For this Sunday, August 30, 2020, the Today's Issues will discuss two essays that are available online.

From the New York Review daily: Ruth Ben-Giat, "Co-opt & Corrupt: How Trump Bent and Broke the GOP"
From TheAtlantic.com, Emma Green, "Can the Religious Left Flip the Bible Belt?"

Both essays are available online (click on the titles) and for your convenience I am attaching a printable pdf copy. We will also talk about the Democratic and Republican conventions.

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings, following social distancing guidelines. Please read the essays and join our lively discussion.

Co-opt & Corrupt: How Trump Bent and Broke the GOP
Ruth Ben-Ghiat

Alex Wong/Getty Images
President Donald Trump, applauded by Vice President Mike Pence and Attorney General Jeff Sessions, attending the Peace Officers' Memorial Service at the Capitol, Washington, D.C., May 15, 2018
"As time went on, it became clear that the sickness was a feature, that anyone who entered the building became a little sick themselves," wrote the journalist Olivia Nuzzi in March 2018 of the Donald J. Trump White House and those who serve it. For a century, those who have worked closely with authoritarian rulers have shown the symptoms of this malady: a compulsion to praise the head of state and a willingness to sacrifice one's own ideals, principles, and dignity to remain in his good graces, at the center of power.

In his relationship with Republican political elites, as in other areas of endeavor, President Trump has followed the model of "personalist rule" used by leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Some of these rulers destroy democracy, and others, like the Italian politician Silvio Berlusconi, govern nominally open societies in undemocratic ways. Yet personalist rule always concentrates power in one individual whose own political and financial interests and private relationships with other despots often prevail over national interests in shaping domestic and foreign policy. Loyalty to this head of state and his allies, rather than expertise, is a primary qualification for

serving him, whether as ministers or bureaucrats, as is participation in his corruption schemes.

While some authoritarians have political parties of their own creation at their disposal, Trump had no ready-made vehicle for his political ambitions before 2016. He had to win over the Grand Old Party to gain credibility and access to its machine and gain the collaboration of its elites. “Co-optation” is the term political scientists use for the way authoritarians bind individuals and groups to them through buy-offs or intimidation. It can also be considered a form of corruption, given the ethical compromises and changes in personal and professional practices that cooperating with amoral individuals entails.

The journeys that high-level enablers like Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and Senator Lindsey Graham have taken at Trump’s side since 2016 have different motivations. Some saw Trump as a means to accomplish their own goals, which had been blocked during the Obama years. That might mean promoting white Christian hegemony, for example, or securing the judicial appointments that would cement their conservative remaking of America. But collectively, they have contributed to the consolidation of an authoritarian political climate in today’s America, marked by fealty to a personalist ruler who holds his senior associates in thrall through complicity and intimidation.

The Republican Party, and the robust media universe that supports it, had been ready for a far-right, rule-breaking, and polarizing personality like Trump. A 2012 assessment by the political scientists Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann captures the crucial elements of an illiberal move that had, by 2016, primed Republicans to accept Trump’s candidacy:

The GOP has become an insurgent outlier in American politics. It is ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.

This retreat from bipartisan governance is why Trump’s open intention to be president of only some Americans (chiefly, his white base) was not a deal-breaker for the GOP during the campaign—despite its being a decisive break with the strategy of greater inclusion that the Republican National Committee, chaired by Reince Priebus, had adopted after its 2012 election defeat. Nor were Trump’s many actions that promised a decidedly antidemocratic future for America: the retweets of neo-Nazi

memes, the dark allusions to having his political opponent, Hillary Clinton, locked up or even hints that she should be shot, and much more.

Still, the aspiring president needed access and credibility from establishment figures like former Senator Jeff Sessions, who joined the ranks of history's first-hour enablers—along with Priebus, Trump's first White House chief of staff. These individuals back the extremist when he most needs it—and are often later discarded. Sessions, in particular, is the perfect case history of this phenomenon.

