Today's Issues this Sunday 8/9/2020

The Today's Issues discussion group is meeting Sunday mornings at 9:30 in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the church, following social distancing guidelines. This Sunday we will discuss two essays from the August 20 issue of the New York Review of Books:

Page 8, Bill McKibben, "130 Degrees," a review of Mark Lyman's book **Our Final Warning: Six Degrees of Climate Emergency.** The essay is completely sympathetic to Lyman's argument as probably most of our church members are. However, if you want to look at a skeptical account, I can recommend Calum Chase's review in Forbes of **False Alarm: How Climate Change Panic Costs Us Trillions, Hurts the Poor, and Fails to Fix the Planet** By Bjorn Lomborg. For a critical review of Lomborg, you might read Joseph Stiglitz's NY Times Review

Page 32, Joseph O'Neill, "Save the Party, Save the World," a review of E.J. Dionne's book **Politics is for Power: How to Move Beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action and Make Real Change.**

Both essays are attached to this mailing.

130 Degrees
Bill McKibbenAUGUST 20, 2020 ISSUE
Our Final Warning: Six Degrees of Climate Emergency
by Mark Lynas
London: 4th Estate, 372 pp., $27.99

Illustration by Anders Nilsen
So now we have some sense of what it's like: a full-on global-scale crisis, one that disrupts everything. Normal life—shopping for food, holding a wedding, going to work, seeing your parents—shifts dramatically. The world feels different, with every assumption about safety and predictability upended. Will you have a job? Will you die? Will you ever ride a subway again, or take a plane? It's unlike anything we've ever seen.

The upheaval that has been caused by Covid-19 is also very much a harbinger of global warming. Because humans have fundamentally altered the physical workings of planet Earth, this is going to be a century of crises, many of them more dangerous than what we're living through now. The main question is whether we'll be able to hold the rise in temperature to a point where we can, at great expense and suffering, deal with those crises coherently, or whether they will overwhelm the coping abilities of our civilization. The latter is a distinct possibility, as Mark Lynas's new book, Our Final Warning, makes painfully clear.

Lynas is a British journalist and activist, and in 2007, in the run-up to the Copenhagen climate conference, he published a book titled Six Degrees: Our Future on a Hotter Planet. His new volume echoes that earlier work, which was by no means cheerful. But because scientists have

spent the last decade dramatically increasing understanding of the Earth's systems, and because our societies wasted that decade by pouring ever more carbon into the atmosphere, this book—impeccably sourced and careful to hew to the wide body of published research—is far, far darker. As Lynas says in his opening sentences, he had long assumed that we "could probably survive climate change. Now I am not so sure."

The nations that use fossil fuel in large quantities have raised the temperature of the planet one degree Celsius (that's about 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit) above its level before the Industrial Revolution. We passed the mark around 2015, which was coincidentally also the year we reached the first real global accords on climate action, in Paris. A rise of one degree doesn't sound like an extraordinary change, but it is: each second, the carbon and methane we've emitted trap heat equivalent to the explosion of three Hiroshima-sized bombs. The carbon dioxide sensors erected in 1959 on the shoulder of the Mauna Loa volcano in Hawaii recorded a new record high in late May of this year, showing an atmosphere of about 417 parts per million CO2, more than a hundred above the levels our great-great-grandparents would have known, and indeed higher than anything in at least the last three million years.

As we drive and heat and light and build, we put about 35 billion tons of CO2 into the atmosphere annually. At the moment oceans and forests soak up slightly more than half of that, but as we shall see, that grace is not to be depended on into the future, and in any event it means we still add about 18 billion tons annually to the air. That is by far the most important bottom line for the planet's future.

A survey of the damage done at one degree is impressive and unsettling, especially since in almost every case it exceeds what scientists would have predicted thirty years ago. (Scientists, it turns out, are by nature cautious.) Lynas offers a planetary tour of the current carnage, ranging from Greenland (where melt rates are already at the level once predicted for 2070); to the world's forests (across the planet, fire season has increased in duration by a fifth); to urban areas in Asia and the Middle East, which in the last few summers have seen the highest reliably recorded temperatures on Earth, approaching 54 degrees Celsius, or 130 degrees Fahrenheit. It is a one-degree world that has seen a girdle of bleached coral across the tropics—a 90 percent collapse in reproductive success along the Great Barrier Reef, the planet's largest living structure—and the appalling scenes from Australia in December, as thousands of people waded into the ocean at resort towns to escape the firestorms barreling down from the hills.

Consider what we've seen so far as a baseline: we're definitely not going to get any cooler. But now consider the real problem, the news that scientists have been trying to get across for many years but that has not really sunk in with the public or with political leaders. As Lynas puts it:

If we stay on the current business-as-usual trajectory, we could see two degrees as soon as the early 2030s, three degrees around mid-century, and four degrees by 2075 or so. If we're unlucky with positive feedbacks…from thawing permafrost in the Arctic or collapsing tropical rainforests, then we could be in for five or even six degrees by century's end.

That's a paragraph worth reading again. It's an aggressive reading of the available science (research published in early July estimates we could cross the 1.5-degree threshold by 2025), but it's not outlandish. And it implies an unimaginable future. Two degrees will not be twice as bad as one, or three degrees three times as bad. The damage is certain to increase exponentially, not linearly, because the Earth will move past grave tipping points as we slide up this thermometer.

