with a net worth more than $1 billion, which would affect around nine hundred people and raise an estimated $4.4 trillion. And in California, a proposed ballot measure called the Billionaire Tax Act would levy a onetime 5 percent tax on the state's two hundred richest residents to make up for Trump's budget cuts to healthcare and education. Just as they did after Mamdani's victory, the uber-

rich in the Bay Area are once again threatening an exodus, with some prominent Silicon Valley figures preemptively moving their business headquarters to low-tax Texas or Florida.

Given the determination of the wealthy to dodge their obligations, proposals for increased taxation need to be coupled with strong measures penalizing tax evasion and cross-border capital flight. But even this problem is tractable. In 2024, the economist Gabriel Zucman proposed implementing a 2 percent global wealth tax on personal fortunes above $1 billion, a plan detailed in a report commissioned for the G20, the international forum of the world's largest economies. If a billionaire doesn't pay in one country, others can collect what's owed through exit taxes or asset withholding, reducing the temptation to jurisdiction shop. Brazil, France, Spain, and South Africa, as well as nearly twenty former heads of G20 governments, all endorsed the proposal. His plan builds on a recent victory for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). As of 2021, 130 countries collaborate on a 15 percent corporate minimum tax, proving that international tax coordination is possible.

Other tools are already in place. The Common Reporting Standard (CRS), which was launched in 2014 and now includes more than 120 countries, has reduced the ability of rich individuals to hide offshore assets from their national tax authorities, though many loopholes remain. For its part, the United States goes further than most countries: it is one of only two nations with a taxation system based on citizenship rather than place of residency, which means Americans cannot simply move abroad to shake off their obligations, unlike, say, wealthy Britons. There are plenty of further steps governments can take to strengthen enforcement, from hiring more auditors, to cracking down on crypto, to increasing penalties for lawbreaking. Tax dodging is also becoming higher-risk in these apocalyptic times: when Iran began launching retaliatory strikes on Gulf states in March 2026, thousands of tax-avoiding Brits who had changed their official residences to Dubai found themselves fleeing from place to place, unable to return to the UK without getting hit with a steep tax bill.

The absurd lengths the ultrarich will go to evade any effort at basic fairness only underscores why a wealth cap is needed. So long as the ultrarich are swimming in excess capital, they will use it to try to squash and escape even modest obligations. Which should only steel our resolve: If

billionaires are going to act like a modest tax is apocalyptic, why bother fiddling with half measures instead of going for real solutions?

While a wealth cap surely strikes some as radical, in many ways it would be a return to American form. Not that long ago, billionaires were practically nonexistent. While the United States has never established a ceiling for riches, for much of the twentieth century the country had a de facto maximum wage. “No American citizen ought to have a net income, after he has paid his taxes, of more than $25,000 a year,” President Franklin Delano Roosevelt told Congress in 1942, seeking approval of a 100 percent top tax rate that would have capped people’s after-tax income at around $300,000 in today’s dollars. Two years later, Congress raised the tax rate to 94 percent on all income in excess of $200,000, or around $3.8 million today.

No doubt, some will object that reviving robust controls on wealth would stifle innovation. So it’s worth recalling that the postwar era combined 90 percent marginal tax rates with extraordinary breakthroughs. High taxes funded the public research that produced transistors, microchips, satellites, and the start of the internet. Silicon Valley later commercialized what government support made possible. (The economist Mariana Mazzucato has shown that virtually every core smartphone technology traces back to public investment.) Tech billionaires, in other words, owe their success to public innovation, and are repaying the debt by buying elections and then attacking the very structures that launched their companies and careers.

Recent research from Oxfam found that around 60 percent of billionaire assets flows from one of three sources: inheritance, cronyism and corruption, or monopoly power. For too long, the world’s oligarchs have been lionized as geniuses, icons, and messiahs, rather than what they are: smart (mostly) guys born at the right time, into the right families, as well as run-of-the-mill bad bosses, tax dodgers, corporate polluters, and, too often, human rights violators.

