



*Donald Trump's plans to throw
the 2026 midterms into chaos are
already under way.*

**BY DAVID A.
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Imagine for a moment that it's late on Election Day, November 3, 2026. Republicans have kept their majority in the Senate, but too many House races are still uncalled to tell who has won that chamber. Control seems like it will come down to two districts in Maricopa County, Arizona. ICE agents and National Guardsmen have been deployed there since that summer, ostensibly in response to criminal immigrants, though crime has been dropping for several years. The county is almost one-third Hispanic or Latino. Voting-rights advocates say the armed presence has depressed turnout, but nonetheless, the races are close. By that evening, the Republican candidates have small leads, but thousands of mail and provisional ballots remain uncounted.

Donald Trump calls the press into the Oval Office and announces that the GOP has held the House—but he warns that Democrats will try to steal the election, and announces plans to send a legal team to Arizona to root out fraud. He spends the rest of the night posting threats and allegations on Truth Social. In the morning, Republican lawyers file to stop vote counting, arguing that any votes counted after Election Day are illegal under federal law. Attorney General Pam Bondi sends a letter to Adrian Fontes, Arizona's Democratic secretary of state, and the county board of supervisors, instructing them to retain all documents and warning that the Department of Justice may intervene if it suspects anything untoward. On X, FBI Director Kash Patel reposts false rumors about fraud and announces plans to lead a group of agents to Phoenix. Meanwhile, Democratic candidates have pulled ahead in both races by Wednesday afternoon, but the margin is just 143 votes in the Eighth District, with many votes still not tallied.

By now, conservative outlets are running wall-to-wall coverage alleging fraud, offering tales of immigrants being bused to voting locations and accusing Democrats of treason. MAGA has learned its lesson since 2020, and Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell are nowhere near the cameras. Instead, administration officials like Bondi are the face of the allegations on TV. Behind the scenes, Trump is making phone calls. He's unable to reach any

county supervisors, whose lawyers have warned them not to speak with him, but he gets through to the county recorder, a MAGA loyalist elected as part of the backlash to the 2020 election. No one knows quite what is said—the call isn't taped—but when Trump hangs up, he posts that the county has agreed to hand over control of voting machines to the Department of Homeland Security.

Fontes and the board of supervisors rush to court to block the move, and a judge quickly grants an injunction. But Trump declares a national emergency that he says supersedes the order; helicopters are en route from a Marine air base in Yuma to take control of the voting machines. By the time Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan, who is assigned to hear emergency matters from Arizona, issues an order blocking this, Marines have already commandeered ballots and machines. Patel, having just arrived in Phoenix, holds a press conference and announces, without providing evidence, that votes have been tampered with. He proclaims the Republican candidates the winners.

Despite Marines on the street, small but fierce protests erupt in Phoenix and elsewhere; Trump uses them as a pretext to invoke the Insurrection Act and announces “martial law in Democrat-run cities.” Who actually won the election can never be determined—the Marines and Patel have broken the chain of custody, as well as some of the machines themselves—but the state names the two Democrats as winners. House Republicans reject Arizona's certification and instead seat the GOP candidates. Trump's allies keep the House in a profoundly illegitimate election rejected by many Americans.

THIS IS JUST one possible scenario. Is it too pessimistic? Perhaps. But at this stage of the election cycle in 2019, no one expected a crowd of Trump supporters to storm the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. No one expected the president himself to explicitly lend his support to their efforts to “Stop the Steal.” Certainly no one expected that there would be calls to hang the vice president for his refusal to subvert the democratic process. If

anything, when it comes to 2026, I worry more about the limits of my imagination than about the hazards of speculation.

Trump has made his intentions clear. At a rally last summer in West Palm Beach, Florida, he offered his supporters a promise. “Christians, get out and vote, just this time. You won't have to do it anymore. Four more years, you know what, it'll be fixed, it'll be fine. You won't have to vote anymore, my beautiful Christians,” he said. “We'll have it fixed so good, you're not gonna have to vote.”

We'll have it fixed so good. It's not hard to guess what Trump might do to fulfill this promise. He has, after all, already attempted to disrupt and overturn an election. In 2020, those efforts involved questioning results, asserting widespread fraud without evidence, pressuring local officials to overturn outcomes, filing spurious lawsuits, and ultimately inciting supporters to sack the Capitol. Now that he's back in the White House, he will draw from this playbook again—perhaps adding new maneuvers, such as deploying armed troops.

As president, Trump has very little statutory power over elections, yet the office provides him with plenty of opportunities for chicanery. He also has powerful reasons to interfere next year. If Democrats recapture the House (by gaining three seats) or the Senate (four seats), they could stall his agenda, launch oversight proceedings, and potentially bring new impeachment charges against him.

Trump and his allies will have before them less an orderly set of instructions than a buffet of options. Some of these options will go untested, or amount to nothing. But elections are a game of margins. Only a handful of Senate seats and a few dozen House races may be seriously contested, thanks to maps drawn to guarantee safe seats for one party or the other. Of those, some may be very close. In 2024, 18 House races were decided by fewer than 10,000 votes. Democrats won 11 of those.

To understand the threat to democracy, and how it might be stopped, I spoke with experts on election administration, constitutional law, and law enforcement. Many of them are people I have known

to be cautious, sober, and not prone to hyperbole. Yet they used words like *nightmare* and warned that Americans need to be ready for “really wild stuff.” They described a system under attack and reaching a breaking point. They enumerated a long list of concerns about next year’s midterms, but they largely declined to make predictions about the 2028 presidential election. The speed of Trump’s assault on the Constitution has made forecasting difficult, but the 2026 contests—both the way they work, and the results—will help determine whether democracy as we know it will survive until then. “If you are not frightened,” Hannah Fried, the executive director of the voter-access group All Voting Is Local, told me, “you are not paying attention.”

Even so, the breakdown of the system is not a foregone conclusion. We can take some comfort next year in the fact that messing with 468 separate elections for House and Senate seats is more complicated than interfering with a presidential race. There will be more opportunities for shenanigans—but it will also be harder to change the overall outcome if one party leads by more than 10 or so seats.

It’s also worth remembering that courts have not looked favorably on recent challenges to elections. Scores of pro-Trump suits failed in 2020, and although the Supreme Court has sanctioned many of Trump’s executive-power grabs, most election cases are decided in lower courts, where Trump has fared poorly thus far in his second term. Finally, the decentralization of the voting system is both a weakness and a source of resilience. The patchwork of laws and offices that govern elections at the state and local levels ensures that some jurisdictions are fairer and more secure than others. It also means that nefarious actors might be able to access only small parts of the system.

Yet Trump has demonstrated that he is more effective at executing his will than he was during his first term. He has surrounded himself with aides whose loyalty is to him, not the rule of law, and who have learned from the flaws of MAGA’s 2020 plan. They are better versed in the inner workings of elections and eager to

use the Justice Department as a tool for political gain.

Stopping any attempt to subvert the midterms will require courage and integrity from the courts, political leaders of both parties, and the local officials running elections. Most of all, it will depend on individual Americans to stand up for their rights and demand that their votes are counted.

I. LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Let’s get something out of the way: Donald Trump will not try to cancel the midterm elections. He lacks both the power to do so—a fact that offers only partial reassurance, with this president—and the incentive.

Modern authoritarians love elections. In Hungary, Turkey, Russia, and other countries, repressive leaders have kept the framework of democracy in place while guaranteeing that they always or usually win. Doing so helps them escape international condemnation and lends an imprimatur of legitimacy. Trump himself has warmly congratulated these leaders on electoral victories that much of the world has deemed unfair.

The political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way coined the term *competitive authoritarianism* to describe a system that gives an all-but-preordained outcome the patina of democratic choice. “Competition is real, but unfair,” Levitsky told me.

Competitive-authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the world offer models for how a leader might make it harder for his adversaries to regain power long before ballots are cast. For example, he might launch an effort to undermine the rule of law, which could be used to hold him accountable. He might seek to change or eliminate term limits. He might seek to co-opt and intimidate the press, rewarding friendly outlets to create a palace media and intimidating others into tempering their criticism. He might seek to pack the government with loyalists, replacing civil servants with political operatives and appointing allies to the

judiciary. Finally, a competitive authoritarian might use the government’s powers to harass political rivals, weakening the opposing party well ahead of elections. When necessary, he might imprison rivals or even kill them; see, for example, the fate of Alexei Navalny in Russia. This is a last resort, though: Such heavy-handedness tends to attract condemnation, and usually isn’t necessary anyway.

Trump has already done a lot of this. He has coerced law firms into questionable agreements that aligned them with the administration. He has launched criminal investigations into officials who have tried to hold him to account. He has questioned whether the constitutional right of free speech extends to criticism of him. He has pressured social-media companies into ending their moderation of disinformation, of which he is a prodigious source. He has used lawsuits and the Federal Communications Commission to bully entertainment conglomerates and news outlets. His administration engineered a deal for the sale of TikTok, a major information source for younger Americans, to a group of investors that includes political allies.

Trump has directed the Justice Department to investigate ActBlue, the fundraising platform that raised more than \$3.6 billion for Democratic candidates in the 2024 cycle. After the assassination of Charlie Kirk, he issued an executive order that could target a range of left-wing political organizations. Trump has not yet arrested any high-profile candidates for office, but, as of this writing, his administration has launched an investigation into Senator Adam Schiff, a California Democrat who led Trump’s first impeachment, and charged Representative LaMonica McIver, a New Jersey Democrat, with assault after an incident at a migrant-detention facility in Newark. The Justice Department also charged former FBI Director James Comey with felonies for allegedly lying to Congress and indicted New York Attorney General Letitia James for alleged mortgage fraud. (Schiff and James have denied any wrongdoing; McIver and Comey have pleaded not guilty.)