"I have a man who is respected by everybody here… I'm becoming mainstream," crowed Trump, as he introduced Sessions as a surprise guest at a February 2016 event. No matter that just weeks before, Trump had boasted about being able to "shoot somebody" in full view on Fifth Avenue in New York and still keep his followers—with hindsight, shorthand for saying that, if elected, he would consider himself above the law. Sessions beamed and dutifully donned the red MAGA hat handed to him as he left the stage. A year later, he resigned from the Senate position he'd held for twenty years to take up the position of attorney general in Trump's administration that was the reward for his loyalty.

Trump also needed people who would lie for him and keep his secrets. Corruption is a process, as well as a set of practices. It involves gradual changes in ethical and behavioral norms that make actions that were once considered illegal or immoral seem acceptable—whether election fraud, lying to the public, treasonous conduct, or sexual assault. The discarding of accountability as an ideal of governance makes keeping the fundamental pact of personalist rule—staying silent about the leader's incompetence and illegal actions—a lot easier.

Paul Ryan, then speaker of the House, and Kevin McCarthy, then House majority leader, set the tone in this respect. "There's two people I think Putin pays: Rohrabacher and Trump," McCarthy commented in a private meeting of Republican congressional leaders and senior advisers in June 2016 (besides the party's then-presumptive presidential nominee, McCarthy was referring to the pro-Russian California Republican who subsequently lost his House seat in 2018). Ryan shut down the conversation immediately, swearing all present to secrecy about the "Russia question"—the original sin of the Trump presidency. A month later, Trump was awarded the GOP nomination.

When word of this exchange leaked, a year later, McCarthy would claim it was a "failed attempt at humor." But tragedy, not comedy, is the only genre that describes all that has followed as the Trump administration has gone to lengths extraordinary in a

mature democracy (but normal in an autocracy) to keep its secrets. The successive purges—FBI director James Comey, US attorneys, government scientists, senior diplomats, inspectors general—the targeting of American intelligence and the press, the attempt to manipulate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, which led to Trump's impeachment in 2019… all of it was made possible by the careful enforcement of a covenant of loyalty and silence taken by the GOP leadership. McCarthy, saddled with the burden of his former frankness, became the perfect obedient House minority leader, charged with "making the president happy"—including by voting almost 98 percent of the time in line with Trump's wishes.

Trump's acquittal on impeachment charges by the Senate in February 2020, following a trial in which no witnesses were heard who might give damaging evidence, was another stark example of the GOP's complete subordination to the needs of a personalist ruler. Fear of running afoul of Trump motivated the near-unanimous Republican vote (Mitt Romney was the sole exception). Senator McConnell, a man with "no ideology except his own political power," as his biographer John David Dyche puts it, stage-managed the non-trial to safeguard Trump's presidency, a cause he has made his own from the beginning.

From the era of interwar fascism onward, one principle of authoritarian–elite collaborations holds true: once those close to power sign on to protect the leader, they tend to stick with him until the bitter end. Even the June 2020 revelation that Trump knew Putin had been putting a bounty on American soldiers in Afghanistan and said nothing—the ultimate betrayal by a commander in chief, and a treason unthinkable under any prior Republican (or Democratic) administration—did not move the dial, even with Senator Graham, whose political brand was once a hard-core patriotism and hawkishness toward Russia.

Graham's conversion from fervent Trump critic to fanatical Trump defender has puzzled many. Seen from the perspective of authoritarian history, though, Graham is no anomaly. He fits the profile of the individual who has led a life of seeming rectitude and now experiences the thrill of partnering with an amoral individual. "Is there no bottom?" legions complain on Twitter, citing the president's latest lies, incitements to violence, and flattering comments about murderous autocrats. It is precisely this absence of a bottom that draws many to leaders like Trump, who think big, make the unthinkable possible, and are open about their desire to exercise power without limits or restraints. Breaking the rules, and getting away with it, is at the center of the ethos of macho lawlessness that underpins strongman rule.