Many of them are also, as we have seen, profoundly disloyal. To cities. To states. To nations. To our shared planet. To our species. None of it seems to matter compared with the insatiable drive to maximize their wealth. In the end, a wealth cap isn’t just about raising needed tax revenue, though that is badly needed. It’s also a public safety measure, because it will force today’s oligarch class to live more humbly, a word that, going back to its

roots, means “lowly, grounded, or on the earth.” You’re less likely to sacrifice reality if you, too, also live in it.

No Law for God Men

While there’s much that can be accomplished to advance the cause of disarmament at the state and national level, ending the plague of elite impunity requires cross-border collaboration: binding commitments, meaningful oversight, and new forms of diplomacy. End times fascists know this, which is why they are so determined to destroy the border-spanning legal regimes, international institutions, and brave individuals that threaten to hold them accountable.

“He who saves his Country does not violate any Law,” Trump posted soon after returning to the White House, using a phrase attributed to Napoleon to declare himself untouchable—a position validated by the country’s Supreme Court, which granted him immunity for “official acts.” The US president is part of a global clique that imagines themselves wielding what Stephen Miller calls “supreme power,” and who, consequently, feel themselves supremely entitled. Entitled to abduct foreign leaders, steal other countries’ land and resources, snatch immigrants off the street, mine and fleece the state, criminalize and even kill protesters, and grab and undress the bodies of women and children, whether in real life or in the digital realm. We saw this after the murders of Renee Good and Alexander Pretti in Minnesota when both Vance and Miller falsely declared that federal agents have absolute “immunity.” And we heard it when MAGA influencers began openly declaring international law “fake” or, to quote the popular podcaster Matt Walsh, “fake and gay.” They didn’t know it, of course, but they were directly echoing the Australian fanatic Denis Michael Rohan, when he said at his trial for causing irreparable damage to al-Aqsa Mosque, “I am above the earthly court.”

The hostility to structures of accountability illustrates why fascist regimes become more violent, desperate, and dangerous the longer they hold power. The more laws they break out in the open, the more the law itself must be demonized and destroyed, along with the people daring to enforce it. The very concept of legal accountability for the powerful must be detonated. So Trump calls repeatedly on Israel’s president to pardon Netanyahu in his ongoing corruption court case involving luxury gifts because, as he told the Knesset, “Cigars and champagne, who the hell cares

about that?” In the United States, judges who have challenged the Trump regime have faced death and bomb threats, impeachment calls from members of Congress, Justice Department lawsuits, and constant smears from the president. Other authoritarians have systematically attacked their judiciaries, including Netanyahu’s sweeping judicial overhaul and Nayib Bukele’s stacking of El Salvador’s Supreme Court with loyalists.

And no institution is more reviled and despised by these figures than the United Nations, which is currently more embattled than it has been at any point since its founding. It’s worth unpacking why it represents such a threat.

One way to understand the United Nations, which was officially formed in 1945, is that it exists, in very large part, to prevent various kinds of world ending—crimes and crises that are so grave, they transcend the sovereignty of nations and demand international cooperation. At the time of its founding, in the wreckage of two world wars, the idea of having every nation represented in a single body, each with a vote, under a unifying mission of keeping the peace, seemed incredibly utopian, especially given how its ill-fated predecessor, the League of Nations, had crashed and burned. And yet preventing a third world war was the UN’s mandate, with the maintenance of “international peace and security” in its charter. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN in 1948, begins by asserting that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Those simple words, so far from our current reality, can be understood as the antithesis of fascism.

No wonder, then, that the three forces making up the end times fascist alliance find common cause in their contempt for this vital institution. Great Replacement nationalists view it as the seedbed of globalism, granting inalienable rights to the immigrants and refugees they regard as their mortal enemy. Conservative evangelicals, haunted by the prospect of one-world government, perennially invoke the UN as an agent of the Antichrist (a figure whom the book of Revelation warns will hold authority over “every tribe, people, language, and nation”). The billionaire tech right is also overcome by loathing: Peter Thiel has described the UN as a place filled with “interminable and inconclusive parliamentary debates that resemble Shakespearean tales told by idiots,” while his colleague Alex Karp calls the body “a discriminatory institution against anything good.” The Anduril

founder Palmer Luckey has decried the UN for housing a “shadow campaign” to “trick” the West “into not applying AI for weapons or defense.” (The campaign is hardly secret: “Machines that have the power and discretion to take human lives without human control should be prohibited by international law,” affirms Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Most people agree.)