The cumulative effect in the United States is likely to be the same as it has

been overseas: Prospective donors, candidates, and campaign workers or volunteers will wonder whether the benefits of participation outweigh the risks of harassment and persecution. By the time voting starts, the opposition party will already be at a steep disadvantage.

II. CHANGING THE RULES

Over the summer, Texas Governor Greg Abbott called the state legislature to Austin for a special session in which, among other things, it redrew congressional districts. The aim was to give the GOP five additional seats in the U.S. House. This was a brazen move. States normally redistrict only once a decade, after the census. Texas's 2021 map was already engineered for Republican advantage, but the White House pushed the state to go further, hinting at retribution for anyone who resisted, according to *The New York Times*. This set off a chain of attempted copycats in red states and attempted payback in blue ones. Trump reportedly threatened primary challenges for Republicans who opposed him and sent the vice president to pressure Indiana lawmakers—all of which suggests that the president believes the midterms will be close.

Redistricting was an especially blunt and public effort to change the rules ahead of Election Day. Most of the other methods that Trump and his allies have tried or are likely to try will not be so overt, and may also be less successful. The problem for Trump is that power over elections rests with the states and, to a lesser extent, Congress, not the executive branch.

Nevertheless, Trump has simply asserted control and dared anyone to say no. In March, he issued an executive order that purported to make several changes to voting. It instructed the Election Assistance Commission, a bipartisan federal agency that helps states administer elections, to require proof of citizenship to vote. (Congress is also considering a bill that would do the same.) It also

demanding that only ballots received by Election Day be counted, regardless of state rules. The executive order was largely blocked by two federal judges, one of whom noted that citizenship was already required to vote and added, “The Constitution does not grant the President any specific powers over elections.”

Trump has been trying to teach the American people to distrust elections since 2016, and many of his actions now are designed to create a pretense for claiming fraud later. For example, he has repeatedly suggested that millions of unauthorized immigrants are voting, although this is not true. Now the Justice Department has ordered many states to turn over voter-registration records with detailed private information, which it says it's sharing with the Department of Homeland Security. Some states prohibit releasing this information, which is unlikely to either produce evidence of fraud or improve voter rolls. Previous attempts at matching voter lists against other databases have produced many false positives but few actual examples of illegal voting. An election-integrity commission established during Trump's first term also tried to acquire voter rolls for the same purpose, but was rebuffed by states and tied up in litigation. This time around, the Justice Department is suing states that don't comply, and could use their resistance as a pretext for future allegations of fraud.

Trump has consistently tried to spread distrust of voting by mail. Most recently, he reported that, during an August summit in Alaska, Putin told him, “Your election was rigged because you have mail-in voting.” Trump then announced on

Truth Social that, in an effort to ban voting by mail and require paper ballots, he would issue a new executive order, adding, “Remember, the States are merely an ‘agent’ for the Federal Government in counting and tabulating the votes.”

This is false, and no executive order has emerged yet, perhaps because plenty of Republicans vote by mail, and eliminating it wouldn't have a clear partisan advantage. Even so, assailing mail-in voting is useful to Trump because it creates a justification to claim fraud after the elections. In 2020, Trump seized on claims about mailed ballots being stolen, altered, or dumped in a river, even long after those stories were debunked. And in 2024, he was preparing to do so again, until it became clear that he had won.

Similarly, Trump and his allies have insisted for nearly a decade—without ever providing proof—that many voting machines are not secure. In his executive order on voting, Trump instructed the Election Assistance Commission to decertify all voting machines in the U.S. within 180 days and recertify only those that met certain requirements. This would be impractical, in part because it's unclear whether any voting machines that meet those standards could be available in time for the election. But again, the order may be designed to serve a different purpose: If races don't go the way the president wants, he can point to the executive order and say that the voting machines didn't meet the standards. The results, therefore, are not valid, or at least cannot be trusted.

The administration's own actions are actually undermining election security.

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In past elections, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, a part of DHS, assisted local officials. That might have meant providing protection from hacking or doing site visits to make sure door locks and electricity were secure. But Trump has held a grudge against CISA since Chris Krebs, then the agency's leader, vouched for the security of the 2020 election. (Trump fired Krebs at the time and earlier this year directed the Justice Department to open an investigation into him.) The administration has cut about a third of CISA's workforce and slashed millions of dollars of assistance to local officials, potentially exposing election systems to interference by foreign or domestic hackers. The big risk is not changing actual vote tallies, but disrupting the system to create chaos and doubt and to prevent people from casting ballots.

This summer, DHS appointed Heather Honey, an election denier involved in efforts to challenge the 2020 election, to the newly created role of deputy assistant secretary for election integrity. Meanwhile, troubling examples of attempted interference with the system are popping up in swing states.

In a peculiar turn this July, 10 Colorado counties reported being contacted by Jeff Small, a Republican consultant, who told some of them he was working on behalf of White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller and requested access to voting machines. According to *The Denver Post*, Small connected at least one Colorado election official with a person at the Department of Homeland Security, suggesting that he was acting

with the administration's cooperation. (Small did not reply to interview requests. An administration spokesperson told CNN earlier this year that Small "does not speak for the White House" and was never "authorized to do official business on behalf of the White House.")

In September, Reuters reported that Sigal Chattah, the acting U.S. attorney for Nevada, had directed the FBI to investigate claims of voter fraud in that state, hoping that a probe would help Republicans keep the House. (Shortly thereafter, a court found Chattah's appointment invalid.)

III. ELECTION DAY

Voter suppression has a long history in the U.S., but the methods have become more sophisticated and less obvious than in the days of literacy tests, poll taxes, and the KKK. Republican jurisdictions in particular have enacted rules that have made it harder for people to vote. They have placed restrictions on voter-registration drives by outside groups; required photo identification to vote (which is popular, though its effects are often discriminatory, because Black, older, and poorer people are less likely than other voters to have qualifying ID); tried to limit the hours that polls are open; and, in Georgia, put restrictions on giving food or water to people waiting in line to vote.

None of these things, in isolation, will prevent large numbers of people from

voting, but they create barriers that might make a difference at the margins. They are likely to especially affect people who vote infrequently. Whether this is beneficial for Trump and his allies is a matter of debate among experts. (Traditionally, high turnout was thought to help Democrats, but Trump's coalitions have included many irregular voters.)

In 2026, however, Trump could far surpass these small-bore measures. The fear I heard, again and again, is that the president will attempt to use armed federal agents to interfere with elections. In its simplest form, this could look like federal law-enforcement officers patrolling the streets in blue cities, a possibility that some influential people in Trump's orbit have already embraced. "They're petrified over at MSNBC and CNN that, hey, since we're taking control of the cities, there's gonna be ICE officers near polling places," Steve Bannon said in August. "You're damn right."

But many people now worry that Trump would go further and use the military. Not long ago, this would have seemed nearly unthinkable. In January, the Brennan Center for Justice, the University of Virginia's Center for Public Safety and Justice, and the States United Democracy Center held a tabletop exercise to consider best practices for policing in a tense society. The participants imagined that the National Guard might be deployed to cities—by sometime in 2028. "Even our most unlikely circumstances were far passed in the first few months of this year," Ben Haiman, the executive director of CPSJ, told me. "We got there real fast."

Federal law specifically bans the presence of "any troops or armed men at any place where a general or special election is held, unless such force be necessary to repel armed enemies of the United States." But some of the experts I spoke with believe that military intervention is now not only possible, but likely. "They're telling me that it's really unconstitutional and illegal for them to be there, but that doesn't seem to make a lot of difference to this administration," Aaron Ammons, the clerk of Champaign County, Illinois, told me.

The administration could try to get around the ban on troops at polling places

in a few ways. Cleta Mitchell, a conservative lawyer who was involved in “Stop the Steal” efforts in 2020 and remains influential in the White House, suggested in September that Trump could use emergency powers. “The chief executive is limited in his role with regard to elections, except where there is a threat to the national sovereignty of the United States,” she said on a conservative talk show. “I think maybe the president is thinking that he will exercise some emergency powers to protect the federal elections going forward.” Trump might allege foreign interference in the elections—asserting, for example, that Iranian hackers had changed voter results—in order to claim that national security required him to intervene.

Elizabeth Goitein, an expert on presidential emergency powers at the Brennan Center, told me that nothing like what Mitchell described exists: “There are no powers that give him the authority to do anything around elections, full stop.” But Goitein warned that Trump could try anyway. One possibility is that he could invoke the Insurrection Act, as he has repeatedly threatened to do, by claiming it is necessary to enforce federal law or protect voters’ constitutional rights.

Mobilizing troops takes time and is hard to do without anyone noticing. Trump might find it easier to deploy troops between now and November and have them on the streets already when voting starts. During a meeting with top military leaders in September, he said, “We should use some of these dangerous cities as training grounds for our military.”

He’s already started. In June, Trump federalized 4,000 members of the California National Guard and sent Marines into Los Angeles, putatively to maintain order and protect ICE agents. He has since deployed the National Guard to Washington, D.C., and moved to send Guardsmen to several other cities. These deployments could accustom Americans to seeing troops in the streets well ahead of the elections.