You may be thinking: Didn't the world leaders who signed the Paris climate accords commit to holding temperature increases to "well below" two degrees Celsius, and as close as possible to 1.5 degrees? They did—in the preamble to the agreement. But then they appended their actual pledges, country by country. When scientists added up all those promises—to cut emissions, to build renewable energy, to save forests—and fed them into a computer, it spit out the news that we are headed for about a 3.5-degree rise this century. And not enough countries are keeping the promises they made in Paris—indeed, our country, which has produced far more carbon than any other over the last two centuries, has withdrawn from the accords entirely, led by a president who has pronounced climate change a hoax. The En-ROADS online simulator, developed by Climate Interactive, a nonprofit think tank, predicts that at this point we can expect a 4.1-degree rise in temperature this century—7.4 degrees Fahrenheit. All of which is to say that, unless we get to work on a scale few nations are currently planning, Lynas's careful degree-by-degree delineation is a straight-on forecast for our future. It's also a tour of hell.

We might as well take that tour systematically, as Lynas does.

At two degrees' elevated temperature, "scientists are now confident" that we will see an Arctic Ocean free of ice in the summer—when already the loss of ice in the North has dramatically altered weather systems, apparently weakening the jet stream and stalling weather patterns in North America and elsewhere. A two-degree rise in temperature could see 40 percent of the permafrost region melt away, which in turn would release massive amounts of methane and carbon, which would whisk us nearer to three degrees. But we're getting ahead of the story. Two degrees likely also initiates the "irreversible loss of the West Antarctic ice sheet." Even modest estimates of the resulting sea-level rise project that 79 million people will be displaced, and protecting vulnerable cities and towns just along the Eastern Seaboard of the US behind dikes and walls will cost as much as $1 million per person. "I suspect no one will want to pay for sea walls at such vast expense, and the most vulnerable (and the poorest) communities will simply be abandoned," Lynas writes.

Researchers once hoped that modest warming of two degrees might actually slightly increase food production, but "now these rosy expectations look dangerously naïve." He cites recent studies predicting that two degrees will reduce "global food availability" by about 99 calories a day—again, obviously, the pain will not be equally or fairly shared. Cities will grow steadily hotter: current warming means everyone in the Northern Hemisphere is effectively moving southward at about 12.5 miles a year. That's half a millimeter a second, which is actually easy

to see with the naked eye: “a slow-moving giant conveyor belt” transporting us “deeper and deeper towards the sub-tropics at the same speed as the second hand on a small wristwatch.”

But that statistical average masks extremes: we can expect ever-fiercer heatwaves, so, for instance, in China hundreds of millions of people will deal with temperatures they’ve never encountered before. The natural world will suffer dramatically—99 percent of coral reefs are likely to die, reducing one of the most fascinating (and productive) corners of creation to “flattened, algae-covered rubble.”

As we head past two degrees and into the realm of three, “we will stress our civilization towards the point of collapse.” A three-degree rise in temperature takes us to a level of global heat no human has ever experienced—you have to wind time back at least to the Pleistocene, three million years ago, before the Ice Ages. In his last volume, Lynas said scientists thought the onset of the collapse of the West Antarctic ice sheet would take place at four degrees; now, as we’ve seen above, it seems a deadly concern at two, and a certainty at three. Higher sea levels mean that storm surges like those that marked Superstorm Sandy in 2012 could be expected, on average, three times a year. The record-setting heatwaves of 2019 “will be considered an unusually cool summer in the three-degree world”; over a billion people would live in zones of the planet “where it becomes impossible to safely work outside artificially cooled environments, even in the shade.” The Amazon dies back, permafrost collapses. Change feeds on itself: at three degrees the albedo, or reflectivity, of the planet is grossly altered, with white ice that bounces sunshine back out to space replaced by blue ocean or brown land that absorbs those rays, amplifying the process.

And then comes four degrees:

Humans as a species are not facing extinction—not yet anyway. But advanced industrial civilisation, with its constantly increasing levels of material consumption, energy use and living standards—the system that we call modernity…is tottering.

In places like Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Arkansas, peak temperatures each year will be hotter than the 120s one now finds in Death Valley, and three quarters of the globe’s population will be “exposed to deadly heat more than 20 days per year.” In New York, the number will be fifty days; in Jakarta, 365. A “belt of uninhabitability” will run through the Middle East, most of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and eastern China; expanding deserts will consume whole countries “from Iraq to Botswana.”

Depending on the study, the risk of “very large fires” in the western US rises between 100 and 600 percent; the risk of flooding in India rises twenty-fold. Right now the risk that the biggest grain-growing regions will have simultaneous crop failures due to drought is “virtually zero,” but at four degrees “this probability rises to 86%.” Vast “marine heatwaves” will scour the oceans: “One study projects that in a four-degree world sea temperatures will be above the thermal tolerance threshold of 100% of species in many tropical marine ecoregions.” The extinctions on

land and sea will certainly be the worst since the end of the Cretaceous, 65 million years ago, when an asteroid helped bring the age of the dinosaurs to an end. “The difference,” Lynas notes, “is that this time the ‘meteor’ was visible decades in advance, but we simply turned away as it loomed ever larger in the sky.”