Not to be outdone, Benjamin Netanyahu has denounced the UN as a “house of darkness,” a “contemptible institution,” an “anti-Israel flat-earth society,” and a “joke.” Trump, meanwhile, has worked to collapse the entire international edifice. He launched his Board of Peace—the financial scam masquerading as an alternative to the UN—while simultaneously withholding billions in mandatory UN dues and withdrawing from sixty-six international organizations. Tellingly, he also issued an executive order claiming the authority to grant the Board of Peace immunity from lawsuits and judicial processes into the future, long after he leaves office. According to Stephen Miller, the “whole period that happened after World War II, where the West began apologizing and groveling and begging and engaging these mass reparations schemes” deserves nothing but contempt.

It’s obvious where the anti-UN rage is coming from. Attacks on the institution are preemptive attacks on any constraints that will make life on Earth safe and sustainable, including the strict controls on nuclear weapons and generative AI that we needed yesterday. Attacking the UN is an assault on the possibility of binding climate treaties, with real enforcement, as well as rules that maintain the right of all people to seek asylum, just as the world is about to see a massive increase in climate refugees. It’s a way to undermine the infrastructure that provides a modicum of aid to the world’s poorest and allows us to coordinate our efforts to fight infectious diseases that respect no borders. Perhaps most important, from the perspective of people who view themselves as above the law as they wage wars of aggression and engage in ethnic cleansing to the point of genocide, attacking the UN and related legal architecture is their best hope of avoiding accountability for those gravest of crimes.

For this reason, the greatest ire is reserved for the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague, an independent institution that has the power to issue arrest warrants. The attacks have escalated markedly since Israel’s Gaza onslaught. In 2024, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant, the former Israeli minister of defense, as well

as the Hamas military commander Mohammed Deif. The next year, the Trump administration imposed retaliatory sanctions on nearly a dozen ICC judges and prosecutors, causing them to lose access to US financial and tech services, including their credit cards and email accounts, since they are provided by US companies like Visa and Google. The United States also froze their personal assets and bank accounts and, because of the reach of US tech giants, was able to block most online shopping and ban certain travel—a level of punishment usually reserved for the world's most dangerous terrorists. Judge Nicolas Guillou, who is based in France, compared the punishment to "being transported back to the 1990s." (It has served as a visceral reminder of the risks of relying on American tech and escalated the push for European digital sovereignty.)

Six months later, UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese released her report focusing, in part, on the role of major tech companies—Alphabet, Amazon, Microsoft, Airbnb, Palantir—in abetting and profiting from Israel's systems of occupation and apartheid and their complicity in genocide, while also detailing their resulting legal exposure (this was the report that had so galvanized organizers in Venice and Tuscon). Sufficiently alarmed by her findings, multiple companies reportedly called the White House, and she, too, was sanctioned.

Rather than being intimidated by this onslaught, we should view the Trump administration's determination to destroy the rule of law at home and abroad as evidence for future prosecutions. As one senior administration official told Reuters, there is a "growing concern" that "the ICC will turn its attention to the president, to the vice president, to the secretary of war and others, and pursue prosecutions against them." The White House gave away the game when it offered to call off the attacks—on the condition that the court amend its founding documents to shield Trump officials from criminal investigations. They are fighting for their own impunity—for everything from lawless boat attacks to the targeting of civilian infrastructure in Iran. The fact that commercial tech platforms have been embedded in this lawlessness only means there are even more players with a motivation to destroy international law.

What this shows us is that end times fascists know they're not invincible. They may have had successes controlling the high courts in their own countries, but they do not yet control the whole world. As we write, Rodrigo Duterte, the former president of the Philippines, is now in ICC

custody in The Hague. He faces charges of crimes against humanity for allegedly orchestrating killings during his war on drugs that claimed tens of thousands of lives. Trump, Vance, and many others—including the Biden officials who knowingly backed and armed the atrocities in Gaza, as well as the tech CEOs who brag about their company's "kill chains" and role in extrajudicial killings—are determined to exist above the law and avoid such a fate.