A military or federal-law-enforcement presence creates the danger of intimidation. Right-wing figures tend to write this off as blather: *If you’re not an illegal immigrant, you have nothing to fear.* But

ICE’s recent dragnets have arrested and jailed American citizens. Beyond that, the presence of police, or especially troops, could make it harder to reach polling places and could sap voters’ energy. Even a small presence of troops in a few cities might create enough media attention to affect turnout elsewhere.

In the worst-case scenarios, armed troops could be ordered to close polling areas, commandeer voting machines, or crack down on protesters. These orders would be illegal, and units might refuse to follow them, potentially producing a standoff between the president and his military brass. But it wouldn’t take more than a few officers complying to corrupt the election.

IV. AFTER ELECTION DAY

As soon as the polls close, Trump and other Republicans will try to stop the counting of votes. Scholars have documented a phenomenon called the “red mirage” or “blue shift,” in which early results seem more favorable to Republicans, but as mail-in ballots, provisional ballots, and tallies in slow-counting Democratic-leaning cities and states trickle in, Democrats’ outcomes look better.

In 2020, with many states still counting, Trump spoke at the White House early on the morning of November 4 and demanded that no new votes be included in tallies. “Frankly, we did win this election. We did win this election,” he said. “So our goal now is to ensure the integrity for the good of this nation. This is a very big moment. This is a major fraud in our nation. We want the law to be used in a proper manner. So we’ll be going to the U.S. Supreme Court. We want all voting to stop.”

In his blocked executive order on elections this spring, Trump instructed the attorney general to target states that allow the counting of votes that arrive after Election Day (but are postmarked by then), arguing that “federal law establishes a uniform Election Day across the Nation” and that any ongoing counting is thus illegal.

Even if that goes nowhere, Republicans will use the same argument in lawsuits seeking to throw out any such votes. This will be only the start of the lawfare. A flurry of lawsuits in close House districts or states with close Senate races will aim to give Republican candidates an edge.

To see how this might look, consider a 2024 race for the North Carolina Supreme Court. Early returns suggested that the Republican Jefferson Griffin had defeated the incumbent Democrat, Allison Riggs, but once every ballot was counted, Riggs took a narrow lead, which was confirmed by multiple recounts. Griffin then filed suit seeking to throw out thousands of votes. Some were overseas ballots, including from military voters, that did not include photo ID; others were in heavily Democratic counties, from voters whose registration did not include a Social Security number. Everyone agreed that these ballots had been cast in accordance with the rules of the election at the time, but Griffin wanted to change the rules after the fact. He almost succeeded, with the help of favorable rulings from GOP-dominated state courts, before a federal judge shut him down.

In the days after the 2026 elections, Republicans will announce that Democratic victories are fraudulent. They may point to alleged deficiencies in voting machines, using Trump’s decertification mandate as a starting point, but many candidates have previously just relied on rumor and innuendo. Republicans will demand that elections be invalidated or rerun because they are tainted.

At the same time, Republican leaders—including Trump—will be working the phones, trying to recruit local and state election officials to help. In 2020, Trump called many local GOP officials seeking assistance, most infamously asking Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to “find” him almost 12,000 votes. Given that he was caught on tape doing so and has thus far faced no repercussions, Trump has no reason not to do it again. The pressure he exerted in 2020 didn’t work, in part because many Republican officials refused to abet his schemes, but in some places, these officials have been replaced by election deniers and MAGA

loyalists. Trump might, for instance, call someone like Linda Rebeck—the chair of North Carolina’s Henderson County board of elections, who was reprimanded last year for sending false election information to state legislators—or leaders in Cochise County, Arizona, who recently asked Attorney General Bondi to investigate the results of the 2022 election, which they themselves failed to certify on time.

Even the best-intentioned official might bend under pressure from the White House, because it’s very hard to say no to the president of the United States when he asks for a favor—especially if the alternative is doxxing, harassment, political ostracism, or worse. And if that prospect doesn’t sway them, a threat from the Justice Department might. How many county clerks are willing to trust their own legal advice over an order from the attorney general?

Stephen Richer, a Republican who was elected the Maricopa County recorder in 2020, described to me what it was like when he and other GOP officials defended the integrity of local elections. Like other Republicans who contradicted Trump, he was chased from office, losing a primary to a MAGA-aligned candidate. “It is incredibly lonely,” he said. “Very few people will have your back, especially if you’re a Republican. There is no constituency.” Standing up to Trump can stymie a political career, as it did for Richer, or lead to criminal jeopardy, as it has for Krebs.

In 2020, Trump also contemplated seizing voting machines. The ostensible reason was to search for evidence of fraud, but taking possession of the machines creates its own huge risk of fraud, and would destroy any trust in results. Aides drafted executive orders instructing the Defense Department or DHS to seize machines, but, amid resistance from advisers, Trump never went forward with the plan. Now he’s surrounded by aides more likely to encourage his most outrageous ideas.

If all of that fails, Republicans could attempt to refuse to seat Democrats who are elected. The House is the arbiter of its own members, and on several occasions—in 1985, for example, during an election that came down to a handful of votes—the body has refused to seat the winner

as certified by a state. With Trump blowing wind into flimsy fraud allegations, the House GOP caucus could try to use them to preserve a narrow majority.

The backdrop to all of this will be the possibility of violence by Trump supporters if they believe the election is being stolen. Just as the Krebs investigation is a warning to anyone who might publicly contradict Trump, the president’s mass clemency for people involved in the January 6 riot—including those convicted of violent attacks on police officers—is a signal to anyone who might act to assist the president’s cause that he will help them out afterward. The insurrection failed the first time, but the second try might be more effective.

V. THE WAY OUT

The most important defense against losing our democracy is the same thing that makes it a democracy in the first place: the people. An engaged electorate, demanding clean elections and turning out in force, has been the strongest and most consistent bulwark against Trump. “It is going to require that every single American do everything in their power to ensure that elections happen, to ensure that they are free and fair, and to push back on this extremism,” Skye Perryman, the president and CEO of Democracy Forward, told me.

The burden will fall especially on local election workers, who will be more prepared than they were six years ago but also more battered. In a survey this spring conducted by the Brennan Center, four in 10 local election officials said they’d received threats; six in 10 said they worried about political interference. They also worry about funding shortfalls. State and local governments are facing smaller budgets, and since 2020, many states have banned private donations for election administration.

Election officials are deluged by requests for information or demands that certain voters be removed from rolls—even when the law doesn’t provide for purges. Remaining apolitical has become

next to impossible. “We have been asked to definitively say whether the 2020 election was fair and legitimate,” Natalie Adona, the registrar of voters in Marin County, California, told me. “I can say without a doubt that that election was fairly decided. Does that now mean that I have made a partisan statement?”

At a previous job elsewhere in California, Adona had to obtain a restraining order because of persistent harassment. In Detroit in 2020, a mob tried to break into a vote-counting center. Since then, poll workers have been doxxed, received death threats, and faced persistent verbal abuse. One result is that many experienced officials have left their jobs. Those who remain are forced to make plans for their physical safety—at polling places, but also at facilities where votes are counted, and even at home.

Despite all of this, there are reasons for hope. Even in a competitive-authoritarian system, recent examples show, elections can defeat incumbents. Scholars consider Poland one of the most encouraging stories in the cohort of the world’s backsliding democracies. Starting in 2015, the country saw a steady drop in freedom. The ruling Law and Justice party pursued many of the same strategies that Trump has now adopted, or might yet. But in the 2023 parliamentary elections, a coalition of pro-democracy opposition parties was able to defeat Law and Justice, carried to victory on the strength of an astonishing 74 percent turnout among voters.

The midterm elections could be a similarly pivotal moment for American democracy. Defending the system in 2026 won’t guarantee clean elections in 2028, but failing to do so would be catastrophic. Trump will exploit any weaknesses he can find; any damage to the system will encourage worse rigging in two years, and maybe even a quest for a third term. And if the president has two more years to act without any checks, there may not be much democracy left to save in 2028. *A*

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The Dead Zones

By mid-century,
many places in the
United States may
be uninhabitable.

*By Vann R.
Newkirk II*



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Earlier this year, in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, a graveyard was spared by the fire that sent thousands of Los Angeles residents fleeing into the coal-black night. Here, in Mountain View Cemetery, lie the bones of Octavia Butler, the famed science-fiction writer who spent her life in Pasadena and Altadena, both of which had burned. Trinkets offered by fans often decorate Butler's unassuming grave. A footstone is inscribed with a quotation from her *Parable of the Sower*: ALL THAT YOU TOUCH, YOU CHANGE. ALL THAT YOU CHANGE, CHANGES YOU.

In that dystopian novel, published in 1993 and set in the mid-2020s, the United States still exists but has been warped by global warming, and its authoritarian government has ceded most of the administration of day-to-day matters to corrupt companies. In Butler's neo-feudal vision, states and cities erect strict borders to deter migrants, the gap between rich and poor has widened, and massive wildfires in Southern California drive the state's decline.

It has become commonplace to label Butler a prophet. She didn't get everything right about the United States today. But even in the things that haven't happened, exactly, one can see analogs to real life.

Butler, however, considered herself merely an analyst—a "histofuturist." She often said that her primary skill was simply learning from the past. In her research for *Parable*, she studied times of rising political strife and demagoguery, along with America's history of class and racial inequality. She studied what was at the time an emerging scientific consensus regarding global warming, a body of research that even then predicted fires and floods, and warned of political instability.

"I didn't make up the problems," Butler wrote in an essay for *Essence* in 2000. "All I

did was look around at the problems we're neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters." That same year, she said in an interview that she dearly hoped she was not prophesying anything at all; that among other social ills, climate change would become a disaster only if it was allowed to fester. "I hope, of course, that we will be smarter than that," Butler said six years before her death, in 2006.