Politicians like Graham need only contemplate the fate of their former peer, Jeff Sessions, to know what happens if they break ranks. During his confirmation hearings for attorney general, Sessions behaved in conformity with the omertà around Trump's illegal actions, swearing under oath that he had had no contacts with Russian officials during the 2016 campaign. After the news subsequently broke that he had, in fact, met twice with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak, contradicting his congressional testimony, Sessions recused himself from the Department of Justice's investigation into Russian interference with the election.

Sessions continued in office but had to endure months of Trump's repeated ridiculing of him, including calling him a "dumb Southerner." By the time Sessions handed in his resignation, in late 2018, Trump had already scouted out a more suitable co-conspirator. He found one in William Barr, a man whom Trump pointedly calls "my attorney general."

Then forced to run for the Senate seat he'd held for so many years, Sessions entered the most delicate phase of the authoritarian leader–follower drama: the quest for forgiveness and a return to grace. "Out of the 100 United State [sic] Senators I was the very first one to stand with @realDonaldTrump and I will keep fighting for him and his agenda," Sessions tweeted in November 2019. To a strongman, though, such a display of weakness only warranted further humiliation. Trump loudly endorsed Sessions's opponent, former Auburn University football coach Tommy Tuberville.

The feud continued, and in May 2020, after Sessions issued a statement concerning his recusal, saying that "I do not and will not break the law," Trump dealt Sessions a death blow by tweet: "Alabama, do not trust Jeff Sessions. He let our Country down." "Perhaps you've forgotten… I did my duty & you're damn fortunate I did. It protected the rule of law & resulted in your exoneration," Sessions responded sourly, in a series of tweets, forgetting that feeling grateful to others is alien to leaders like Trump. On July 14, Sessions lost the primary, effectively ending, so far as can be foreseen, his political career.

"Congress no longer operates as an independent branch of government, but as an appendage of the executive branch," the moderate Republican and former House representative Tom Davis told The New York Times in January 2020. Four years after Trump won the Republican nomination, the GOP has become a personalist ruler's dream: a party solely dedicated to defending and promoting the leader, no matter what he says and does. No price, even the mass death of Americans from the president's willful mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic, seems too high to pay to keep the pact

of silence about the leader's criminality and unfitness for office that maintains him in power.

With the authoritarian's personal needs and desires setting the tone for political life, it is all too tempting to focus all blame on him. And that is routinely what happens when such rulers inevitably exit office. Yet, as the former Republican strategist Stuart Stevens asserts in his new book, It Was All a Lie: How the Republican Party Became Donald Trump, it would be a mistake to conclude that Trump had somehow simply hijacked the GOP. The Republican Party had already become a laboratory for American autocracy, a vehicle for power combining a base of white supremacists and gun-rights extremists with leaders like McConnell who had long approved of subverting voting rights and other democratic procedures to maintain their privileges and authority.

The GOP was already becoming "Trumpian" even before Trump himself appeared to complete its self-destruction as a democratic party. Enticing and intimidating individuals into becoming their worst selves as willing collaborators is what authoritarians do best. On this count, Trump has succeeded magnificently.

August 12, 2020, 7:00 am

Anger over Donald Trump's leadership has created an opening for progressives to flip formerly solid-red states such as Georgia—and reclaim the identity of so-called values voters.

EMMA GREEN
7:00 AM ET

ATLANTA—In late July, Democratic political giants filed into the towering sanctuary of Ebenezer Baptist Church to mourn the death of an era, and to declare a new one to come. This is the church where Martin Luther King Jr. once preached, and where Representative John Lewis, the civil-rights icon, was now being laid to rest.

Lewis's pastor, Raphael Warnock, stood before the congregation in a black pulpit robe with Kente-cloth panels and lamented the cynicism of this time in American politics. "In a moment when there are some in high office who are much better at division than vision, who cannot lead us so they seek to divide us," he said, "here lies a true American patriot." As former President Barack Obama took the lectern, he turned to Warnock, locked eyes, and pointed.