They know that, around the world, victims and their families, backed by crusading lawyers, are working tirelessly to bring powerful lawbreakers back down to earth and make sure the rules are fairly applied to them, in both international courts and national ones. Since 2000, more than seventy presidents around the world have faced criminal charges, and the same goes for many of their accomplices. In addition to Trump's ally Jair Bolsonaro's imprisonment for attempting to sabotage Brazilian democracy, two senior members of Poland's previous right-wing government are now on the lam after being charged with founding and operating a criminal network inside that country's justice ministry (they received asylum in Hungary thanks to Orbán, but now Orbán himself may face similar investigations).

In 2026, the former president of South Korea Yoon Suk Yeol was handed a life sentence for orchestrating an insurrection, while his prime minister, Han Duck-soo, was sentenced to twenty-three years. Mr. Yoon had enthusiastically embraced the outrageous antifeminist politics of the country's manosphere, and women and teenage girls responded by dedicating themselves in record numbers to the democratic protests that helped precipitate his removal from office. Meanwhile, the former Prince Andrew, already stripped of his royal titles, was arrested after emails released by the US Justice Department exposed more details about his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein. He was released without charge and remains under investigation. Epstein himself, of course, died in prison, and his partner in crime Ghislaine Maxwell is currently in custody.

Trump, a convicted felon, surely feels the walls closing in, especially after his ally Viktor Orbán's dramatic defeat. Despite JD Vance's last-ditch efforts to campaign on his behalf, Hungarian citizens overwhelmingly voted to oust the aspiring autocrat, a man whose efforts to purge and pack Hungary's courts and tilt the electoral playing field had once made him seem untouchable. To be clear, his successor, Péter Magyar, is a rightwinger, one who has pledged to be even stricter than Orbán on

immigration while also vowing to repair relationships with the EU. But the opposition campaign ultimately succeeded because of its laser focus on Fidesz Party corruption and cronyism, the depth of which had prompted Magyar, a former government insider, to become a whistleblower in 2024. “From now on we will not be a country without consequences—those who robbed the country must take responsibility,” Magyar proclaimed in his victory speech. “To prison! To prison!” the crowd cheered, triumphant that Orbán’s sixteen-year reign was finally over and hopeful that an era of accountability was about to begin.

There are no guarantees, of course, that justice will arrive. But it will never come if we don’t fight for it, through whatever channels are available and even when the pressure is immense. Despite the escalating threats, the ICC’s 125 member countries have refused to cave to US blackmail and acquiesce to Washington’s demands. Instead, they issued an official statement: “We renew our resolve to stand united against impunity.”

A Universalism of Here

Albanese, too, has stood strong in the face of a relentless campaign of bullying, which has included spreading doctored videos radically misrepresenting her views. While the US sanctions and “mafia style intimidation techniques,” as she calls them, have greatly limited her freedom and ability to engage in normal, daily activities, she continues to call for the application and enforcement of international humanitarian law for past and ongoing crimes, without exception.

The irony in all of this is that international law has been a bitter disappointment to a great many victims of its violations. So much so that many young people who came of age bearing witness to annihilation and dismemberment on their phones have come to the conclusion that the fine words in UN treaties and conventions are mostly a cruel taunt, and perhaps a political impossibility. “The tale of international law is a tale of betrayal,” Albanese herself concedes. “The law was there and has been violated through and through because of complicity, because of ideology, because of racism, because of dehumanization.” And yet, she adds, “we cannot afford for this to become the tale of today.”

According to Albanese, today’s crisis of impunity flows from the fact that the ideal of universalism has only been implemented half-heartedly. From the start, and for all their idealism, the United Nations and its network

of international laws were built upon a cracked foundation, with powerful countries determined to carve out exceptions for themselves. Take the Security Council, the UN's most powerful decision-making body on matters of war and peace. The council's five permanent, or nonrotating, members possess veto authority, emboldening them to pursue narrow interests over shared objectives. Compounding their power, these five permanent members are also officially recognized as "nuclear weapons states," a privileged class of countries that tested nuclear weapons before 1967, which allows them to retain nuclear weapons while other countries are prohibited from developing them. These and many other examples of institutionalized inequity undermine the universalist principles in the UN's founding charter from the inside.