What will our "full-fledged disasters" be in three decades, as the planet continues to warm? The year 2024 was the hottest on record. Yet 2025 has been perhaps the single most devastating year in the fight for a livable planet. An authoritarian American president has pressed what can only be described as a policy of climate-change acceleration—destroying commitments to clean energy and pushing for more oil production. It doesn't require an oracle to see where this trajectory might lead.

An authoritarian American president has pressed what can only be described as a policy of climate-change acceleration.

Taking our cue from Butler, we would do well today to study the ways that climate change has already reshaped the American landscape, and how disasters are hollowing out neighborhoods like the one where Butler is buried. We should understand how catastrophe works in a landscape of inequality.

Over the next 30 years or so, the changes to American life might be short of apocalyptic. But miles of heartbreak lie between here and the apocalypse, and the future toward which we are heading will mean heartbreak for millions. Many people will go in search of new homes in cooler, more predictable places. Those travelers will leave behind growing portions of America where services and comforts will be in short supply—let's call them "dead zones." Should the demolition of America's rule of law continue, authoritarianism and climate change will reinforce each other, a vicious spiral from which it will be difficult to exit.

How do we know this? As ever, all it takes is looking around.

IN AUGUST, as the setting sun sent a red glow up the San Gabriel Valley, I surveyed a stretch of western Altadena, just blocks from Butler's grave. The better part of a year had passed since the Eaton Fire—which destroyed some 9,400 buildings here and in Pasadena while the Palisades Fire raged simultaneously to the west. Still, the moonscape in front of me was unsettling. Much of the debris had been cleared, which made the houseless lots seem even more eerie. Here and there, a brick fireplace stood watch over an otherwise empty lot.

In January, when the Santa Ana winds came, Altadenans weren't too worried. In this part of California, small fires were just part of life. "We always think it's going to be an earthquake that takes us out," Veronica Jones, the president of the Altadena Historical Society and a resident for six decades, told me. For many Altadena lifers, the memory of the 1993 Kinneloa Fire, which destroyed almost 200 buildings and burned for five days, was the guide for what to expect in the worst case.

But 1993 was billions and billions of tons of carbon pollution ago. This time around, the physics of the planet were

different. In 2023, high temperatures in the Pacific had helped incubate Hurricane Hilary, which led to the first-ever tropical-storm warning in Southern California. The storm dumped buckets of rain on the region, helping spur rapid plant growth over the next several months. But then the rain dried up completely. In the second half of 2024, Los Angeles County received only 0.3 inches of precipitation—the lowest amount on record. The drought and near-record temperatures dried out the lush scrub, turning it to kindling. In just 16 months, multiple supposedly once-a-century weather events had worked in concert to make the hills perhaps more combustible than they'd ever been.

When the winds blew in, bringing dry, warm air from inland over Southern California, they were unusually strong, approaching hurricane strength. Strong winds can damage power lines, and evidence now suggests that a malfunctioning power line helped spark the Eaton Fire. Early in the morning on January 8, Jones was startled when her husband told her they needed to go because embers—“big chunks of fire,” as Jones put it—were falling into their yard.

The story of the Eaton Fire itself is tragic, and an omen: In ways that are straightforward and in ways that were largely unanticipated, global warming is quickly expanding the potential for large fires. But catastrophes also tend to reveal deficits in society, and the patterns of destruction and abandonment that followed the fire—which have roots in America's past and its present—tell us something about the country's future, too.

Many of the people escaping the fire had originally come to Altadena in flight: In the 20th century, Black folks seeking refuge from the Jim Crow South moved to California en masse, among them Butler's grandmother from Louisiana. Redlining and restrictive covenants kept them from buying homes in Los Angeles and Pasadena, leaving unincorporated Altadena as a favored destination, particularly its western half.

For many of those who'd been part of the migration, or who'd heard the stories, the fire felt like the return of an old

menace. The Eaton and Palisades Fires afflicted every class and demographic group. But the first response appeared much worse on the west side of Altadena, where the Black population was centered, than anywhere else. Of the more than 100 L.A. County fire trucks that went out to neighborhoods affected, only a single one entered West Altadena within the first 12 hours. According to an after-action report commissioned by the county, the homes there were older and more flammable, and—perhaps owing to power outages or weather interference with cell towers—residents throughout Altadena said that they hadn't received evacuation orders. All but one of the 19 reported deaths in Altadena occurred on the west side, which suffered the most catastrophic damage. Nearly half of all Black families in Altadena lost their home or sustained extensive damage.

Previous spread: A house in Altadena, California, destroyed by the Eaton Fire in January. Below: A flooded street in Miami in June 2022.

Just as fire victims began the process of trying to recover, Donald Trump came back into power. Deep cuts at FEMA and other agencies targeted much of the federal machinery and sources of money that were supposed to help. AmeriCorps volunteers who'd staffed recovery programs were sent home, and residents reportedly had difficulty reaching FEMA agents on the phone. Six months after the fires, the federal aid received by victims, relative to their property damage, was less than a third of that provided after previous fires in California and Hawaii. FEMA declined to perform its customary soil testing after cleanups, and now independent tests indicate high levels of lead in several lots. Darlene Greene, a member of the town council representing a tract in West Altadena, told me that the ordeal of rebuilding had driven some of her constituents into mental-health crises.

Months passed and empty lots languished. Many residents, having purchased homes years ago, were severely underinsured, owing to increased building costs. As of early October, fewer than 500 rebuilding permits had been issued within the Eaton Fire perimeter.





On the street during a heat wave in Miami in June 2023

Those who couldn't abide all the delays and red tape have sold, in many cases for a fraction of what the land was worth, and in many cases to corporate entities. More sales might still be on the horizon. With much of their surroundings still burned out and with friends and families scattered, even people who didn't lose their home in the fire might feel inclined to move away. "When you leave your house," Jones told me, "you have to look up at the street sign because there's no landmarks anymore."

Greene said the setbacks that families have faced have been their own kind of disaster. In the first weeks after the fire, "I was very optimistic," Greene told me, "and thinking that, *Hey, you know, people will be able to come back and rebuild.*" Now, she said, she doesn't know about that.

WHO NEEDS IMAGINATION when the dystopia is right in front of you? During the Palisades and Eaton Fires, scenes played out that could have appeared in Butler's *Parable*. Private firefighting outfits defended companies, utilities, and ultra-rich enclaves while other parts of the city burned. The county's defenses were over-matched. Its fleet of fire trucks was hobbled by ongoing consolidation in the fire-engine industry, where giant companies have been delaying maintenance orders and raising prices for new trucks. Hundreds of incarcerated people, making at most \$10 a day, worked as firefighters for the state. All of these things at least partly

reflect the increasing regularity, intensity, and cost of fires. They preview the kinds of problems that climate change will bring to our local governments and economies, manifesting most severely in poor and minority communities, but affecting us all.

One problem is who will underwrite disaster risks as they grow. Seven of the 12 largest home insurers in California—including State Farm, the very largest—have already limited their coverage or stopped taking new policies there. After the fires, State Farm proposed increasing its homeowner premiums by 22 percent statewide, and warned that it would need to "consider its options," seeming to imply that it might unwind even its existing policies, if the state didn't allow the increase (the two sides ultimately agreed on a 17 percent rate hike). The specter of huge future premium increases or whole-state withdrawals by insurers adds a new level of risk for every homeowner. Other insurers are also reconsidering their long-term positions, and asking to raise rates sharply.

There are parallels to the 2008 financial crisis, when entire communities were built over the rotten plank of sub-prime mortgages. Insurers lost more than \$100 billion in underwriting in 2024, and "insurance deserts," where policies are becoming impossible to find or

prohibitively expensive, are growing in the South and the West—more than half a million Florida residents are down to just one state-established "insurer of last resort," for example. Last year, a report from the Senate Budget Committee found that the withdrawal of insurers from many markets threatens "a collapse in property values with the potential to trigger a full-scale financial crisis similar to what occurred in 2008." But it's six one way, half a dozen the other: Insurers that *stay* in risky markets will be imperiled by unexpected disaster payouts, and might be destabilized if multiple disasters happen in different parts of the country at once.

Even if climate change does not trigger a full-fledged economic panic, whole regions will be thinned out and impoverished. Residential areas are the centerpiece of local economies, yet without insurance, people cannot get mortgages, and so most cannot buy houses. The mere prospect of that makes business investment riskier. Jesse Keenan, a professor at Tulane University who studies climate change and real estate, told me that some places are already becoming economic "no-go" zones.

Keenan is not some lonely Cassandra. In February, in a report to the Senate Banking Committee, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell warned of exactly the same thing. "You know, if you fast-forward 10 or 15 years, there are going to be regions of the country where you can't get a mortgage," he said. "There won't be ATMs. You know, the banks won't have branches and things like that." Leave it to the banker to think about the banks, but the same logic applies to everything else. In places that suffer an increasing number of climate disasters and don't receive commensurate assistance, we should expect more food deserts, fewer libraries, and fewer small businesses. We should expect that, with a larger share of municipal budgets going to disaster mitigation and repair, city and county services will suffer or disappear. Even as local taxes rise, "service deserts" will spread, leaving the remaining populations with only shells of local government. These are the dead zones.

