

A CHEROKEE FOR TRUMP | By Graham Lee Brewer

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For people who care about the West

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PARTY FAVORS

Should parties pick candidates before voters do? | By Will Ford



An attendee at a campaign event takes a photograph of Democratic Party candidate Xochitl Torres Small (left) posing with supporters in Belen, New Mexico, last November.

BRIAN SOKOL

On the cover

Democratic Party candidate for New Mexico's 2nd U.S. Congressional District, Xochitl Torres Small (second from left), poses for photographs with supporters following her speech at a campaign event at an A&W restaurant in Belen, New Mexico, last November.

BRIAN SOKOL



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Congressman Markwayne Mullin may not look like a typical Indigenous lawmaker. But the hard-right, white-passing Cherokee is far from an anomaly. By Graham Lee Brewer

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Editor's note

Bucking against 'horse-race' political journalism

American politics are complicated. And as we head into a new election cycle, there's more to sort through than ever. That's why we've dedicated a hefty portion of this double issue (more on that in a moment) to politics.



In our main feature, Albuquerque-based writer Will Ford documents the rise of Xochitl Torres Small, a Democratic representative in New Mexico's Congressional District 2, and the methods by which she was chosen. In 2018, when Torres Small achieved her unlikely victory, she became a darling of the Democratic Party. Here, in a conservative district near the U.S.-Mexico border, was a young woman of color — a careful pragmatist with hopeful politics. The question is: Was she chosen democratically?

After more than two years of reporting, we discovered the uncomfortable story behind Torres Small's triumph.

Ford illuminates how local players in New Mexican politics tilted the scales in the candidate's favor. This retrospective offers lessons far deeper than traditional horse-race political coverage — the breathless, live reporting where leaders become losers, losers become leaders, and candidates zip up and down the polls like numbers on the stock exchange.

Torres Small is not the villain here. Rather, she, like all the other primary candidates in the story, is the product of a system. We believe that the full, if sometimes troubling, picture we paint is instructive, revealing in detail how our democratic processes work — who benefits, and who gets burned along the way.

Elsewhere, far from New Mexico, we take a look at Markwayne Mullin, a longtime Oklahoma congressman. Mullin is a conservative Republican, a member of the Cherokee Nation, and a bit of an enigma. Some see him as a much-needed Native voice in Congress; others say he is a mixed bag for Indian Country. In many ways, the duality of Rep. Mullin embodies Cherokee Nation politics. Understanding him helps us understand some of the nuances of political identity that seem to be missing from the national discourse.

We hope you'll dive right in, and that as the next political season progresses, *HCN* gives you the tools to more carefully scrutinize each race. Maybe we need a better process, one where the people can choose representatives that fit them, instead of being pigeonholed by a single party or ideology. The West is far too complicated for that.

Also, a quick note: You are holding a double issue in your hand, the last of the year. *High Country News* is taking a break after this to put together a brand-new magazine on a brand-new publication schedule for 2020. We have a lot of changes coming your way, including a new look. Our publisher will tell you more. (See page 13.) Happy holidays, and we'll see you in January. —Paige Blankenbuehler, associate editor

THE LATEST

Backstory

The Yurok Tribe of Washington state declared **rights of personhood for the Klamath River last summer**. The tribal council's resolution means that if the river is harmed, a case can be made in Yurok tribal court to remedy the problem. It comes at the end of another difficult season for the Klamath, with low water flows, high disease rates in salmon and canceled fishing seasons ("The Klamath River now has the legal rights of a person," *HCN*, 9/24/19).

Followup

On Nov. 14, a long-running water-rights lawsuit titled *Baley v. United States* was settled in favor of the U.S. According to MyBasin.com, the appellate court denied compensation to the farmers and ranchers who sued after the U.S. set aside irrigation water for threatened and endangered species, citing the Endangered Species Act. This ruling **upheld a lower court's decision affirming the senior rights of the Klamath, Yurok and Hoopa Valley tribes, who have upstream rights to water fisheries**.