Time and again, double standards have corroded these ideals and caused people to lose faith in the principle of equality before the law. When Obama was elected after two terms of US wars based on lies, torture scandals at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, and billions gone missing in the black hole of US military contracting, he chose not to prosecute the offenders. It was, he said, time "to look forward as opposed to looking backward," the mantra of impunity. (He showed similar mercy to the bankers who brought down the global economy, helping fuel the resurgence of the far right.) Joe Biden continued this trend, funding and defending Israel's military machine even as evidence mounted that its attack on Gaza went well beyond what could be described as "self-defense" and was instead targeting journalists, hospitals, schools, ambulances, and aid workers, while using torture, sexual assault, and starvation as weapons of war.

In April 2024, in the midst of this carnage, Rula Jebreal, a Palestinian journalist and human rights scholar, warned that unless there was accountability under international law for these crimes, "the genocide in Gaza will become a global doctrine." Eight months later, a report issued by twelve United Nations special rapporteurs, the institution's leading human rights experts, echoed those words: "Israel's continued impunity sends a dangerous message suggesting that parties to other conflicts around the world need not comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. We cannot afford to lose the force of the multilateral system. Israel and its leaders must be held accountable."

There was no accountability, and now elites are abandoning even the pretense of adhering to international obligations, barely bothering to

provide rationales for illegal military aggression while reveling in gratuitously violent wartime conduct. “America, regardless of what so-called international institutions say, is unleashing the most lethal and precise air power campaign in history,” Secretary Hegseth boasted as bombs rained down on Iran. “All on our terms with maximum authorities. No stupid rules of engagement, no nation-building quagmire, no democracy building exercise, no politically correct wars.” By then, Hegseth had effectively dismantled the military offices devoted to reducing civilian casualties in US wars, and to investigating civilian harm, dismissing these concepts as “woke” bureaucratic constraints. Meanwhile, the Army made laws-of-war training optional, sparing soldiers the “unnecessary distractions” of battlefield ethics and rules of engagement. Military lawyers, in Hegseth’s lingo, are “jagoffs” obstructing the “lethality” of America’s “warfighters.”

During the first two weeks of the regional war conducted by the United States and Israel, huge numbers of families were forced from their homes, with some estimates of the number of displaced people in Lebanon and Iran as high as four million. One thing is certain: the Trump administration’s adventurism and oil war will only hasten the destabilization of the planet’s climate systems and displace countless more people. The effects will be all the more catastrophic because of the larger context. Rich countries have spent decades undermining UN climate frameworks—rigging them with carve-outs and opportunities for creative carbon accounting—while also weakening protections for migrants and refugees, including by “offshoring” asylum seekers to third countries to avoid legal obligations and setting the stage to make even bolder demands for mass “remigration.” In 2025, the United States ended its refugee program entirely, while opening the door to only one supposedly at-risk group: white South Africans (Afrikaners).

This shameful track record is why nostalgia is not an option. No doubt, it’s important to acknowledge the significant accomplishments of international law in the post–World War II era. As the scholar Oona Hathaway has noted, we understandably notice violations while taking for granted the conflicts that are averted when international law does its job and peace is maintained. And multilateralism can claim many proud victories, from protecting the ozone layer to curbing and even eliminating many infectious diseases (even as the Trump administration seems determined to revive them). Large swathes of the world have agreed to prohibitions on

biological and chemical weapons, blinding laser weapons, “weather warfare,” land mines, and cluster munitions. The United Nations acknowledges that “a campaign or network led by advocacy organizations and concerned global citizens” has been behind nearly every successful disarmament initiative.

And yet in our new era of the defiant impunity of the powerful, all these undeniable wins are now endangered. “The prerogatives of the permanent members of the Security Council are already unjustifiable in an international order grounded in the sovereign equality of nations. When exercised irresponsibly, they become intolerable,” observed Brazilian president Lula da Silva. All the rules bending and rules breaking has finally led to a “rupture” in the world order, as the prime minister of Canada, Mark Carney, put it in Davos, to much applause (two days before Donald Trump unveiled New Gaza and the Board of Peace). Of course, it was not the ideal of a universal set of rights and responsibilities, applied equally to all people and nations, that failed us. It was the opposite: it was all double standards and concealments. Clearly, if the principle of universalism is to have a chance of surviving, it must actually be implemented universally.