In Butler's *Parable*, corporations use global warming to their advantage, taking over distressed governments, buying

up devastated lands, and providing housing to residents in exchange for cheap labor. Parts of this vision are manifesting in real life. Private-equity firms are deeply embedded in the disaster-recovery industry, sometimes relying on the low-wage labor of immigrants and incarcerated people in order to provide reconstruction services at cut rates. Investors often come into distressed real-estate markets and transform them, buying up land on the cheap and flipping residential homes into rental units. Essential services such as firefighting, disaster response, and cleanup are being slowly ceded by the public to the private sector in places under climate stress. Life in these places won't be like life in the company towns of the 19th century, not exactly. But if you squint, it may not look that different, either.

THESE GLIMPSES into tomorrow would warrant consternation under any administration. The United States cannot control global warming on its own, but it can exert a significant influence, directly and by example. President Joe Biden's climate agenda was the most robust ever attempted in this country, but even he did not sign enough laws to produce the fair share of decarbonization that America would need to deliver in order to avert 2 degrees Celsius of warming—a threshold whose crossing would likely spur a mass drought in the Southwest and West, disrupt agriculture in the South, and bring deluges to Miami, Sacramento, and New York City. But our present government is actively working to worsen global warming and make communities less resilient to its effects. It is working to make the darkest futures more likely.

It is possible, even considering the hatchet blows that Donald Trump has delivered to the federal bureaucracy, public institutions, and the Constitution, that his legacy will be most felt in our climate. On his first day back in office, the president signed executive orders that will withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Agreement—his second time pulling the country out of the global climate-change accord—and expand fossil-fuel production. In March, the Department of the Interior took steps to allow drilling

in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a vanishing sliver of pristine wilderness whose climate is already rapidly warming.

Even while justifying the expansion of oil and gas production as “energy independence,” Trump has attacked renewable energy. In January, he suspended all new leasing of federal lands for wind-power production. In July, he signed into law the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which accelerated the phaseout of wind- and solar-power tax credits, ended the tax credit for consumers who purchase electric vehicles, and zeroed out penalties for automakers that don't abide by fuel-economy standards. He has suggested that wind farms threaten American health, and has said he wants to ban new facilities outright.

Trump's EPA administrator, Lee Zeldin, came into office with the intent, he said, of “driving a dagger straight into the heart of the climate change religion.” He has since moved to slash the staff of the EPA's emission-enforcement office. Zeldin is now leading an effort to kill the EPA's “endangerment finding,” a 2009 declaration that

greenhouse gases are harmful to human health. Without that finding, the federal government would no longer have the authority to regulate carbon pollution.

The Trump administration's fixation on ending that “climate-change religion” fits the president's general view that everything is a zero-sum struggle between two sides, and that he wins only when his opponents lose. By this standard, Trump is winning: According to an analysis from the Princeton-affiliated REPEAT Project, his administration's actions have already erased all the future emission declines set in motion during Biden's term.

Trump has even thrown wrenches into the energy-transition plans of other countries. In a trade deal with the European Union, the administration agreed to lower punitive tariffs in exchange for European companies' purchase of \$750 billion of American energy over the next three years, mostly oil and gas, a move that—if the EU enforces it—would throw Europe off its decarbonization targets. In August, U.S. officials released a statement pledging that the United States would “not hesitate to retaliate” against countries that voted in favor of a global agreement to lower emissions in international shipping.

As the administration accelerates climate change, it has also moved to weaken the country's infrastructure for dealing with climate disruptions. Trump scrapped a program dedicated to funding flood mitigation in low-income communities. He axed rules that required public housing and critical infrastructure rebuilt with federal money to be elevated in order to account for new flood risks. The National Weather Service is a shadow of its former self, and the forecasters who help people make evacuation decisions are working double shifts just to keep offices open.

Even if Trump were to make a miraculous conversion to that climate-change religion today, some effects of these changes will be essentially irreversible. Once dismantled, bureaucracies are not so easy to replace. New wind farms won't just pop up overnight. It would take time and investment merely to get back to our pre-Trump emissions baseline, let alone hit our national targets for averting a 2-degrees-hotter world.

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Liberty City, a “heat island” that can be 10 degrees Fahrenheit hotter than more affluent parts of Miami, is nonetheless now in demand because it sits on high ground.

This reality is so sobering that even staunch climate optimists have had to adjust. Since 2012, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, one of the Democrats’ leaders on climate, has delivered more than 300 “Time to Wake Up” speeches about global warming on the floor. Earlier this year, Whitehouse acknowledged for the first time that it may actually be “too late to wake up.”

IN SEARCH OF more windows into our climate future, I traveled to a place where water is the agent of change. The first preview came as soon as I left my hotel. As I drove through Miami, a light rainstorm flooded the streets, sending water sloshing around my car’s tires and then over my shoes when I got out.

There are few places in America where climate change is made more obvious to the senses than in Miami. On some eroded beaches, you can wade or even swim out to

where the land once reached. The seawalls along Biscayne Bay have gotten higher, and flooding from rainfall has become more and more of a problem. Crucial areas of Miami-Dade County are at or near sea level. And the sea level, as glaciers melt, is rising. A 2016 county report estimated that from 1992 to 2030, sea levels there would rise by up to 10 inches.

Somewhere between the inconvenience of wet feet and a potential Atlantis-style submergence are plenty of climate issues that make life more difficult. Weather patterns in South Florida have changed, and extreme rainfall has become more frequent, exacerbating the rising sea level. Last year, a “rain bomb” system dumped more than a foot of water on Miami in just two days. Until very recently, that was considered a once-in-200-years (or rarer) event—but it has now happened in the city four times in as many years. Salt water from the encroaching ocean threatens the drinking-water supply.

And at the risk of stating the obvious, global warming is supercharging the city’s already daunting heat. In 2024, Miami-Dade County experienced 60 full days with heat indexes greater than 105 degrees Fahrenheit. The most dangerous

change might be the spike in overnight temperatures, which robs resting bodies of the chance to recover from daytime heat, thus contributing to as many as 600 excess deaths from heat each year. The county is the epicenter of an incipient “extreme heat belt” that is reshaping concepts of seasonality and livability in the United States.

In Miami, denying climate change would be like denying the nose on one’s face. Even so, even knowing what’s coming, the city and surrounding county have struggled to protect themselves—and especially their most vulnerable residents. This was evident in the community where I was headed, Liberty City.

The water receded as the land sloped upward on my drive to the old site of Liberty Square, the second segregated housing project in the country built for Black residents. I passed buildings adorned with Technicolor murals of civil-rights icons. And I found the remnants of the old “race wall” that had been erected to separate Black residents from white.

In Miami, places known as “heat islands,” with little shade and lots of asphalt, are disproportionately inhabited by poor and working-class residents, and these can be 10 degrees Fahrenheit hotter

than wealthy residential areas. Heat-related deaths and illnesses are concentrated among Black and Latino outdoor laborers. One of the worst such heat islands is Liberty City.

The neighborhood does, however, have one thing going for it, albeit one that may not benefit its current residents much longer. Historically, some of Miami's most desirable real estate has been crowded along the beachfronts of the metropolitan area, with businesses and wealthy white residential enclaves prizing shore views and beach access. Meanwhile, neighborhoods farther inland—Liberty City, along with Overtown and Little Haiti—were designated for Black folks. They sit several feet higher above the ocean than the city's prime real estate.

In 2018, a group of researchers led by Jesse Keenan found that property values in these higher-elevation areas were increasing relative to the city average. Theorizing that these price increases were driven by demand from developers and buyers fleeing inward from sinking coastal neighborhoods—and were displacing people already in the communities farther inland—Keenan and his colleagues coined the term *climate gentrification*.

In Liberty City, climate gentrification gave Black residents a new way to think about a process that, until that point, had seemed like regular old gentrification. Rents for existing residents had been rising faster than the city average, and an upsurge in evictions followed. Homeowners—many facing a budget crunch from rising property-tax bills—had grown accustomed to getting offers to buy their homes for cash. Developers had plans to demolish Liberty Square and replace it with a kind of mixed-use Chipotleville, and there wasn't much political will to stop displacement. Miami “was built upon inequity,” Kilan Ashad-Bishop, a professor at the University of Miami and a former member of the city's Climate Resilience Committee, told me—“but this felt a little different.” Activism against climate gentrification and national attention grew such that Miami passed a resolution requiring a study on climate gentrification—although so far, that hasn't accomplished much.

If the architectural renderings of trees, umbrellas, and awnings come to pass, some

families of color might be able to hang on and enjoy the new amenities. But many who are displaced will find it difficult to rent or buy anywhere else in the city with similar elevation. Even if they buy farther inland, climate change will still hang over their finances. Home-insurance premiums are soaring in South Florida towns that aren't beach-adjacent, too—the whole area is hurricane-prone. And the number of insurance nonrenewals is actually highest inland, where many lower-middle-class homeowners have had to drop policies they can no longer afford. The geography of real climate risk—which includes not just the effects of weather and disasters, but also the ability of communities to withstand them—looks roughly similar to the geographies of poverty and race.

The same holds true across the hottest, most volatile regions of America. In Houston, homeowners in minority communities damaged by Hurricane Harvey in 2017 were the least likely to receive

loans and federal grants for rebuilding. In Chicago, the inland American city with the greatest number of properties at substantial risk of flooding, communities of color have been immensely overrepresented among flood victims. In Alabama, which is now part of America's Tornado Alley because of the changing climate, the people least able to rebuild (and who live in shoddier homes that tend to sustain more damage) are likely to be poor and Black.

The climate itself does not discriminate; climate catastrophe will distress the middle class and inevitably sweep away even mansions in gated neighborhoods. But in the next 30 years, the people who will bear the brunt of that catastrophe—who will be dispossessed, uprooted, and exposed to the worst of the elements—will be those who are already on the other side of society's walls.