I’m not going to bother much with Lynas’s descriptions of what happens at five degrees or six. It’s not that they’re not plausible—they are, especially if humanity never gets its act together and shifts course. It’s that they’re pornographic. If we get anywhere near these levels, the living will truly envy the dead: this is a world where people are trying to crowd into Patagonia or perhaps the South Island of New Zealand, a world where massive monsoons wash away soil down to the rock, where the oceans turn anoxic, or completely deprived of oxygen. Forget the Cretaceous and the asteroids—at six degrees we’re approaching the kind of damage associated with the end of the Permian, the greatest biological cataclysm in the planet’s history, when 90 percent of species disappeared. Does that seem hyperbolic? At the moment our cars and factories are increasing the planet’s CO2 concentration roughly ten times faster than the giant Siberian volcanoes that drove that long-ago disaster.

With the climate crisis, returning to “normal” is not a feasible goal—no one is going to produce a vaccine.* But that doesn’t mean we have no possibilities. In fact, right now we have more options than at any previous point in the climate fight, but we would need to use them at dramatic scale and with dramatic speed.

For one thing, engineers have done their work and done it well. About a decade ago the price of renewable energy began to plummet, and that decline keeps accelerating. The price per kilowatt hour of solar power has fallen 82 percent since 2010—this spring in the sunny deserts of Dubai the winning bid for what will be the world’s largest solar array came in at not much more than a penny. The price of wind power has fallen nearly as dramatically. Now batteries are whooshing down the same curve. In many places, within a few years, it will actually be cheaper to build new solar arrays than it will be to keep running already-built-and-paid-for gas and coal-fired power plants. (That’s because, when the sun comes up in the morning, it delivers the power for free.) Because of this, and because of strong campaigns from activists targeting banks and asset managers, investors have begun to move decisively toward renewable energy. Such activist campaigns have also begun to weaken the political power of the fossil fuel industry, which has used its clout for three decades to block a transition to new forms of energy.

But—and this is the terrible sticking point—economics itself won’t move us nearly fast enough. Inertia is a powerful force—inertia, and the need to abandon trillions of dollars of “stranded assets.” That is, vast reserves of oil and gas that currently underpin the value of companies (and of countries that act like companies—think Saudi Arabia) would need to be left in the ground; infrastructure like pipelines and powerplants would need to be shuttered long before their useful life is over. This process would probably create more jobs than it eliminated (fossil fuel tends to be capital-intensive, and renewable energy labor-intensive), but political systems respond more to current jobholders than to their potential replacements. The poorest nations

should not be expected to pay as much as rich nations for the transition: they're already dealing with the staggering cost of rising sea levels and melting glaciers, which they did very little to cause. So even absent leaders like Donald Trump, the required effort is enormous—that's precisely why those pledges by the signatories in Paris fell so far short of the targets they'd set. And leaders like Trump not only exist, they seem to be multiplying: Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro can singlehandedly rewrite the climate math simply by continuing to encourage Amazonian deforestation. It will take a mighty and ongoing movement to speed up change.

What Lynas's book should perhaps have made slightly more explicit is how little margin we have to accomplish these tasks. In a coda, he writes valiantly, "It is not too late, and in fact it never will be too late. Just as 1.5°C is better than 2°C, so 2°C is better than 2.5°C, 3°C is better than 3.5°C and so on. We should never give up." This is inarguable, at least emotionally. It's just that, as the studies he cites makes clear, if we go to two degrees, that will cause feedbacks that take us automatically higher. At a certain point, it will be too late. The first of these deadlines might be 2030—the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in 2018, told us we needed a "fundamental transformation" of energy systems by that date or the targets set in Paris would slip through our grasp. (By "fundamental transformation," it meant a 50 percent fall in emissions.) That is, the period in which we retain the most leverage to really affect the outcome may be measured in years that correspond to the digits on your two hands.

The Covid pandemic has provided us with some way to gauge how important time is in a crisis. South Korea and the US reported their first casualties on the same day in January. And then the American government wasted February as the president dithered and tweeted; now Seoul has something closer to normalcy, and we have something closer to chaos. (In a single day in July, the state of Florida reported more cases than South Korea had registered since the start of the pandemic.) As the US wasted February spinning its wheels on the pandemic, so the planet has wasted thirty years. Speed matters, now more than ever. And of course the remarkable progress made by the Black Lives Matter protests this summer reminds us both that activism can be successful and that environmental efforts need to be strongly linked to other campaigns for social justice. The climate plan announced by the Biden campaign last month is a credible start toward the necessary effort.

The pandemic provides some useful sense of scale—some sense of how much we're going to have to change to meet the climate challenge. We ended business as usual for a time this spring, pretty much across the planet—changed our lifestyles far more than we'd imagined possible. We stopped flying, stopped commuting, stopped many factories. The bottom line was that emissions fell, but not by as much as you might expect: by many calculations little more than 10 or 15 percent. What that seems to indicate is that most of the momentum destroying our Earth is hardwired into the systems that run it. Only by attacking those systems—ripping out the fossil-fueled guts and replacing them with renewable energy, even as we make them far more efficient—can we push emissions down to where we stand a chance. Not, as Lynas sadly makes clear, a chance at stopping global warming. A chance at surviving.