This was not just a funeral for Lewis and the civil-rights movement. It was a rally for a different America, one where health-care coverage is universal, police officers are traded for social workers, and bail has gone the way of the horse and buggy. Democrats intend for November's elections to be the first step toward building that America.

Warnock wants to help Democrats remake the country. The pastor is hoping his association with King and other civil-rights leaders will come in handy during his campaign for one of Georgia's two United States Senate seats on the ballot in November. Polling experts consider Warnock's race competitive, and if he wins, he could be the first Democratic senator elected from Georgia in two decades, and the first Black senator from Georgia ever. His pitch, modeled after his close ally Stacey Abrams's 2018 gubernatorial bid, is based on math, motivation, and morality. Georgia's voter base has transformed in recent years, with a surge in registrations among young people and racial minorities. Democrats are betting on high turnout, driven by anger about racist violence, outrage over Trump, and frustration with how the state has handled COVID-19. And Warnock's supporters believe his identity as a progressive pastor and activist will help him win in Georgia, a state where three-quarters of the population attend religious services at least somewhat regularly.

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EVE L. EWING

Transforming a pastor into a politician can be complicated, however. On a Sunday afternoon a few weeks ago, I drove down to Georgia and met Warnock on the patio of a bougie cafe not far from his church. It had been more than a dozen weeks since he last preached for a crowd at a regular service in Ebenezer's sanctuary. "It would be a shame if the pastor got used to not going to church on Sunday," he told me, laughing. Even away from the pulpit, he sported the formal look of a stylish celebrity preacher: a well-pressed suit in 80-degree weather; rimless glasses that were one click short of "Silicon Valley executive." Purple-striped socks peeked out from his trousers as he settled in for conversation, crossing his legs at the knee and sipping glass-bottled Coca-Cola from a Styrofoam cup. Before taking MLK's former pulpit, Warnock had spent his life in the civil-rights leader's shadow: His mentor, Lawrence Edward Carter Sr., is the chief steward of King's legacy at Morehouse College, and the reverend who ordained Warnock served under King. As a favored son of Atlanta's elite, who carefully cultivate the mythology around MLK, Warnock is adept at invoking King to make the most broadly appealing version of his pitch."What we're really talking about is a renaissance of the Kingian tradition, which is really bigger than the left or the right, and red and blue," he said. "It's a deep human-rights tradition that is … informed by Christian tradition, but is not limited to it." A fundamental part of Warnock's worldview, like King's, is that the gospel should inform politics, and politics are essential to the work of the church.

Read: The whitewashing of King's assassination

But Warnock, like MLK, is more complex than ad-ready mantras. Progressive religious leaders such as Warnock have long hoped to see their vision of justice explicitly reflected in politics, looking back nostalgically on 19th-century abolitionism and the civil-rights movement as moments of cultural victory. In the years since King assembled a coalition of clergy to protest segregation, however, the left has failed to build a religion-based political machine that can truly oppose the religious right—movements such as Moral Mondays, the weekly protests at the North Carolina legislature led by the Reverend William Barber, are important, but do not match the might of their conservative counterparts. To some extent, this is because the Democratic Party is too religiously diverse and too secular to base its policy prescriptions primarily on religion. But it's also because the Kingian tradition Warnock admires is radical and activist, calling for a massive overhaul of the economic, racial, and social structures that make American society so unequal. Most Americans in King's time, and especially white Americans, were not ready to embrace such a vision.

Americans who seek a more racially just society have to not only “engage in protests where that’s effective,” but also “translate our passion and our causes into laws,” Obama told mourners at Lewis’s funeral. In recent months, white people have been willing to protest. They have eagerly held signs and declared “Black lives matter.” But it’s not yet clear whether white voters—especially in places such as Georgia—will bring their solidarity to the ballot box, and whether Americans’ protests against existing policies will lead to changes in who makes those policies.