IN THE 1930s, rolling black dust storms blanketed America's Great Plains, uprooting topsoil and crops across 100 million acres of land. The clouds billowed as far east as New York, choking farm economies in the middle of the country and sending millions of people on the move. The black blizzards seemed to many like divine judgment; actually, they had their origins at least partly in human action. Years of deep plowing and overgrazing had eroded the earth, priming the Plains to become what we know now as the Dust Bowl.

As these storms darkened the prairies, farmers and laborers alike sought refuge. Many of them traveled hundreds of miles to California and other havens. Despite the passage of New Deal programs to aid these “Okies,” many did not receive a warm welcome in their new homes, because some saw them as interlopers competing for housing and jobs. In one ugly episode, Los Angeles Police Department Chief James Edgar Davis stationed more than 100 officers along the California border to enforce a “bum blockade” against migrants. California had made it a misdemeanor for any citizen to transport an “indigent” person into the state, a law that was later overturned by the Supreme Court. The Court's decision became part of the established basis for a right that

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many Americans take for granted—the ability to travel freely across state lines.

As Octavia Butler believed, America's past is a good place to start when trying to predict how climate change will reconfigure its society in the future. The country has already seen large, sudden movements of people driven by disaster and local changes in climate. These upheavals have always caused tensions, and those tensions have shaped the American social order in many ways.

Within the U.S. today, people are again moving because of disasters, and because of the slow-grind attrition of heat, flooding, and rising insurance rates. Earlier this year, the nonprofit Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre found that disasters had caused 11 million evacuations or relocations in the previous 12 months. These numbers will climb. Without interstate coordination and federal relief funding, workers and politicians in receiving zones may try to keep out newcomers—especially poor ones, arriving en masse on the heels of a particular disaster—as they did during the Dust Bowl.

In his forthcoming book, aptly titled *North*, Keenan anticipates a major climate migration—out of the South to cooler, less volatile climes—driven partly by disaster but also by a simple preference for milder weather. Over the past half century, one of the fundamentals of American life has been the steady relocation of people—and of the country's center of gravity—to the Sun Belt. Southern metropolises such as Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, Phoenix, and Charlotte expanded rapidly. But, according to Keenan, climate change has essentially stopped growth in southward movement, and northern cities are seeing fewer outflows and greater influxes of people.

Keenan's observation aligns with a recent study published by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, which found that for decades, hotter places tended to grow faster than colder ones. But from 2010 to 2020, that pattern ceased. And for elderly people, whose long-term comfort is a big part of the choice of destination, it had outright reversed.

In the next 30 years, climate disruptions won't make whole states unlivable,

and demographic shifts might not reach full exodus levels. But in America, small change is often deeply felt, and bit by bit, the American economy and culture will likely be transformed by climate attrition and the redistribution of people. Southern states will lose residents and dynamism. Bad weather and ruined infrastructure will sap productivity and leave behind thousands of acres of abandoned farmland after crop failures. Houston faces potentially extreme damage if struck by a Category 4 or 5 hurricane, and might struggle to rebuild without substantial federal aid. Even absent another disaster, New Orleans has been the fastest-shrinking major metro area in the country in recent years, as

more people have sought high ground or been priced out of the market by rising insurance rates. The populations of several cities and counties in California's fire country are shrinking, and domestic migration to Miami is now outpaced by people leaving (though international arrivals have so far kept the city's population from declining).

The worst climate disruptions will happen beyond U.S. borders, but they will put pressure on American society

Steps remain where a house once stood in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, 20 years after Hurricane Katrina. The community has never fully recovered.



nonetheless. Migration to the southern border, perhaps the most powerful current in American politics today, is already being driven partly by ecological collapses in Central American farm economies. International monitors expect these pressures to grow over the next several years. If the country's policy today is at all indicative, detention camps for immigrants will proliferate, often in climate dead zones, and the southern border will become even more militarized.

This would not be an America where the founding ideals hold much sway. The movement of people might even set states against one another. Tensions in receiving zones will—without strong, growing economies—create more opportunities for

demagoguery. In dead zones, the dearth of public services and the fading imprimatur of the state will naturally erode local participatory democracy.

All of this could create even better conditions than those today for the kind of transactional authoritarian government that Trump is trying to establish. Xenophobia and racism are already pillars of this movement, and they would be strengthened by mass migration. State and local leaders affected by disasters might supplicate themselves to the president in order to receive the patronage of disaster aid. A hurricane or megafire during election season might be a convenient excuse for federal intervention.

The emerging Trump doctrine views empathy as a weakness and public welfare

as a usurpation of the natural hierarchy. His authoritarianism is perfectly suited to an era of climate strife.

AT THE END of August, almost 20 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina, I drove across the Claiborne Avenue Bridge to New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward. The neighborhood was mostly obliterated in 2005, after the levees that were supposed to protect it failed. Today it is still in rough shape. Inhabited homes are sparsely distributed, and grassy lots fill many of the spaces where houses previously stood. There are few businesses to speak of. Before Katrina, 15,000 people lived here. Now that number is closer to 5,000. A casualty of what is often considered America's first great climate disaster, the Lower Ninth Ward also has an antecedent in Butler's work. In *Parable of the Sower*, a hurricane devastates the Gulf region, and most of its victims are poor folks "who don't hear the warnings until it's too late for their feet to take them to safety."

The Lower Ninth Ward was a harbinger of what climate change might do to our most vulnerable places. But it has also been a place of reverence for people who wish to fight climate change. At the TEP Center, a museum and community center there, I met former Vice President Al Gore, at ease in an oxford shirt and a magnificent pair of cowboy boots. He and the Climate Reality Project, the nonprofit he founded, were in the middle of a tour through Louisiana, holding listening sessions and dialogues with climate-justice advocates to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Katrina.

I was seeking assurances—any science I hadn't seen, any hope Gore had on hand—that the Earth might be able to avoid the worst of climate change, even with America now accelerating warming. I was not encouraged by the news that global temperatures last year had already risen above the 1.5-degree warming ceiling that the Paris Agreement had established as a goal in 2015, and looked to be staying above it this year. Gore has been the world's biggest cheerleader for that target. If there was a silver lining to be had, he would know what it was.



But Gore was more measured—or, as he called it, “textured”—in his assessment than I’d expected, at least initially. After all, he followed the data. “I am not willing to call it now and say, ‘No, we’ve crossed 1.5,’ because the scientists are not willing to say that now,” he told me, cautioning that the actual threshold uses an average calculated over several years, not just one or even two. “As a practical matter, we can see the writing on the wall. However, calling it would also have some consequences.”

Still, he said, even if that call is soon made, climate action will remain just as urgent. Each bit of global warming that is averted beyond that matters—1.6 is better than 1.7. And for what it’s worth, he told me, other countries do grasp that. “In focusing on what Trump and his gang are doing, I think we miss the changes that are under way in the rest of the world,” Gore said, “and in many places, it’s moving more quickly in the right direction.” If anything, the United States’ retreat from climate leadership has encouraged countries such as Brazil to provide it.

Possible futures may be narrowing, but they are narrowing from both directions: Globally, future emissions have already been slashed enough to make the worst-case scenarios projected a decade ago—4 or more degrees Celsius of warming by 2100—unlikely, even as the best case moves out of reach. And Gore believes that the now-obvious progression of climate change—the heat waves, floods, fires, and other disasters—is itself becoming a kind of asset in the fight to stop it. “Mother Nature is the most powerful advocate that has a voice on this matter,” he said. “And I do believe that she is winning the argument.”

Gore was buoyed by the grassroots energy that global climate activism has cultivated. “This has now become”—with relatively little fanfare—“the largest political movement in the history of the world,” he told me. And neither markets nor investors can afford to wholly deny the environmental physics in front of them. Even in the U.S., share prices for green energy continue to increase as renewables become cheaper—and as sustainability becomes less of a watchword and more of a meat-and-potatoes

consideration for businesses hoping to preserve future profits.

The previous day, Gore had spoken at a “climate revival” at a church in St. James Parish, in what’s known as “Cancer Alley,” a set of communities upriver from New Orleans that struggle not only with climate risks but also with a long legacy of industrial pollution and governmental neglect. The stories of many residents had stayed with him. “I think that the sacrifice zones—I hate to endorse that phrase by using it, but the people who live there often do,” Gore began. “I think they may, in political terms, represent a stone that the builder refused.” He was referring to the biblical passage about a cast-off object becoming the cornerstone of a new edifice, which later became a parable for the faith built on Christ’s resurrection.

It was the morsel of hope that I was perhaps most prepared to receive. Our country’s “sacrifice zones” are both illustrations of our hotter future and indictments of our democracy’s faults. They are perfect avatars for the kind of project that climate action now needs: one that links our climate to our freedom.

I AM PERSONALLY not optimistic about the chances of averting significant climatic chaos. America has shown that it has not absorbed the fundamental lessons that Katrina previewed 20 years ago. The first and worst effects of the climate crisis have so far been mostly in places that—like the Lower Ninth Ward—are not high on many policy makers’ priority lists. Because of that fact, it has always been difficult to prompt preemptive action to save everyone else.

All of that said, perhaps Trump, through his very extremity, has provided a galvanizing opportunity. In his reflexive culture-warrior rejection of climate change, he has backed into a climate policy of his own, and has linked that policy to his power. With his single-minded, bullying determination to reverse course on renewables—which are part of life now for many people of all political stripes—and to dismantle programs people rely on, Trump has essentially taken ownership of any future climate disruptions,

and has more firmly connected them to oil and gas. In advancing this climate-accelerationist policy alongside an anti-democratic agenda, he has sealed off fantasies of compromise and raised the political salience of dead zones, where devastation and exclusion go hand in hand. Trump’s intertwining of climate policy and authoritarianism may beget its own counter-movement: climate democracy.