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Some have called for “geoengineering” solutions to global warming—techniques like spraying sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere in an attempt to block incoming sunshine, which would do nothing to slow the other dire crisis caused by the burst of carbon we’ve sent into the air, the acidification of the ocean, and might well wreak new forms of havoc with the planet’s weather. Such methods are rightly described by Lynas as at best a Faustian bargain: “The planet we would bring into being would not be the earth I want to live on.

Save the Party, Save the World
Joseph O’NeillAUGUST 20, 2020 ISSUE
Code Red: How Progressives and Moderates Can Unite to Save Our Country
by E.J. Dionne Jr.
St. Martin’s, 262 pp., $27.99
Politics Is for Power: How to Move Beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action, and Make Real Change
by Eitan Hersh
Scribner, 275 pp., $27.00; $17.00 (paper)
Joe Biden
Joe Biden; illustration by Ellie Foreman-Peck
Somewhat unexpectedly, ensuring the success of the Democratic Party has become the most important political project in the world. The United States remains the world’s largest economy and superpower, and its constructive international leadership is essential if the climate crisis and other world-historical dangers are to be overcome. This can happen only if Democrats dominate the national government for the best part of the next ten years or so. Republicans cannot be trusted with meaningful power precisely because they form one of the world-historical dangers that must be overcome. Noam Chomsky has accurately described the contemporary Republican Party as “the most dangerous organization in human history.”

The politics that this state of affairs calls for—working to make certain that one party defeats another throughout a series of legitimate elections, in order to avert catastrophe—is a novel one. Canonical political theory doesn’t engage with the scenario. Neither does customary political practice. Even reliably partisan voters don’t feel obligated to be partisan. They reserve the right to calibrate their support for a party in accordance with private criteria that could be trivial or morally serious. It’s a free world, right? But acting in accordance with private criteria, however virtuously, begins to feel absurd at a time when global heating has ripped open the “climatic envelope” that Homo sapiens has occupied for the last six thousand years.1 As for elected officials, their outlook is largely determined by the everyday demands of constituents and donors, by institutional maneuvering, and by personal careerism. Democrats are no exception. They didn’t go into politics thinking of themselves as emergency custodians of the biosphere or as firefighters combating the arson of American democracy. They too find themselves with philosophies and wish lists and time frames that have lost their currency.

Our political situation, then, makes an unfamiliar and potentially repugnant demand on us, namely that we quickly develop a loyalty to the Democratic Party as such. To a degree, this is already happening. The 2018 “Blue Wave” midterms produced an extraordinary partisan grassroots mobilization for a wide variety of candidates. Two years later, Angela Davis and Bill Kristol, whose political views couldn’t be more different, both support the presidential candidacy of Joe Biden. But transpartisan electoral alliances, however useful in the short term, are obviously insufficient to enable the Democratic Party to edge out the Republican Party for the next decade. Much of today’s political energy on the left is not profoundly Democratic or pro-Biden, and it’s not even profoundly anti-Republican. It’s a very narrow negative partisanship—support that is significantly motivated and energized by antipathy against one figure, Donald Trump. What happens to that energy when Trump goes? How will the Democratic Party fare without it?

The long-held approach of the Democratic establishment won’t solve this problem. That approach—to minimize interparty differences in the hope of winning over politically disengaged voters, to crawl upward one step at a time while the escalator is moving downward—has enabled the GOP to win most elections for the last twenty-two years. It is self-evidently unfit for the strategic purpose of gaining and exercising long-term power. Recent events have made a return to Democratic government-by-stasis unthinkable. The Black Lives Matter protests and the disastrous Republican response to the coronavirus crisis have budged even the famously stick-in-the-mud Biden into recognizing that a new politics is necessary. If, as seems likely, he wins in November, his administration and its supporters will need a new, broadly acceptable partisan ideology in order to win a series of subsequent elections.

Two clarifications are called for. “Partisan” does not connote gratuitous animosity against one’s political opponents. It refers to embracing a party, and a party identity, as the prime means of advancing a political agenda. It involves identifying the opposing party (rather than its supporters or even its leading figures) as your stated adversary, and waging a perpetual campaign of negative partisanship against that adversary. When the Conservatives in the United Kingdom under Margaret Thatcher and John Major retained power from 1979 to 1997, they consistently characterized the rival Labour Party—which for most of that period was ably led by Neil Kinnock and then John Smith—as unfit for power. Republicans have explicitly bashed Democrats for years, with some success. In a two-horse race, it helps to hobble the other horse.

Second, “ideology,” in this sense, isn’t exhausted by the concept of a policy agenda. But if Democrats want to win elections repeatedly, they must enact policies that are both effective and popular with Democrats. The emphasis refers to an insight that for years has been mislaid by the left but not by the right: an American political party can’t consistently win elections, midterm and state-level races in particular, without the sustained and vigorous grassroots participation of its base. What about swing voters? They don’t vote much in midterms, and in this polarized era have shrunk to such small numbers that their influence on national elections is much

diminished. Swing voters will support you if the big outcomes—jobs and the economy, in particular—are favorable and if your branding strategy (positive and negative) is strong. Base turnout, though, won't happen unless the grassroots identifies strongly with the party, is united by a common purpose, and is determined to win. What can be done to make this a reality?