It helps warnock’s case that he understands how to cloak the radical nature of his message in the words of the original Christian radical. “I’m an activist preacher,” he told me. “I’m a Matthew 25 Christian, where Jesus says, ‘I was hungry, and you fed me. I was naked, and you gave me clothes. I was in prison, I was sick, and you visited me. When, Lord, were you hungry? When were you sick? When were you in prison? When were you naked?’” Warnock began riffing, adding in people with HIV/AIDS, immigrants, and the homeless. “The gospel text says, ‘Inasmuch as you’ve done unto the least of these, you’ve done unto me.’” His policy priorities are similarly progressive: He opposes all abortion restrictions, talks frequently about the importance of living wages for workers, and calls the death penalty “the last fail-safe for white supremacy.” In our conversation, he condemned one of his opponents, Representative Doug Collins, on his votes to repeal or limit the Affordable Care Act during his time in Congress. In the Book of Luke, Jesus “says that he came to preach good news to the poor, and to set the captives free,” Warnock said. “I don’t see how I could lift up that gospel on Sunday, and then fight to get rid of health care in the richest country in the world in the middle of a global pandemic on the floor of the United States Senate.”

For all this talk of tending the tired and the poor, Warnock also has a knack for ending up near the action in big, national stories. He invited Obama to speak at Ebenezer in the early days of his 2008 presidential campaign, and later defended the rhetoric of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama’s former pastor, when Wright declared “God damn America!” A few years ago, Warnock got arrested at the Georgia capitol when the governor refused to expand Medicaid under the ACA. He has turned the incident into a campaign one-liner: “Next time I’m escorted by Capitol Police,” he likes to say and tweet, “it will be to my new office as U.S. senator.”

Read: King wanted more than just desegregation

Running for Senate as a Democrat in Georgia is hard enough. In the midst of a pandemic, it can seem impossible. Warnock is campaigning while pastoring a

6,000-person congregation that has suffered a number of coronavirus deaths, and also taking care of his two small children, who are 1 and 4. “I literally am talking to Elizabeth Warren one minute, and changing Caleb’s poopy diaper the next,” he told me. A first-time candidate for elective office, he has been stuck recording sermons about racial justice in an empty sanctuary and doing meet-and-greet events over Zoom. It’s impossible to witness firsthand whether Warnock can whip up enthusiasm at rallies or ably work the food lines at summer fairs, but other signs of his support have emerged. This summer, after Kelly Loeffler, one of Warnock’s opponents and a co-owner of the WNBA team the Atlanta Dream, criticized the league’s involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement, players protested by wearing shirts that said vote warnock.

Multiple Democrats and Republicans are competing in November’s open special-election race, and unless one candidate wins an outright majority, it will go to a runoff in January. Although Warnock is by far the best-funded Democrat, with endorsements from 31 U.S. senators, the national Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and almost all of Georgia’s Democratic state legislators, he still faces a Democratic challenge from Matt Lieberman, the son of the former vice-presidential candidate Joe Lieberman. The younger Lieberman typically polls a few percentage points behind Warnock. (The Georgia NAACP recently called for Lieberman to drop out over a self-published novel about a man who owns an imaginary slave.) If Warnock makes it to the January runoff, his campaign will face another challenge: holding voter interest well after America knows who its next president will be. The race could decide which party controls the Senate in 2021: Democrats need to pick up only a handful of seats to retake control of the chamber.

The two competitive Republicans in the race are Loeffler, who was appointed to the seat when Johnny Isakson stepped down in 2019 for health reasons, and Collins, a Republican pastor from one of the most conservative congressional districts in the country. Two clergymen running for Senate from opposite political parties is an alluring gimmick, but it also speaks to a fundamental truth about Georgia: It’s a state where religion really matters. Like Collins, 38 percent of Georgians identify as evangelical Christians, compared with just 25 percent of Americans overall. Like Warnock, 17 percent of Georgians are part of historically Black Protestant denominations, compared with just 6.5 percent of Americans overall.