Climate democracy would be aided by the gift of simplicity. At present, the only way to ensure that America avoids the future outlined here will be to win back power from its strongman leader, or possibly his successors. The places facing existential climate risks—especially those in the Deep South—are mostly in states that have long been considered politically uncompetitive, where neither

Al Gore during Climate Week in New York in September. The former vice president remains optimistic that the darkest futures can still be avoided.



party expends much effort or money to gain votes. But they could form a natural climate constituency, outside the normal partisan axis. Poor and middle-class white communities in coastal Alabama, Mexican American neighborhoods in Phoenix, and Black towns in the Mississippi Delta might soon come to regard climate catastrophe as the greatest risk they face, not by way of scientific persuasion, but by way of hard-earned experience. Some of them might form the cornerstone of a new movement.

With the right message, plenty of other people may be persuadable: those upset by higher electric bills, or poorer storm forecasts, or the coziness of Trump with the oil and gas industry, or weather-related disruptions in everyday life. To paraphrase Theodore Roosevelt, Americans learn best from catastrophe, and they will learn that the help they once took for granted after disasters might now be harder to come by. Autocracy takes time to solidify, and building popular support in opposition to it takes time as well. But in the reaction

needed to build climate democracy, perhaps heat is a catalyst.

I realized that, in visiting sites of catastrophe and upheaval, I'd also visited epicenters of climate democracy. In Altadena, Darlene Greene still did yeoman's work to support her struggling constituents, and—in the absence of help from above—residents became the leaders their community needed. In Miami, groups of homeowners and tenants were united in fighting climate gentrification, and in trying to keep their homes. In the Lower Ninth Ward, people from across the country who'd been moved to climate action by Katrina convened with Al Gore and strategized.

It isn't really a coincidence that these places, and the places where America's climate retreat will begin, roughly overlap with the geography of historic conflicts over civil rights and democracy. Where risk and disinvestment come together in America, democracy has always suffered. In many ways, crisis is revelatory, and we know that disasters expose cracks in

society. If there is a sliver of a chance of averting the scenarios I've laid out, it will have to come by the hands of a movement that finally repairs those cracks.

It is easiest, as I have done, to imagine those faults persisting and widening, in which case the worst conclusions about our future physical and political climates are likely to hold true. But the last of Octavia Butler's rules for predicting the future should also guide our imagination, and our hopes. She instructed students to "count on the surprises," and even when making grounded predictions to allow for the possibility of genuine inspiration and rupture. After all, Butler's own success—as a child of a Black family that moved West from Jim Crow Louisiana during the Great Migration—would have been considered very unlikely at the moment of her birth. None of the great movements that shaped this country was preordained. *A*

Vann R. Newkirk II is a senior editor at The Atlantic.



FICTION



We Are
Not One

By George
Packer

When it came into view, Doctor Rustin was struck by its size. The platform rose on six-by-six wooden posts at least 12 feet off the ground, with enough room up top for a small deck party, and the staircase from the sidewalk was a steeply pitched ladder. This gallows had been raised to last—built not only by children but for them, since few adults would have the agility and daring to reach the top. Its height and



solidity gave the sense of a play structure, the crossbar that loomed above the platform a climbing feature for the truly fearless, and the rope noose perfect for swinging and letting fly if only the gallows had been built over water.

A drop by the neck from 12 feet into midair would not be play. The designers of the Suicide Spot had been impressively serious. Rustin ran his hand over his own neck and forgot his mission.

About 30 people were gathered around the base, spilling from the sidewalk into the street. Most were teenagers skipping school, though there was a scattering of grown-ups and a couple of families with younger children. High up on the platform, two girls in yellowish-gray clothes stood on either side of a boy. He looked a year or two older than Rustin's daughter, Selva, with a wild thicket of hair and a tough face. He was tugging at the rope as if to test its strength, eyes narrowed, lower lip jutting out in a kind of defiance, while the two girls leaned close and spoke to him in voices so quiet that Rustin, keeping back and half concealed under the red awning of a tavern called the Sodden Spot, couldn't make them out.

But he knew they were Guardians—specially trained peers, there to help confused young people break free from life as they'd known it before the Emergency, in particular from their parents, and become unconflicted agents of Together. Mere weeks after the empire had collapsed, that word appeared on posters glued to the walls of public buildings and on banners strung from lampposts along the central avenues. What Together meant as a philosophy or program, Rustin wasn't sure, but as a passion, it had quickly spread among the city's Burghers, especially its youth, and created hairline fractures in his family. The Rustins were no longer the tight foursome that played word games at dinner. Selva no longer returned on the tram after school, but instead disappeared into the city, attending the daily gathering in the main square called We Are One, staying out for hours. This morning, Rustin—marooned at home since being exiled from the hospital in disgrace—had followed her through the streets until he lost her in the Market District.

In front of him a bickering couple, huddled under an umbrella—though it wasn't raining—made it even harder to hear what was happening on the gallows.

"You didn't have to come," the woman said. "I could have come by myself."

"You were afraid to. 'What if one of them really does it?'" the man said, mimicking her panic.

"I never said that."

"Shh!" Rustin hissed. The Suicide Spot belonged to the young, and he didn't want to be associated with the disrespect of the middle-aged.

The boy's shoulders rose and fell. He looked down to check the position of his feet over the trapdoor, then draped the noose around his neck. A murmur that sounded almost like satisfaction passed through the audience.

A Guardian placed her hand on the lever connected to the trapdoor. In a voice clear enough to carry over the crowd, she asked: "Do you want to leave this world?"

Rustin saw the boy's face tighten. His eyes twitched in rapid blinks, his lips disappeared as if cold fury were coursing through his body. Then his features crumpled and he exploded in tears. He sobbed openly, without shame, like a little child, his whole body shaking. Several times he tried to master himself, but he couldn't stop.

Keeping a hand on the lever, the Guardian reached with her other and touched the boy's heaving shoulder. "Hey—we're here with you. We're suffering with you. We love you."

The boy buried his face in his hands, and the thick nest of hair shook as if in a wind, and the sobs, though muffled, grew louder. Sighs of pity rose around the gallows.

"What do you want to say to your parents?" the other Guardian asked.

The boy looked up mid-sob, startled. "My—I—"

"If they were here, what would you say to them?"

He opened his mouth but no words came out, only a stuttering sob.

"This is pointless," the woman under the umbrella said.

"You were the one that wanted to come," the man said.

"Why don't you both leave?" Rustin asked. They turned around to glare, but their talking stopped.

"Mama!" the boy suddenly cried out. "I'm sorry!"

"You have nothing to apologize for," said the first Guardian, her hand still gripping the lever.

"Do it!" the boy wailed.

The Guardian didn't move.

"Talk to us," the other Guardian said.

"We don't want to lose you."

"Shut up and do it!"

"Talk to your parents. Why are you sorry? They should be sorry."

"Mama will be when I do it!"

The Guardian on the lever, who seemed to be leading the session, nodded.

"Oh, Mama will be sorry. But what about us? You're gone, and we needed you. Do you know what's on the other side of that door?"

The boy looked down at his feet. He shook his head.

"A great big empty hole. When you went through that door, the hole got bigger than you can imagine. That hole is bigger than this city."

The crowd drew in its breath as if the boy was already dangling broken-necked from the noose.

Rustin tried to imagine this girl and boy talking in someone's bedroom, which was where teenagers used to have difficult conversations. Talking face-to-face in private was supposed to allow you to open up, but maybe it wasn't true. Maybe it was easier to say everything like this, with a crowd at your feet and a rope around your neck.

"Please just do it," the boy said in a voice strained from sobbing, but softer, losing conviction.

"And we were about to try something that has never happened before," the Guardian went on. "We were going to make a new city! Make ourselves new, too! We were young and dumb enough to think we could do it. How can we now without you?"

The boy murmured something Rustin couldn't hear.

"And what about your Better Human? All that work you did. What's going to happen to him now that you're gone?"

The woman under the umbrella tugged at the man's coat sleeve. "What did she say? Better what?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Rustin didn't understand either.

The Guardian went on talking while the boy listened. He began to nod, and after a few more minutes he lifted the noose off his neck. She let go of the lever, and the crowd broke out in cheers and applause, as if its team had scored a winning goal. Startled, the boy looked down at his new fans. No adolescent defiance or child's anguish was visible on his face now. Wide-eyed, grinning, he climbed down the ladder like a boy who never in his life had expected to win first prize.

The ground was undulating under Rustin's feet, the tavern awning about to collapse on his head, the gallows the only fixed thing in sight. He had seen enough.

As he turned to go, a girl began to mount the scaffold. She wore the same clothes as the Guardians, with a bag slung over her shoulder and goggles dangling from her neck.

Found you! was his first thought, and then: *She's going to replace a Guardian. That's how it works—short shifts.* He watched his daughter come out onto the platform. She took her place between the two girls and planted her feet apart. Then, with the same decisiveness he'd seen from the moment she left the house, Selva reached for the noose and draped it over her head.

His stomach dropped as the trapdoor opened beneath him, plunging him into a void of air. *No!* He must have said it aloud, because the couple under the umbrella turned around: "Shh!" His neck was tingling, his knees barely held him upright.

"Do you want to leave this world?" the Guardian asked.