E.J. Dionne Jr.'s Code Red addresses this question. Dionne, a columnist at The Washington Post and the author of numerous books about American politics, is an astute and sympathetic observer of the Democratic Party. He has seen a lot, and he is worried about the feuding between the various factions of the American anti-right. The conflict between the center-left and the farther-left has been submerged by the pandemic and its economic fallout, by mass demonstrations for racial justice, and by ever more extreme Republican autocratic actions, but Dionne is right to be concerned. The worry isn't so much about disharmony per se, because there will always be healthy squabbling inside the Big Tent. The worry is that deep internal differences could pose great risks for any project whose goal is durable power exercised effectively.

Dionne's foundational assertion is important: the present moment offers an "opportunity we dare not miss" for progressives and moderates (these are Dionne's terms) to jointly create "a movement that can and should be the driving force in our politics long after Trump is gone." Referring to the spectacular exploits of the Democratic grassroots in the 2018 midterms, he writes:

These newly engaged citizens have created an opportunity to build a broad alliance for practical and visionary government as promising as any since the Great Depression gave Franklin Roosevelt the chance to build the New Deal coalition.

A coalition of this kind isn't fanciful, Dionne argues. The entire liberal-left spectrum is outraged by the Trump presidency and, more deeply, is "appalled by the extremes to which economic policy has been pushed by a radical, deregulatory, anti-tax right." Furthermore, the political intuitions of Americans have propitiously changed:

The "common sense" of politics…was redefined in the Reagan era as a belief in the supremacy of markets and the futility of government action. Now, our common sense, while still skeptical of government's competence (after the Trump years, who could not be?), is deeply troubled by economic concentration, the power of corporations, the growth of monopoly power, and the unfairness of the distribution of wealth and income.

That point has only been fortified by the events of this cataclysmic year. With certain exceptions—Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, refuses to raise taxes on billionaires in New York State, even in the pandemic economy—American "common sense" has continued to move away from Republican givens. The justness of the Black Lives Matter cause is suddenly the subject of broad consensus. The Supreme Court has predictably undermined immigrant rights and the separation of church and state, but it has surprisingly adjudicated in favor of

protections for LGBTQ workers and Dreamers and abortion rights. Democratic primaries have produced unlikely insurgent victories over well-funded favorites of the national or local party establishment (Jamaal Bowman's over Congressman Eliot Engel of New York, to take a recent example).

Only cranks dispute the need for strong government action in the realms of public health and economic recovery. If you factor in the broad goodwill likely to be bestowed on a Biden administration that restores legality, competence, and decency to American government, a transformative application of Democratic power becomes more plausible than ever. Of late, Biden himself has been encouraging such expectations. On July 5 he tweeted, "We're going to beat Donald Trump. And when we do, we won't just rebuild this nation—we'll transform it."

Dionne recalls that Democrats were once capable of doing big stuff, quickly:

The years between 1963 and 1966 saw the most extraordinary outpouring of liberal legislation since the New Deal…. Until the 1966 midterm elections put an end to lopsided Democratic majorities in Congress and strengthened conservative voices in the congressional GOP, an era of consensus enabled a large and confident majority to embrace national action expanding opportunities and alleviating needless suffering. The Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, Medicare, Medicaid, federal aid to education, new environmental laws, Head Start, the Job Corps, immigration reform—these are among the achievements of [the] period.

How do we get there again? "At the risk of sounding like a perhaps unwelcome counselor attempting to ease a family quarrel," Dionne stages an intervention that tactfully surveys the viewpoints of the mutually infuriating quarrelers. This is of course a slippery undertaking. Big Tent politics encompasses class politics, movements of recognition and representation, moderation and radicalism, socialism and neoliberalism, cults of personality, boldly structural and incremental theories of change, good ideas and terrible ones. Dionne is at pains to not take sides—or, rather, to acknowledge the discrete merits of all sides. But his bottom line, it's fair to say, is that moderates must accept that their conservative assumptions have been overtaken by events, and that the Democratic policy terrain has been mostly staked out by progressives. Progressives, for their part, must see that their efforts have been astonishingly effective, and move forward in a spirit of alliance and, if necessary, "visionary gradualism." (Dionne likes this phrase, which he credits to the theorist and activist Michael Harrington, who founded the Democratic Socialists of America.)

The general tilt leftward is embodied by Biden's apparent metamorphosis from restorationist centrist to agent of change awake to the new political landscape. His campaign website, "Joe's Vision for America," sets out a platform that is conspicuously more progressive, both in its rhetoric and in its practical proposals, than those of Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton. It states, for example, that "the Green New Deal is a crucial framework for meeting the climate challenges we face" and proposes a "Clean Energy Revolution" that will ensure "a 100% clean energy economy and net-zero carbon emissions no later than 2050." Bernie Sanders, in his primary

campaign, promised “100 percent renewable energy for electricity and transportation by no later than 2030 and complete decarbonization of the economy by 2050 at latest.” Similar convergences occur in other policy fields, with health care being perhaps the most significant exception. But even there, the so-called Biden Plan, which focuses on making the Affordable Care Act a lot more practical for low-income families, offers “all Americans…a public health insurance option like Medicare.” While falling short of Medicare for All, this last measure would inarguably represent a historic progressive lurch—and as recently as 2009 would have been viewed, Dionne suggests, quoting his fellow Post writer Paul Waldman, as “radically leftist.”