When democrats make the case for why Georgia is ready to elect a Black, progressive candidate to statewide political office, the argument always starts with race. “The math says it’s possible,” Abrams told me. Nearly 600,000 Georgians registered to

vote from the end of 2018, when Abrams lost, to July of this year, according to data from the secretary of state's office. At least 43 percent of those new voters are people of color—and many Georgians, regardless of race, will have racism on their minds as they go to the polls in November. Warnock spent Mother's Day weekend with family members of Ahmaud Arbery, who was allegedly murdered by three white men in February while jogging in south Georgia; he conducted the funeral of Rayshard Brooks, who was fatally shot by a police officer outside of a Wendy's in Atlanta in June; and he prayed with Lewis, his longtime parishioner, in the days before the congressman's death in July. Warnock's position as the "pastor of arguably the most famous Black church in America … grounds him in a traditional Black politics that could actually be really attractive to traditional or ideologically moderate to conservative African American voters," Andra Gillespie, a political scientist at Emory University, told me.

Although Georgia has one of the largest Black voting populations in the country, white voters alienated by Trump are also prime targets for Democrats in November. During Jon Ossoff's 2017 special-election congressional campaign, which covered much of the suburban area north of Atlanta, "there were scores of folks coming in, saying, 'Look, I have always been a Republican, but the election of President Trump has revealed the identity of the party, and this is not something I can participate in,'" Theron Johnson, a Democratic organizer on the campaign, told me. This rage is especially potent among women. "The suburban female vote is driving what's shifting in Georgia," says Erick Allen, a Black Democrat who flipped a formerly Republican state-legislature seat representing part of Cobb County in 2018. Faith is a big part of that. "There are enough believers and followers of Christ who understand the perversion of religion that the current Republican standard-bearer," Trump, represents, Allen told me. "I think there's going to be some blowback from that."

Read: Black activism, unchurched

But Warnock's role in the Black-church world may complicate his attempt to build a coalition of voters. His scholarly work focused in part on the flaws of the prosperity gospel, a theological tradition popular in both Black and white churches that emphasizes individual salvation and health over the collective liberation and the activism that Warnock advocates. "In the decades after Dr. King's death, there are churches that have taken a different kind of view of the gospel," he told me. "They don't necessarily see the work of justice, even when they're engaged in it, as central to their Christian identity." Throughout his career, Warnock has argued that King's tradition of the gospel is as much about economics as it is about race: "King has certainly been sanitized and domesticated and therefore distorted," he told the Montreal paper The

Gazette in 2001. “People whose ideological orientation is clearly antithetical to that of King can mouth pious platitudes in honor of King while arguing for policies King would never have supported.” In past interviews, Warnock has spoken about the failures of certain Black-church traditions more sharply: Shortly after his book came out in late 2013, he told NPR’s Michel Martin that the “burgeoning Black middle class … has too often given in to the kind of narcissism and mindless consumeristic impulses of America without asking the hard questions about the distribution of wealth, about the broadening chasm between the haves and the have-nots.”

Typically, Democratic political candidates who depend on Black voters aren’t focused on calling out those voters’ sins. What makes Warnock’s candidacy so unusual is that his critique of America indicts not only his enemies, but his potential voter base. Religious leaders who prefer a prophetic vision of the gospel typically gravitate toward the margins of society, calling out all who are content with the systemic injustices of everyday life. Warnock is attempting the opposite, vying to win widespread support with a distinctly progressive message in a state where Democrats already have difficulty getting elected. But he has spent his life studying the way to build movements around ideas that challenge the status quo. “Even during the civil-rights movement, it was really a remnant of Black churches at the center of that movement,” he said. “It was never all the churches.”

In his “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” King made the case for political activism that makes people uncomfortable: Jesus “was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.” King didn’t necessarily intend for this to be a campaign slogan; indeed, he wrote those words in a moment of profound disappointment in his white neighbors. There are still reasons to doubt that white Americans are ready for the kind of political change they’ve advocated in the streets. Warnock is praying that they are