No! This time a silent cry. He would run to catch her legs before the rope went taut, but she would be just out of reach, her head listing forward in the choke hold of the noose.

"Possibly," Selva said.

"What do you want to say to your—"

"Listen, Papa," Selva said before the Guardian could finish. "The other night you asked why I'm angry."

She was speaking in her debate voice—quick, strong, a little tremulous with

effort. He knew that she had carefully prepared what she was going to say, and from his hiding place under the awning, he was listening. He had never listened so closely to anyone.

"As usual, I didn't think of an answer fast enough. Well, here's my answer, Papa: because you never believed the world could be better or worse than the one you gave me. And that breaks my heart."

A rumble of approval from the crowd.

"Oh, this one's good," the woman under the umbrella said to the man.

That's my girl up there, Rustin wanted to tell her. *Our pride and joy.* It had been a favorite phrase of his, until Pan came

*Talking face-to-face
in private was
supposed to allow
you to open up, but
maybe it wasn't true.
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to say everything
like this, with a
crowd at your feet
and a rope around
your neck.*

along and Annabelle asked him to stop using it, but sometimes he couldn't help himself, because even Selva with the noose around her neck was exactly that. Those eyes! Their intelligence shone all the way from the gallows. And didn't she have a point? Even here at the Suicide Spot he couldn't imagine any life for his daughter other than the one that had always awaited her under the empire.

"The world was worse than you ever knew, Papa. Remember the exams?"

He would never forget them. Every year in May the whole empire came to a stop for three days while 14-year-old Burgher kids sat for their comprehensive exams. In

the city by the river the authorities raised banners across buildings and lampposts to proclaim pride in their children and wish them luck. The rituals were ancient, unchanged since Rustin had sat for his. The night before, Annabelle had made the traditional meal of baked rabbit, asparagus, and custard. Rustin drilled Selva one last time on complex equations and imperial history. Pan touched his sister's forehead with a sprig of rosemary, and the family held hands around the table and solemnly recited the Prayer for Wisdom and Success: "If it cannot be me, then let it not be me. But let it be me."

The next morning, Burgher parents—oblivious to the fighting that had broken out in the capital—had lined the walkways and cheered as their children filed into schools with pencils and notebooks and tense faces, some bravely managing a smile, others rigid with fear. A few of Rustin's colleagues were on hand in their professional capacity in case a child fainted. As Selva walked past her parents, she kept her eyes fixed straight ahead. "Look at her," Rustin whispered to Annabelle. "She's going to murder it."

"I had to place in the top 5 percent," Selva went on from the gallows. "Not just to qualify for provincials and have a shot at the Imperial Medical College. But for you to still love me."

Someone in the crowd loudly booed.

Selva, no! Not true!

"I didn't look at you, because I was afraid I'd see it in your eyes. Being your daughter, I did what I had to."

As always, the results had been announced in the main square two days after the last exam, with practically the entire city in attendance. It was a gorgeous spring day, dry and fragrant, lilac and chestnut trees coming into bloom. One of the old councilors mounted a temporary stage erected in the middle of the square, next to the statue of a historic Burgher that stood on a pedestal surrounded by a gushing granite fountain, and for an hour he read from a long scroll of paper, while the children who had taken the exams lined up at the foot of the stage facing out toward the crowd. When they heard their name called, they stepped forward and shouted, "Here for city and empire!"

The names were read out in order from first rank to last. The family of Selva Rustin did not have long to wait. Out of 179 children, she was third.

“You beat your papa and your grandpa,” Rustin had said that night over the most expensive bottle of wine he owned. “What a day for the Rustins.” On their coat of arms, in the quadrant with the caduceus, next to his own initials he carved SR, welcoming his daughter into the family guild. She was set for life. And as he stood now in the shadow of the gallows, he thought: *We sat around the kitchen table and sang our favorite songs. You pretended Zeus was your patient. Was that world so bad?*

“The next day, the boy who sat beside me in class wasn’t there,” Selva continued. “We all knew why. He was down around 170.”

Everyone in the square had been keeping a rough count as the councilor approached the bottom of the list. Burghers with no family interest in the results were there just to see who had fallen into the bottom 10 percent—that was a bigger

draw than honoring the top 5 percent, who would sit the following month for the provincial round. Even if you lost track of the count, the cutoff point became clear as soon as the shouts of “Here for city and empire!” started to come out weak and choked. A few children didn’t even answer when their names were called.

“Iver was an Excess Burgher.”

Everyone knew what future lay in store for the bottom 10 percent. They, too, were set for life. No prohibition had been announced, but they would never be allowed to join a guild. They would finish the school year and then look for work. The lucky ones would find a job in one of the markets, or learn a trade in the Warehouse District, or, with the right family connections, go to work for the city as a street sweeper or trash collector. Some of the girls were hired as servants in the homes of higher-status Burghers, though Rustin refused on principle to consider it. A few sank into the underworld of prostitution.

But the great majority of Excess Burghers would end up like the ones who drank and fought all night at the Sodden Spot, lay around the main square asleep at midday, and spent most of their shortened adulthood in the city prison. Rustin’s next-door neighbor thought they should be sent directly from school to compulsory work gangs. Some disappeared from the city and were swallowed up in the Yeoman hinterland. Most Burghers considered it more respectable, more in the natural order of things, to be a Yeoman than an Excess Burgher.

When Rustin was a boy, there had been no such people as Excess Burghers. Every child in the city was admitted into a guild—of course, some at lower status than others. But around the time he was studying at the Imperial Medical College, he’d heard that children who had not done well on their exams were leaving school and falling out of view. No ordinance was passed that declared the bottom 5 percent of Burgher children (later raised to 10) superfluous, but this was the beginning of a long period of economic contraction throughout the empire, and competition for a dwindling supply of guild positions became intense. That was when the practice began of parents withholding food

from children who performed badly on their pre-exams as an incentive to study harder. (Rustin personally thought this was taking things too far, though he kept the opinion to himself.) The first accounts of cheating and payoffs during exam week surfaced—a blow to the belief in fairness on which the whole system of guilds depended. Excess Burghers became a fixture of imperial life, the answer to a chronic social problem, the unfortunate result of simple arithmetic.

“Do you remember what you said that night?” The tremble in Selva’s voice was thickening; she was coming to her purpose. “I told you about Iver, and you said—”

That’s just the way it has to be, Sel. She had come home from school troubled, and he’d wanted to comfort her. He hadn’t wanted poor Iver’s fate to take away from her magnificent achievement. She hadn’t replied, but a cloud had passed over her face.

“That’s just—the way—it has—to be.” Selva raised her chin, causing the length of rope above the noose to go slightly slack. She closed her eyes and shook her head and stamped her foot on the platform just as if she’d reached the end of endurance during one of their arguments that had escalated far beyond his wishes. When she opened her eyes, they pierced his chest. “Why?” she cried. “Why was that just the way it had to be? Why in the world did you ever think that was just the way it had to be?”

More approval from her audience, shouts of “Why? Why?”

“Here’s what you should have said, Papa: ‘I’m sorry, sweetheart, but our whole life is a stinking pile of shit, that’s how it is, we live on it, we eat it, we fuck on it, we’ll be buried in it, but I love you so let’s not talk about it anymore.’”

The shouting grew wild. Even the two Guardians were shouting—they had become part of Selva’s audience. Her color rose and her throat quivered inside the noose and her lips tightened in expectation of a response that he wasn’t there to give. He felt as if he were letting her down by not standing beside her on the platform to receive the full force of her indignation, to coax out the last glimmer of her brilliance. One word of his and she’d finish him off, cut him to pieces. He was witnessing

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one of the greatest moments of her life, as great as that morning in the main square. *That's my girl*, he thought again—but also: *It wasn't just me! Everyone believed it. In the old days beggars were drawn and quartered in that square. It sounds terrible now, but four months ago Excess Burghers were normal. You'd be surprised what people can get used to.*

"If you'd said that, it would have helped me. But you didn't have the courage." Selva dropped her chin and lowered her voice. "So I kept going. I started cramming for provincials. My dream was to reach the imperial round. Instead, we had an Emergency."

A cheer rose, half-heartedly—they weren't sure where she was headed.

"That was the end of exams. To be honest, it felt like the end of me. I actually, literally, didn't know who I was. Without the next round, why get up in the morning?" She gave a hollow laugh. "Then Together came, with the six principles. Suddenly people seemed happier, they started talking louder and laughing, even with strangers. The rules of Good Development came from the empire, from on high, but Together was our own creation. I thought: *Okay, I'll do that. I'll join a self-org committee—even Iver's in one. I'll be the best damn Together girl in the city.*"

Someone laughed too loud. Rustin knew from the tremolo in Selva's voice that things were going wrong.

"Except Together wasn't about that—it was the opposite of that. 'I am no better and neither are you'—that's the second principle!" Selva brought her hands to her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut as if a massive headache had just come on. "So here I am. I don't have the right thoughts, I keep thinking things I don't want to think, they go around and around and I can't make them stop. I can't stop being your girl!"

The woman punched the air with her umbrella. "Oh my God, she's great!"

The Guardians spoke to Selva as they'd spoken to the boy, telling her what it



would mean to leave the world, reminding her to think of her Better Human, but none of it worked, her silence was too strong for them. She stood there in the grip of unuttered answers that would have defeated their philosophy, and her father knew that she was struggling with the decision. But before she reached it, the Guardian released the lever and the

second Guardian embraced Selva. She removed the noose from her own neck and descended the ladder into a swarm of cheers with failure in her eyes. *A*

George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic. This excerpt was adapted from his novel The Emergency.

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