KALEN GOODLUCK



California condors reach recovery milestone

Somewhere in California's mountainous Ventana Wilderness, five plump California condor chicks are getting ready to fledge, the first flock since the species was declared extinct in the wild 28 years ago. Today, there are over 100 condors in central California, bringing the Southwest's total population to well over 300. "To have more than a 10% increase in condor population in one year is just amazing," says Kelly Sorenson, executive director of the Ventana Wildlife Society, which co-manages the birds with Pinnacles National

Park. "The story of the condor is a hopeful one and shows we can make a difference if we work at it." The recovery milestone involved a captive breeding program along with concentrated efforts to curb lead poisoning. Even small amounts of lead can be lethal to the majestic scavengers; 40% of recorded deaths since the program began were caused by bullets left in the carcasses of squirrels, coyotes and other animals.

NICK RAHAIM, HAKAI MAGAZINE

Read more online: hcne.ws/condors-recovery

This California condor, known as AC-4, was captured from the wild in the 1980s and has become a pivotal part of species recovery efforts, fathering more than 30 chicks.

PACIFIC SOUTHWEST
REGION USFWS VIA FLICKR

11.5% Increase in the levels of fine particulate matter in Western skies between 2016 and 2018

10,000

The number of premature deaths nationwide attributed to that increase

40% The proportion of those deaths that were in California

California's recent Kincade and Getty fires burned almost 80,000 acres and prompted more than 200,000 evacuations. The infernos also released large amounts of pollution into the atmosphere. A study published in October by the National Bureau of Economic Research revealed that, for the first time since 2009, air quality has fallen nationwide, nowhere worse than in the West. Between 2016 and 2018, levels of inhalable particulate matter increased by 11.5%. Such pollution can harm the health of and increase the risk of premature death in the elderly and in people with asthma and other pre-existing respiratory conditions. **WILL PEISCHEL, MOTHER JONES VIA CLIMATE DESK**
Read more online: hcne.ws/west-dirty-air

"The fire is a blur in my mind. I have a vague memory of the apocalyptic scene in the photographs: the hillside roaring with a bright orange, dark billowing clouds of smoke above a mountain town."

—Sara Fleming, runner-up for the Bell Prize Award, in her essay about the Coal Seam Fire in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, which her family fled when she was a child. Read more online: hcne.ws/fight-a-fire

It's time for a moratorium on new fossil fuel extraction

Last week, the Trump administration officially withdrew the United States, the world's second-largest greenhouse gas emitter, from the Paris climate agreement. The move will likely embolden fossil fuel companies across the West, Denise Fort writes, while hampering cities' efforts to reduce their carbon footprint; Fort's home state of New Mexico, for example, despite being in the midst of an oil boom, had just passed legislation to close its coal power plants and commit to 100% renewable energy. The Southwest is slowly but surely descending

into aridification, a more accurate description than drought since it signifies a long-term change in the climate — the new normal. "People who live near oil and gas facilities know the full costs of the wealth generated by fossil fuels," Fort writes, including air pollution and toxins, elevated ozone levels and the risk of explosions. She joins many prominent Democratic presidential candidates in calling for an end to policies that promote oil-and-gas development on federal land. **DENISE FORT, OPINION**
Read more online: hcne.ws/fossil-moratorium

Trending

WiFi, Amazon and food trucks in parks?

In October, a team of Trump administration advisers, mostly from the private sector, urged the Interior Department to promote the "modernization" of national park campgrounds. In practice, this would mean food trucks, WiFi and Amazon delivery in the nation's national parks and monuments. Additionally, the White House wants to reduce the National Park Service's budget by 15%, or \$481 million, even as the agency faces a more than \$11 billion maintenance backlog. Since taking office, Donald Trump has sought to privatize many governmental institutions, including the U.S. Postal Service, airports and freeways. Advisory committee member Derrick Crandall told the *Los Angeles Times*, "We want to let Americans make their own decisions in the marketplace."

EMILY HOLDEN/THE GUARDIAN

You say

JOHN NORDGREN: "So their vision is to take the worst America has to offer and impose it on the best American has to offer ... so that their shareholders can profit off of our parks. Great."

JOHN ROBERT SWEET "If the parks' natural and/or historical integrity can be preserved, and the parks made more attractive to today's Americans, then that is a positive thing overall."

DONNA BONETTI: "It sounds terribly like everything I wish to escape from."