Biden’s choice of a running mate will reveal a lot about his intentions. In a column published on June 14, Dionne wrote:

Former vice president Joe Biden and Democrats in Congress have an obligation to turn the shock of moral recognition from [George] Floyd’s murder into a movement for a new community.

Precisely because Biden is widely seen as a traditional figure of restoration, he has been given a historic opportunity to argue that restoration demands change.

The implication is that Dionne is not yet fully persuaded by Biden’s new credentials. Nor could anyone be until a Biden administration, backed by a Democratic Congress, exercises power as progressively and aggressively as circumstances (for example, control of the Senate) permit. Biden’s career has largely coincided with the moral, intellectual, and electoral capitulation of the Democratic Party to the GOP. Like his contemporaries Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, he has been programmed to not use power in a way that will anger Republicans or upset bankers or frighten the horses in an imaginary Middle America. It’s a generation of decent but passive people who find it difficult to grasp that their job is to enact meaningful policies that Democrats like and Republicans don’t like. Power corrupts, but so too does powerlessness.

Nor are younger generations immune from the trauma of political failure. The cohort aged between thirty and forty was shocked into a strangely helpless political sentience by the September 11 attacks and the fraudulent war of aggression fought by the Republican administration against Iraq. Even as this cohort recognizes the immense civic and representational value of Barack Obama’s presidency, it has little experience of the Democratic Party implementing a Democratic agenda. It has watched with dismay as its concerns—the climate crisis, wealth inequality, fair access to education and housing and health care and meaningful work, racial injustice, the corporate capture of government—have been warily, technocratically, and finally ineffectually handled by Democratic authorities.

Contrary to myth, this hasn’t led to an outbreak of Millennial self-pity and lassitude. It has led to a transformation of political participation. Vital Democratic causes have been advanced not by the party but by activism, in which Millennials and Generation Z have played a crucial part. Brave young protesters have confronted racial injustice and police misconduct; high school

students from Parkland, Florida, have assumed leadership on the issue of gun control; the Me Too movement has confronted sexual harassment; responsibility for climate progress has been taken on by groups such as the youth-led Sunrise Movement. Even the party's core function—getting Democrats elected—has been most effectively managed by people outside the party organs. The 2018 midterm triumphs were driven by organizing start-ups such as Indivisible, Swing Left, Flippable, and Run for Something. New talent has been forced onto the party by grassroots primary campaigns waged in support of Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Mondaire Jones, Marie Newman, and others.

The result has been partisan disassociation and distrust that only worsens in the case of the youngest voters. Among registered voters, Democrats over the age of thirty-five overwhelmingly view Biden favorably, but of those aged eighteen to thirty-four, 41 percent view him unfavorably or are unsure what to make of him. Dionne presents a valid analysis of liberal divisions by reference to a left–right spectrum, but viewing them as a matter of generational divides illuminates something important about the perils facing the Democratic Party. The youngest want to move forward, fast; the oldest, gripping the wheel, are thinking about parking.

Dionne's central proposal is designed to meet this challenge. In order to strengthen partisanship across varied standpoints, he argues, Democrats require a moral claim to power that is fresh, clear, and collectively shared. "The galvanizing idea," he says, "should be dignity":

A politics of dignity can bring progressives and moderates together and also begin to close the deep social divides that have distorted our politics and torn our country asunder. Opening the way to a new spirit of solidarity requires something else as well: An honest reckoning with the urgency of overcoming the injuries of race and gender but also with those of class.

"Dignity" refers to the enlightened idea that all persons are inherently valuable and worthy of respect. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." At the moment, dignity figures only peripherally in American liberal-left discourse, but as Dionne points out, Democrats from Biden to Ocasio-Cortez to Senator Sherrod Brown make regular use of the concept in their public remarks. They do so because dignity synthesizes issues of justice and recognition, tax and economic policy, family values, environmental policy, even statehood for the District of Columbia. It also links struggles associated with working-class white Americans to struggles associated with American minorities. If unifying the Big Tent requires finding a generalizable, unsullied, and instantly useful focal theme, the principle of dignity is as actionable and inspiring as any.

But will, or can, ordinary leftists and liberals embrace it? Do they have the wherewithal—the stern stuff of ambition, the will to power—to adopt a new vocabulary and find common cause? Making an argument that is partly polemical and partly scholarly, the political scientist and Tufts professor Eitan Hersh casts doubt on this possibility. In Politics Is for Power, he argues that much of the uproar occasioned by the Trump presidency is mere political hobbyism.

Political hobbyists are people who devote significant time to keeping up with political dramas but almost no time “on any kind of real political work. It’s all TV news and podcasts and radio shows and social media and cheering and booing and complaining to friends and family.” Reading about political hobbyism is, of course, itself a sign that you are politically hobbyistic:

More likely than not, if you are reading this, this book is about you. It’s about me, too.

Political hobbyism is found in all circles, but it’s mainly a problem for people who are well educated and on the political center or left…. They will follow the news, join an email list, make an occasional financial contribution, or attend a one-off rally, but they will shy away from deeper organizational engagement.