That was the point made by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez when she spoke at the 2026 Munich Security Conference. She warned that Western democracies must deliver “material gains for the working class” to defeat the rise of authoritarianism, but that we cannot afford to limit our concerns to the borders of our own nations, nor to express that concern in a self-serving and arbitrary way. “In a rules-based order, hypocrisy is vulnerability … When you have a rules-based order where you carve out exceptions to our values, exceptions to our rules, eventually the exceptions become the rules.” What we need, she argued, is a rules-based order that refuses such hypocrisies.

Her comments pointed to a reason for optimism. “Over the last five years, we’ve seen such a breaking and such a fraying of these alleged Western values that people wonder if it ever existed in the first place,” the Congresswoman acknowledged. Perhaps that means that we aren’t actually in a “post-rules-based order,” but rather in the early stages of something new: “I think it’s possible that we were in a pre-rules-based order, and we have an opportunity to explore what a world would look like if we upheld democracy, human rights, trade that actually centers working-class people, instead of accruing overwhelmingly the benefits of trade to the wealthiest.”

Two months later, Pedro Sánchez, the prime minister of Spain, reinforced her vision when he called for a "profound renewal of the multilateral architecture": "We must transform the United Nations as soon as possible with a much stronger General Assembly, a more representative Security Council, and a more democratic decision-making system in which all regions truly have a voice and a vote." The West, he declared, "should relinquish some of its representation quotas in favour of global stability and the confidence of countries in the south."

In other words, we can still create a system truly committed to the ideal of universalism—a framework that respects human rights while also imposing serious moral duties to protect vulnerable populations, even or especially when it is inconvenient or unpopular. Today the idea of human rights hardly seems novel or visionary, and some on the left even criticize it as insufficiently radical. But to actually live by the principle of fundamental human equality and worthiness would require a profound transformation of our politics, economies, and values. A commitment to the principle that every single person deserves to live well and have a future, whoever and wherever we happen to be, has never been seriously attempted, and remains a north star worth striving for.

In fact, our times call for even greater ambitions. End times fascism's war on earthly life calls on us to develop a more inclusive and expansive form of universalism than the one developed in the twentieth century. In contrast to the fascist drive for supremacy and separation, we need a universalism that understands that human beings share this planet with other life-forms and are just one part of larger, living systems. A universalism committed to here—to the planet in all its teeming diversity—would also defend the right of rivers to flow and gray whales to migrate and bees to pollinate and low-lying islands to exist. Recent years have seen various efforts, many coming from Latin America, to enshrine "the rights of nature." And in 2024, several Pacific island nations, severely threatened by sea-level rise, brought a landmark case before the ICC asking for a new crime to be recognized—the crime of "ecocide," defined as the mass destruction of the environment.

All of this is a reminder that, despite the various efforts to erase climate breakdown from the political agenda, the need for stabilization of our planetary home is far too significant for any politician to brush aside. And like all of the existential threats we currently face, it can only be tackled

with cross-border cooperation and coordination, as well as serious engagement from civil society. International institutions and obligations require mass support. They can exist and be effective only when ordinary people, all around the world, believe in them enough to force their governments to live up to their commitments.

And that, fundamentally, is the prospect that terrifies end times fascists more than anything else. It's why apocalyptic preachers such as John Hagee vilify people organizing for peace and human rights as "thugs" driven by "demonic hatred" and the "spirit of Amalek"; why Peter Thiel denounces anyone attempting to regulate fossil fuels and AI as the Antichrist; and why Trump and Vance smear nonviolent Minnesotans defending their neighbors as "domestic terrorists." What keeps these men up at night is … us. It's the possibility that a popular and vigorous democratic movement will rise up and defend this planet and the many life-forms who call it home.

Fascism-Free

It wouldn't be the first time. As World War II came to its bitter close, Japanese survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were some of the first people to devote their lives to the fight to eradicate nuclear weapons. Oppenheimer and other researchers who worked on the Manhattan Project started the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and the Doomsday Clock soon after, to warn the world about the danger of their invention. They all looked to the newly formed United Nations as the best hope for building a nuclear-free world.