Read more online: hcne.ws/parks-amazon-wifi and [Facebook.com/highcountrynews](https://www.facebook.com/highcountrynews)

Yurok fishermen on the Klamath River.

LINDA TANNER/CC VIA FLICKR

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ENERGY AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Thank you for this important article pointing out the numerous vulnerabilities disproportionately faced by low-income residents and people of color during a crisis ("Solar inequalities," *HCN*, 11/25/19). After Hurricane Katrina and every subsequent hurricane, I have said to a friend or co-worker that cities should have neighborhood resiliency centers with PV. I've been saying that, even if it's only one home, having one working refrigerator to keep food and medicine safe is a good idea. I've been saying the lack of distributed energy (net metering) is a national security issue. Unfortunately, I don't have a job or bully pulpit where my voice would rise to the surface. Granted, batteries were crazy expensive, and the inverter technologies weren't designed to flip from grid-tie to in-house easily when Katrina hit. But they are now. Leaving the poor and people of color to suffer, or requiring them to spend money on polluting generators, is unconscionable. Let's all share this article with friends and elected officials. What is happening in California with PG&E is a travesty. So was what happened in New Orleans' 9th Ward and in Puerto Rico. Distributed energy and neighborhood resiliency centers or safe houses every few blocks should be funded in any community with more than a few thousand people. PV and battery packs should also be mandatory on senior housing.

Ginger Wireman
Richland, Washington

ELOQUENTLY MISSING THE POINT

Carl Segerstrom's harsh review of *This Land* ("The West is more than heroes and villains," *HCN*, 11/11/19) dwells too much on the book's style and tone, distracting from Christopher Ketcham's compelling indictment of a century of severe and relentless damage to public lands in the Southwest. Segerstrom crafts clever turns of phrase to highlight his own writing skills, picks semantic fuses over Ketcham's admittedly selective interviewing techniques, and unfairly dismisses the author because he is not from around here — all with only token attention to the book's timely and important message. That message: Cattle grazing, and the stumbling industry and misplaced culture behind it, have inflicted permanent damage on an almost unfathomably large landscape. Don't take Segerstrom's word on this — or mine. Read *This Land* for yourself and see what you think.

Steve Smith
Glenwood Springs, Colorado



JESSE SPRINGER, SPRINGERCREATIVE.COM

NAILED IT, CARL SEGERSTROM

You describe the West, with all its gritty contradictions (*HCN*, 11/11/19). I could barely get through the inside cover of *This Land*; it's a fiction of romantic idealism disconnected from the realities of our region, and the complex and pragmatic work to "save" it.

Chase Gunnell
Ballard, Washington, via Twitter

CHURLISH REVIEW

At its core, Carl Segerstrom's churlish review of Chris Ketcham's *This Land* (*HCN*, 11/11/19) provides perfect testimony to why the book is so needed at this time. The writing shatters the myths and illusions that ranchers are the salt of the earth, the very fabric that holds the West together. In reality, it is the chokehold of public-lands ranchers and the livestock industry's no-holds-barred domination of public-lands policy and its brutality towards the natural world that is at the heart of why so many of the West's wildlife species are on a trajectory towards extinction. No matter how many trees are senselessly destroyed in projects like those described in *This Land*, sage grouse populations continue to slide towards extinction in places with little energy development and no large fires that are plagued by ubiquitous hordes of cattle. Gullied streams and trampled springs incrementally dry up with year after year of chronic grazing abuse. Livestock-caused weeds doom native landscapes as they fuel fire after fire. If there's going to be a West worth living in, a

West not overrun with cheatgrass and weeds, and a West where functioning native ecosystems and beauty still exist, then divorcing how we treat the land, its wildlife and wild places from the desires and management myths of the public-lands livestock industry is paramount.