Hobbyists satisfy “our own emotional needs and intellectual curiosities” rather than “seeking to influence our communities or country.” Hersh believes that political hobbyism turns politics into a circus and politicians into seals performing for their base: “Hobbyism is a serious threat to democracy because it is taking well-meaning citizens away from pursuing power. The power vacuum will be filled.”

Hobbyism implicates almost everyone, but it is more prevalent in men, who are also less likely than women to combine hobbyism with activism. “Independents are prone to hobbyism because activism does not fit well with the above-the-fray self-image that they want to curate.” Partisans are also implicated, as is partisanship itself: “Rooting for the team,” Hersh believes, undermines “commitment to the truth” and promotes counterproductive hostility toward the people on the other team. Watching The Rachel Maddow Show; leaving comments on news websites and Twitter and Facebook; phoning your congressperson with demands; signing online petitions; indulging in superfluous “knowledge acquisition” (like Paul Manafort’s prison identification number or Paul Ryan’s workout routine): all are instances of treating politics as a pastime or an entertainment. Even activity that gets you out of the house—joining a protest, say, or attending a fundraising event—is, in Hersh’s view, liable to be shallow and ultimately self-serving.

The real deal, Hersh suggests, is activity that has a “serious purpose.” To explain what he means, he offers studies of a series of exemplary activists who include liberal organizers working long-term in Westmoreland, Pennsylvania, a very red county; a student organizer in North Carolina; an introverted New Yorker who practices “deep canvassing” (the goal of which is to have a profound and truly influential encounter with the canvassee); and a Ukrainian-American elder whose communal ties have given him enormous political influence in Boston. The most successful activism, we learn, involves making lasting, socially meaningful connections in the community. If you show people the Democratic Party cares about them, they may begin to vote for Democrats.

That is clearly and indispensably right. But it doesn’t mean that hobbyism is a mischief that must be cured—if, indeed, it is curable. While it’s certainly the case that most supporters could

contribute more efficiently to the Democratic cause, there's no evidence (as Hersh himself acknowledges) that if they stopped obsessing about Justin Trudeau's hair and gave up tweeting niche takes, they would turn to long-term voluntary work to heal polarized communities. And although so-called political hobbyists and slacktivists may not be civic paragons, over the last three years their small-dollar (and large-dollar) donations, not to mention their street protests and their inescapable electronic hubbub, have plainly succeeded in transferring a lot of power from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party—and indeed from Democratic officialdom to grassroots activists. What looks like an epidemic of political hobbyism to one person is another person's idea of mass political engagement.

And while Hersh's basic idea—that politics should be about pursuing power and not about "putting feelings ahead of strategy"—is valid, he yokes it to a second, befuddling idea, namely that the proper purpose of left-liberal power is to make tradeoffs with interests on the right, and that this purpose has been frustrated by the capture of Democratic officials by donors and other litmus-test hobbyists:

In the halls of Congress and on the campaign trail, politicians behave badly, even act against their own side's policy goals and long-term political interests, because the people who pay the most attention to them demand that they behave like stubborn, outraged children.

This is befuddling because bipartisan norms have been strategically sabotaged only by the GOP. There are simply no Democrats who correspond to clownish but destructive Republicans like Devin Nunes, Louie Gohmert, Clarence Thomas, or Trump. The political endgame Hersh has in mind—empowering the likes of Schumer and Pelosi to make the best bargains they can with GOP counterparts—refers to a political system that stopped functioning at least a decade ago and cannot be unilaterally resurrected by Democrats. And as Dionne points out, "radicalized and deformed Republicanism…will long outlive the Trump presidency." The denial of this reality is precisely what has undermined the credibility of the Democratic Party's most senior officials. It's as if they've forgotten that politics means working for their power, not the GOP's.

The problem with political hobbyism isn't that it's too partisan. The problem is that it's not partisan enough. It is in the nature of mass culture to focus on personalities rather than structures. A huge amount of outrage is trained on Trump and his supporting cast of arch-villains (William Barr, Mitch McConnell, Jim Jordan, et al.). The attributes of prominent Democratic figures are likewise subjected to magnified but personalized scrutiny. Political issues that are charismatic—essentially, those that involve violence or sex or antisocial or hateful behavior—generate a lot of excitement, but the excitement is confined to those specific issues. If your goal, as a Democrat, is to create a successful partisan movement, this distribution of emotion and eyeballs is not ideal. You want millions of political hobbyists directing their power in support of the Democratic Party and against the Republican Party.

Hersh tells a highly instructive personal story. In 2016 he approached his local Democratic Party organization in Brookline, Massachusetts, and offered to do year-round community outreach on

behalf of the party. He was met with a “hard no.” The local Democratic committee focused exclusively on mobilizing voters shortly before state elections. Hersh persisted, offering to help raise turnout for municipal elections. Again, he drew a blank. Hersh writes:

For the Democrats to get their vote out even when their candidates are weak but the stakes are high, such as in that 2010 special election [when Senator Ted Kennedy’s seat was won by a Republican, denying Democrats a Senate supermajority], communities such as Brookline need robust, long-term party engagement. That’s what they lack in communities all around the state and country.