In the beginning, the United States and Russia kept building up their nuclear arsenals. Peace, influential officials argued, would be best achieved by allowing global powers to continue developing the capacity to nuke each other to extinction, the principle that would come to be known as Mutually Assured Destruction. But as the bombs kept getting bigger, and the stockpiles ballooned, increasing the odds of a Strangelovian accident, more came to see the logic as ludicrous. As Bertrand Russell wrote in his 1955 Anti-Nuclear Manifesto, signed by Albert Einstein, "Here, then, is the problem which we present to you, stark and dreadful and inescapable: Shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war?"

Russell and Einstein were part of what would eventually become a massive, international, and multigenerational nuclear disarmament movement. Around the world, organizers engaged in a range of tactics, from

popular education to lawbreaking civil disobedience. Britain's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament inspired tens of thousands to march in the late 1950s, while American women organized mass peace strikes in the early 1960s ("End the Arms Race—Not the Human Race"). Activists celebrated the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty and 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as hard-won victories. Most critically, they captured the public imagination to such an extent that the prospect of actually deploying a nuke in a warzone became politically untenable. Richard Nixon complained that if he had used nuclear weapons in Vietnam "the resulting domestic and international uproar would have damaged our foreign policy on all fronts."

When Ronald Reagan took office, his administration began readying for a "protracted" nuclear conflict with the USSR, inspiring a new wave of mass resistance that spanned the globe. Beginning in 1981, a UK group called Women for Life on Earth established a permanent protest camp outside a military base—the Greenham Common Peace Camp lasted, in some shape or form, for a remarkable nineteen years. In 1982, New York City held what was at the time the largest political rally in American history, with one million people gathered under the banner "Freeze the Arms Race—Fund Human Needs." The same year, a coalition that included indigenous people and faith leaders organized vigils and engaged in civil disobedience at the Nevada Test Site, situated on Western Shoshone treaty land. In the words of Reagan's communications director David Gergen, the White House considered the movement to be "a dagger pointed at the heart of the administration's defense program."

The White House initially responded by making a "huge effort" to discredit organizers as Communists and foreign agents, and when that failed, the hard line began to soften and Reagan changed his tune: "To those who protest against nuclear war, I can only say 'I'm with you.'" Soon the Republican president was preaching abolition. "We seek the total elimination one day of nuclear weapons from the face of the Earth," he declared in his 1985 Inaugural Address. President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union, by then passionately allied with the international campaign for a nuclear freeze, sent a similar message. World leaders faced with the "self destruction of the human race" had no choice but to "burn the black book of nuclear alchemy" and usher in a new era "of life without fear of universal death." Gorbachev called for a "new mode of thinking," the heart

of which would be “the recognition of the priority of human values or, to be more precise, of humankind’s survival.”

Between 1986 and 2015, approximately 54,450 nuclear weapons were decommissioned—a staggering number representing the vast majority of the existing stock. In the 1990s, with the Cold War over and disarmament accelerating, many people began to see atomic bombs as relics of a Strangelovian spasm in human history and assumed disarmament would continue until the job was done. As a result, the movement to ban the bomb all but faded away, a victim of its own success.

We now know that was premature. There are around 12,200 nuclear warheads in existence today, 4,000 of them ready to be deployed, and nine nations have them. A new arms race has begun, now with expired treaties and an AI wildcard. For the first time in four decades, Washington looks poised to conduct some kind of nuclear testing. Weeks into the war on Iran, Trump made unsettling comments hinting that the United States could end the conflict in “two seconds” as the prime minister of Japan—the only country to have experienced the horror of atomic warfare—sat awkwardly beside him.

Does this mean that the movement to ban the bombs was an abject failure? Hardly. If millions of people hadn’t mobilized for disarmament, we would be living in a world with tens of thousands more bombs, and more nuclear-armed nations. The victories for nuclear safety and monitoring very likely prevented horrific accidents, while the public pressure that made deploying nukes a nonstarter surely saved lives; it might even have saved ours.