Katie Fite
Boise, Idaho

SEA LIONS ARE ACTING NATURALLY

I want to comment on a phrase that was used in the recent article entitled "The ineffectual bombing of sea lions" (*HCN*, 9/16/19). In it, the authors describe the behavior of the sea lions eating the fish out of the fishermen's nets as "unabashed thievery." This is the second time I have read an article on the use of seal bombs in which this is how the behavior of sea lions is described. Given that the sea lions are in their natural habitat and eating their natural prey, to describe this behavior as "unabashed thievery" is both needlessly hyperbolic and scientifically inaccurate; the sea lions are simply eating their natural food in their natural environment as any animal would. I am not discounting the impacts they have on the fishermen's catch, but to describe this as somehow akin to criminal activity makes no sense. I think journalists should not wrongfully characterize the behavior of marine mammals in this way, as it does not advance a rational dialogue.

Jason Scorse
Director, Center for the Blue Economy
Aptos, California

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Why fight the youth climate cases?

Settling instead could help the climate fight

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

In 2011, 15-year-old Kelsey Juliana and 11-year-old Ollie Chernaik filed a lawsuit on behalf of Oregon youth, charging then-Gov. John Kitzhaber, D, and the state of Oregon with not doing enough to fight catastrophic climate change.

Eight years and about a half-dozen court appearances later, Juliana and Chernaik, now college students, are headed back to high school: On Nov. 13, Oregon's Supreme Court convened at Portland's David Douglas High School to hear the case.

A similar lawsuit is bound for a Washington state appeals court. Despite the two states' liberal legislatures and governors who cast themselves as climate activists, the cases have been met with staunch resistance. That the young activists should face such tough sledding in the Pacific Northwest highlights the tension between the often slow-turning wheels of the democratic process and the urgency of climate action.

At the core of the youth climate lawsuits is the claim that elected officials have failed to protect the public interest of future generations from the worsening climate crisis as scientists predict and observe rising sea levels, stronger storms and prolonged droughts. Therefore, the young people's lawyers argue, it's the courts' responsibility to demand that the state preserve a healthy climate for future generations by rapidly phasing out greenhouse gas emissions.

In response, Oregon and Washington have defended their actions on technical grounds — citing separation of powers and questioning the reach of the public trust doctrine — rather than denying the perils of climate change. And in the most recent cases, the courts have sided with the states. In the latest decision in Washington, for example, King County Superior Court Judge Michael Scott wrote “the issues involved in this case are quintessentially political questions that must be addressed by the legislative and executive branches of government.”

As the youth face setbacks in the courts, some observers think the cases are a distraction that isn't moving the needle on climate action. Suing Oregon Gov. Kate Brown and Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, both Democrats and supporters of climate legislation, “defies logic” said Aseem Prakash, the founding director of the University of Washington's Center for Environmental Politics: “Inslee and Brown are doing everything politically feasible.” For example, Brown said she would look into using executive authority to direct state agencies to pursue climate action following the defeat, in June, of what was seen as the most comprehensive climate bill in the country. And after voters rejected a carbon tax initiative in Washington in 2018, Inslee helped shepherd a separate set of climate legislation through the Legislature this year. In Prakash's view, it doesn't make sense to target allies who are constrained by limits on their executive power. “Inslee can't unilaterally wave a hand and change the state's climate plans,” he said.

Though a wave of the hand might not do the trick, the young plaintiffs' lawyers say that a pen stroke could. Either governor could choose to settle with the activists rather than argue against them in court, said Nate Bellinger, the state program manager for Our Children's Trust, the nonprofit organizing climate lawsuits at the state, federal and international levels. “If you had a court-approved agreement, it would provide legal cover to take aggressive action on climate change,” Bellinger said. But he doesn't see politicians willing to make that kind of end-run around legislatures that have at times been reluctant to pass significant carbon-limiting laws. “The impression we're getting is (Brown and Inslee) don't mind talking about climate change and taking incremental steps,” he said. “But they're unwilling to take bold action.”

When it comes to bold action, recent parallels at the federal level show how far executives can go to push ambitious agendas. President Donald Trump's emergency declaration on building a U.S.-Mexico border wall has caused money to be re-appropriated and environmental laws waived while 30-foot-tall metal slats are erected in southern Arizona. This exercise of authority following the declaration of an immigration emergency has Democratic presidential candidates and lawyers considering the impacts of a future administration declaring a climate emergency. Several Democratic presidential candidates have already pledged to do so. Yet it remains unclear whether any of the candidates would direct their Justice Department to settle the federal youth climate case.