This is absolutely correct. But note that the difficulty Hersh ran into wasn’t political hobbyism. It was the inadequacy of the local Democratic Party—specifically, its refusal to confer agency on a volunteer itching to show ordinary constituents that the party cared about their concerns. This is a structural problem. A flurry of studies have shown that this kind of grassroots neglect has been devastating to Democratic electoral performance. You see a lot of discussion, especially on the left, about the need to implement policies that effect structural change. What’s often overlooked is that the two American parties are themselves structures, with extraordinary power. Change them and you change a lot.

All that Democrats can do to change the GOP is to defeat it. Reduce it to electoral rubble and force it to rebuild itself as a party that is basically competent and doesn’t pose a threat to organic and democratic life on Earth. But how do you change the Democratic Party into a partisan movement that is capable of inflicting such a defeat?

The difficulty, as Dionne and Hersh are well aware, is that an ideology of partisanship isn’t something you can exhort into existence. In order for Democrats to cohere around the principles of dignity and grassroots power—the two are closely related, if you think about it—commitment in the abstract won’t be enough. It must be embodied by party relations, structures, and deeds. Specifically, it requires appropriate action by the three main stakeholders: the Democratic Party apparatus, in particular the DNC; Democratic elected officials; and, finally, the (potential) supporters of the party who are ordinary civilians. Of these stakeholders, the institutional ones have the most immediate agency—the power to generate partisan coherence by action. It’s pretty clear what they must do: gain the trust and loyalty of the younger, more progressive cohort; keep the trust of the more centrist party faithful; and make swing voters trust Democrats more than they trust Republicans. The following steps must be taken.

First, embrace the principle of dignity as a central partisan theme. That will help unify and energize the party through this campaign season and provide a powerful and protective narrative for future partisan action.

Second, appoint figures trusted by the left to senior positions in the Biden administration and in the party organization. The progressive (younger) wing of the party is almost completely without representation in the congressional and DNC leaderships. That is a scandal, and must be fixed

right away. The Biden-Sanders Unity Task Forces (entrusted with producing policy recommendations in a variety of areas) are a very good step in this direction.

Third, the Biden administration and its allies in Congress must take the strongest legislative and executive action possible to do what Democrats, younger ones in particular, want them to do. A Green New Deal—with a substantial jobs component, not a pro forma one—will be crucial. Taxing the rich a lot more will be essential, as will a historic leap forward in health care. Doing stuff that Democrats like will be much more powerful in creating partisan loyalty than saying stuff that Democrats like.

Fourth, substantiate the narrative of dignity by reforming the police and ICE, fixing voter suppression, and fast-tracking immigration reform. Such measures are supported by the majority of Americans and are urgently awaited by party loyalists of color. A narrative of dignity—which is also applicable to the economically progressive measures outlined above—will enable a wide range of liberals to support these measures.

Fifth, enact reforms that will correct the dangerous electoral advantages enjoyed by the GOP. Statehood for D.C. is a no-brainer, as is restoring the reach of the Voting Rights Act. Scrap the Senate filibuster rule if need be. Criminalize intentional voter disenfranchisement. Expand the Supreme Court as necessary.

Sixth, start thinking about the 2022 midterms on day one. Because midterms and special elections are won by base turnout, Democrats must internally rebrand their party as the party of grassroots organizers. That entails more than a PR campaign. It will require funding, empowering, and privileging grassroots organizations, and putting the DNC apparatus at their disposal. Primary challenges should not be discouraged. Factional disputes should be viewed as good-faith differences of opinion—unless they undermine the shared partisan purpose and the mutual respect that an ethos of dignity requires.

Finally, stoke negative partisanship. Americans—whether they're swing voters or party activists—must go to the polls in 2022 and 2024 with a strong (and valid) fear of letting the GOP back into power. Thus, always be negatively branding the GOP in the eyes of swing, or persuadable, voters. Exactly what approach to take in a branding operation is a complex question, but suffice it to say that it must be undertaken, and that the master narrative is: The Republican Party can no longer be trusted with power. Repeat this at every opportunity, then verify this narrative by investigating and bringing to light all Republican misdeeds. Brand them as Republican Party misdeeds, not as aberrant Trumpist corruption.2

Call the disastrous Republican economy that Biden will inherit "the disastrous Republican economy." Call the Republican pandemic crisis "the Republican pandemic crisis." Always be trumpeting the success of your initiatives, always be talking about the danger of letting Republicans back into power. On no account repeat the mistakes of 2008–2010, when Democrats apologized for the Affordable Care Act and took ownership of the Republican

financial crisis. If Democrats comport themselves like the natural party of government, they will be perceived as such and win more elections.

Biden will be crucial in all of this. He has spent fifty years accumulating bipartisan political capital. He is broadly viewed as an exemplar of personal honor. If he responds to this moment of historic need and opportunity, there could be no more credible messenger of the demise of the GOP nor a more reassuring leader in an era of transformative and partisan legislative action. It will be challenging, of course. Many of the steps outlined above will not be possible without having both the Senate and House under Democratic control—but then again, many will be. The challenges can be overcome—but only if Democrats, from the president to the hobbyists, start thinking and acting as partisans.

1
See Chi Xu et al., “Future of the Human Climate Niche,” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, May 26, 2020. ↩

2
See my “Brand New Dems?” in these pages, May 28, 2020. ↩