In the spiral of history, it is always the task of the present to pick up where past movements left off, learning from both their victories and defeats, and taking courage from their audacity. Now we must combine the fight for nuclear disarmament with the fight for other kinds of nonapocalyptic futures. We can take heart: if it’s possible to decommission tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, each one capable of killing hundreds of thousands of people and poisoning many more, we know that dismantling additional bombs is, in fact, a wholly realistic goal. And if generations before us managed to disarm these dangerous atomic missiles, then we can disarm the AI models designed to addict us and steal our jobs—as well as the robots designed to stalk and even kill people. We can also disarm the profit models that have turned into weapons waged on our

capacity to self-govern. And like the people who collaborated across borders and enemy lines to end the follies of the Cold War, we can also collaborate to end fossil-fuel extraction, which would mean ending the bloody wars for oil and the ecocidal burning of carbon.

As we have seen in these pages, fascism is always a response to real crises. And end times fascism is a response to real planetary-scale crises. The responses it proposes—mass sacrifices of humans and non-humans alike—are monstrous and must be purged from our body politic.

Yet we can never forget that the underlying crises off of which contemporary fascism feeds are very real. Boundaries *are* being crossed. Limits *are* being exceeded. Walls *are* being hit. Fascists want us to believe that what is hitting the wall is the human story: it's over, so make sure you are among the chosen who transcend to the next world. Pray to your God for salvation. Implant the chip, merge with the machines. Militarize and purify your bunkered nation. Arm yourself to the hilt and hide behind your fortune. Don't worry about the humans, the animals, the trees, the rivers and reefs that won't make it.

But they are wrong. It's not the human story that is hitting the wall. Rather, it is the story we have been trapped inside about how greed must be the engine of civilization. About how growth can go on forever. About how there are always more efficiencies to be found, more workers to be rationalized, more resources to be sacrificed, more people and places and planets to be colonized. These myths are hitting the wall of reality and much will have to change as a result. "In order to make earthly planetary survival possible," writes the scholar of policing Robyn Maynard, "some versions of this world need to end."

The versions that need to end should be clear by now. Unlimited violence. Unconstrained exploitation. Insatiable wealth. Unaccountable and unchecked power. Those are the forces that make co-existence impossible. Looking forward, two paths beckon. We can abandon and betray this world, or we can break with capitalism and build new economic and political systems that honor life and prioritize care and repair.

Thankfully we are not starting from scratch. Our movement ancestors have left us maps to earthly Zions where everyone is welcome, to inclusive futures where peace and safety are core principles. Not the post-human

future desired by end times fascists, but a post-capitalist and pro-(all of) life one. Deeply democratic, socialist, feminist, multiracial, multispecies, internationalist, generous, courageous, and animate. Embodied and sensory, proudly earthbound.

We can already glimpse this future on the streets where neighbors are picking up laundry and dropping off dinner for strangers hiding from ICE. We can see it, too, in the canvasser knocking on a door to talk about free buses and rent freezes, and the block-by-block planning for the next hurricane or flood—making sure there are strong arms to push the wheelchairs and plans to bring water and supplies to those who need them. We can hear it in the word *neighbor* growing to expand to include thousands of people we have never met and who have yet to arrive.

We didn’t choose to be born into a fight quite so fateful, but we have reached a choice point. We can either follow end times fascists into oblivion, or we can commit to building the unruly, boundary-crossing movement they so deeply fear. One that wrests away their weapons, holds them accountable for their crimes, and defends the paradise of here.

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Index

TK [allow 16–18 pages]

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Naomi Klein is an award-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker, and the bestselling author of *Doppelganger*, *No Logo*, *The Shock Doctrine*, and other classic books, which have been translated into thirty-five languages. She is an associate professor of geography and codirector of the Centre for Climate Justice at the University of British Columbia, and she writes a regular column for *The Guardian*. *Doppelganger* was the winner of the Women's Prize for Nonfiction and was named one of the ten best books of the year by *New York* magazine, *Slate*, and *Time*.

Astra Taylor is an award-winning writer, activist, and documentarian, and a co-founder of the Debt Collective. She is the author of *The People's Platform*, which won the American Book Award; *Democracy May Not Exist, but We'll Miss It When It's Gone*; *The Age of Insecurity*; and is the co-author of *Solidarity*. Taylor regularly writes for publications including *The New Yorker, The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*. Taylor toured with the band Neutral Milk Hotel and was the 2023 CBC Massey Lecturer.

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