At the state level, politicians preaching climate action continue to fight the youth climate cases. After nearly a decade in court, the plaintiffs, now young adults, still see their case as a key that could unlock sweeping change, and they are getting frustrated. In a scathing opinion piece in *The Oregonian* earlier this year, Kelsey Juliana questioned whether Brown could be a leader on climate while opposing the youth climate lawsuit: “If Kate Brown is so concerned that ‘kids should not have to fight this hard to protect the planet they will inherit,’” she wrote, “why is she fighting us tooth and nail?” □

Kelsey Juliana speaks in front of co-plaintiffs of her climate case outside the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C.

ROBIN LOZNAK/OUR CHILDREN'S TRUST



Carl Segerstrom is an assistant editor at *High Country News*, covering Alaska, the Pacific Northwest and the Northern Rockies from Spokane, Washington. [@carlschirps](#)

‘This is a human tragedy and an ecological tragedy’

Border communities fight Trump’s wall

BY JESSICA KUTZ

On a Saturday morning in early November, Edwina Vogan and a few of her friends drove over two hours from the Phoenix suburbs to southern Arizona to protest new wall construction at the U.S.-Mexico border.

By the time I met them, among a throng of protesters in front of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument’s visitor center, the weather was sweltering. The protesters chanted, “Hey hey, ho ho, this border wall has got to go.” Some had donned animal masks made from paper, representing endangered species like the jaguar that will be at increased risk if their habitat is cleaved in two. Every 20 minutes or so, a volunteer shuttle brought more people.

“We live over a hundred miles from here, but that doesn’t mean that we don’t care about what is going on here,” Vogan told me. She wore a shirt that showed monarch butterflies, which have come to symbolize migration. A member of CODEPINK — a women-led organization that opposes militarization and supports human rights — she came to see what was happening here firsthand. “This is a human tragedy and an ecological tragedy,” she said. “We are here to witness.”

She wasn’t alone: Over 300 environmentalists, Indigenous activists, Samaritan groups and human rights defenders had gathered, for the first time, to protest the panels of steel bollards going up just a few miles down the road. Organizers hadn’t expected so many concerned people, alerted by social media, to make the journey from elsewhere in Arizona and the surrounding region. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that this many people traipsed all the way out here,” said Randy Serraglio, with the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the event’s organizers. “Border issues really get people fired up, they really do.”

At Organ Pipe, the landscape’s ecology confronts its militarization: A migratory corridor collides with a wall, a natural spring could lose water to pumping for concrete, and both migrants and locals who cross the Borderlands are monitored and tracked. Here amid a sea of saguaros, standing tall like giant green tridents, and organ pipe cactus rising in clusters like their namesake church organ pipes, the voice of local dissent grows louder.

Some members of the Tohono O’odham

Nation, whose land spans both sides of the border, see the wall construction as the latest abuse from the federal government. “To the Anglo people, to the people of color, I want you to think back in terms of your own communities,” said David Garcia, a former tribal leader. “What may be going on in your communities has just started recently, but this has been going on for many centuries.”

Nellie Jo David, who is Hia-Ced O’odham and a Tohono O’odham citizen and activist, said that Tohono groups like Indivisible Tohono and the O’odham Anti-Border Collective have been standing up for border issues for years. “We’ve all grown out of the constant militarization and surveillance our land has experienced,” David told me.

I followed the protesters down a winding dirt road to see firsthand where new panels of wall are rising at a dizzying pace. Vehicle barriers have been ripped from the ground, replaced by steel bollards. The difference is dramatic. Where the old barriers blend into the landscape — simple rusted metal columns a few feet high with big gaps in between — their successors resemble the bars of a giant never-ending jail cell. This nuance is lost when national outlets like the *Washington Post* report that President Donald Trump’s wall is simply replacing old fencing. “I think a lot of the media would rather make it look like Trump isn’t

delivering,” Laiken Jordahl, Borderlands campaigner for the Center for Biological Diversity, told me. “The sad truth is that right now, border walls are being built in all four states; they are destroying some of the most beautiful places in our Borderlands.”

The ongoing construction is already having ecological impacts and threatens to destroy or fragment habitat for 93 threatened, endangered and candidate species, according to a 2017 report by the Center for Biological Diversity. Already, environmentalists fear that border construction, which involves mixing concrete with hundreds of thousands of gallons of water from nearby aquifers, could drain Quitobaquito Springs — the only place in the United States where endemic species like the Quitobaquito spring snail, Sonoyta mud turtle, Quitobaquito pupfish and desert caper plant are found. This desert oasis is located within a few hundred feet of the U.S. Mexico border.

At the wall protest, not far from the spring, Volunteers from No More Deaths, a humanitarian aid organization, held signs with water jugs bearing the words: “Humanitarian aid is never a crime.” The following Monday, volunteer Scott Warren would face a retrial on felony charges for supplying food, water and shelter to two migrants through his work with the group. On Nov. 20, he was acquitted of the charges. In this desert-scape, the bodies of over 3,000 migrants have been recovered since 2001, their deaths mostly due to exposure.

For the next hour, I watched as people touched the metal slats, examining them with their fingertips and peering out to the other side. In bundles of six, bollard-wall panels dotted the road, awaiting their placement down the line. Around us in plain sight, dead saguaros lay. □

“I think a lot of the media would rather make it look like Trump isn’t delivering.”

—Laiken Jordahl,
Borderlands campaigner
for the Center for
Biological Diversity



Over 300 environmentalists, Indigenous activists, Samaritan groups and human rights defenders gather to protest U.S.-Mexico border wall construction. RUSS MCSPADEN/CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

Jessica Kutz is an assistant editor for
High Country News. [@jkutzie](#)

Wildlife refuges suffer cuts and shortages

Why the refuge system could fail

BY HELEN SANTORO

The Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge is nestled between the boggy wetlands and glistening ponds of Montana's Bitterroot Valley. Inside, near a cluttered display of taxidermy birds — a tall American white pelican with a bright orange beak and an osprey caught in mid-flight — Frances "Wa" Correia greets visitors. The 92-year-old has been volunteering here for 15 years, fielding questions, answering the phone and keeping the kiosk outside filled up with pamphlets. It's work she enjoys doing. Still, as the number of full-time professional staff dwindles, volunteers like Correia are forced to take on even more tasks, while other important projects are left undone.

The refuge once employed 13 people to manage and study its land. Now, it has only three full-time staffers and one seasonal worker. Consequently, key projects — such as bird migration surveys, weed management and prescribed wildfires — are being left unfinished. This is a problem plaguing the entire National Wildlife Refuge System, which has suffered from a string of budget cuts and a shrinking staff for the last decade or more.

That means that refuges nationwide have fewer scientists, reduced law enforcement and a lack of habitat restoration. As a result, one of the system's central responsibilities — to protect and restore wildlife habitat — is falling by the wayside.

The National Wildlife Refuge System, a branch of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, protects more than 850 million acres of land and water. From the marshy Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in Florida to arid landscapes like the Desert National Wildlife Refuge in Nevada, the Refuge System is home to nearly every species of bird, fish, reptile and amphibian in the U.S., making it the world's largest collection of habitats set aside for wildlife conservation. Around 50 million people visit the nation's refuges each year.

But funding has not kept up with the



system's needs. Accounting for inflation, the overall Refuge System budget has decreased by almost 18% since 2010. As a result, the number of staff is currently around 2,600, which is an almost 20% drop from 2013. Additionally, as of 2015, there were only 318 refuge officers, down 65% from 1990, according to the 2015 annual report. (The "annual" report has not been published since.) Fewer officers mean higher chances of damaged property and hunting violations, a matter of particular concern since the Trump administration is opening up additional refuge acreage to hunting and fishing.

On a sunny, early-October afternoon, a cacophony of birdsong — the staccato chirp of the song sparrow against the loud whistle of the European starling — could be heard throughout the 2,800-acre Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge. A group of visitors sat on descending rows of stairs, shaped like an open-air theater, as they watched trumpeter swans glide across the shimmering pond.

While budget and staff cuts may not diminish this experience, they do dampen scientists' understanding of the local avian population, which includes some 240 species of migratory birds. Deborah Goslin, the refuge's former biological technician, used to spend her days surveying the migrations of waterfowl, raptor and shorebirds and studying their responses to floods, wildfire burns and other environmental changes.

Goslin was let go, however, and now no one is doing that work. These days,

the refuge leans heavily on volunteers, especially for less specialized tasks, such as running the environmental education program or staffing the visitor center. But even with that help, the visitor center is closed many days due to insufficient staffing. "There's so much information right behind that door," said volunteer Richard Davis, "and it's not even available."

The Trump administration's budget cuts are hitting all the public-land agencies. But the National Wildlife Refuge System has been struggling for years, never receiving the funding and recognition that it needs, said Geoff Haskett, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, a nonprofit based in D.C. "I don't think it's a Democrat or Republican thing," he said. He suspects that some of the Refuge System's woes stem from its lack of visibility compared to, say, national parks. But despite these challenges, said Haskett, keeping refuges working remains crucial. Not only do they protect some of the country's most iconic ecosystems and wildlife, refuges allow the public to connect with the nature around them.

That's the part that keeps Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge Manager Tom Reed going. A few years ago, a family traveled all the way from Hong Kong to the refuge just to go birding, Reed recalled. "Seeing the joy on the face of what they just observed, it humbles me," he said. "It makes me realize how lucky I am to look out at this refuge each day." □

Montana's Bitterroot Mountains loom over the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge. While the refuge used to have 13 people on staff, it now has just three full-time employees.

ROGER PETERSON/U.S. FOREST SERVICE

Helen Santoro is an editorial intern at High Country News. [@helenwsantoro](https://twitter.com/helenwsantoro)



Disastrous assistance

U.S. tribal citizens receive far less federal recovery aid than non-Natives

BY ALLISON HERRERA

A wildfire in the Okanogan Complex approaches a home on the edge of the Colville Reservation in Washington. In 2015, the fires burned about 20% of the tribe's land, destroying 24 homes. Applications for FEMA assistance were denied for the disaster. STEPHEN BRASHEAR/GETTY IMAGES

In the last decade, more than 70 natural disasters have occurred on tribal lands, with some communities being hit more than once a year. According to an analysis from the Center for Public Integrity, tribal nations were on average more vulnerable than the U.S. overall during the same period, based on measures such as unemployment and income. Yet, in the span of one year, they receive less than half of what the Department of Homeland Security grants states for recovery efforts daily. Data from the National Congress of American Indians show that U.S. citizens receive, on average, about \$26 per person, per year, from the federal government, while tribal citizens receive approximately \$3 per person, per year.

"There are huge gaps in the way the federal government responds to tribes when a natural disaster occurs," said Nelson Andrews Jr., emergency management director for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe.

For every region, one tribal liaison navigates tribal agencies, approved contractors, the federal government and tribal council. And while tribes can apply for grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to get help financing a hazard mitigation plan, there's no guarantee the agency will provide funding. Without a

FEMA-approved mitigation plan in place, tribes are not able to receive funding for permanent, non-emergency repairs or long-term mitigation measures, Andrews Jr. said. And yet, as of 2018, around 30% of tribal nations had an approved plan.

But even when such a plan is in place, FEMA aid isn't guaranteed to cover the full cost of recovery. The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation have experienced four natural disasters in the last 10 years, according to the Center for Public Integrity's analysis. In 2012, a severe storm, straight-line winds, and flooding damaged communities and left residents without power — and sometimes water — for days. In 2015, some of the most destructive wildfires in Washington state's history hit the reservation and surrounding communities, leaving three firefighters dead and more than 255,000 acres of land burned — approximately 20% of the tribe's land base. And last year, in 2018, flooding caused at least \$356,000 in damage.

In 2012, according to then-Chairman Michael O. Finley, the tribe sought aid from FEMA's technical assistance personnel to help navigate the "complex FEMA regulatory scheme." But when Chairman Finley testified in an oversight hearing about FEMA recovery efforts in 2013, he noted in his prepared statement that FEMA's personnel "had little experience working with Indian tribes and were not in a position to provide us with prompt answers to our questions." Finley added that the paperwork the tribe had to provide presented a "significant workload" that required

the efforts of three full-time employees to assemble all the records and complete requests for reimbursement. Even when that paperwork is completed, many tribes experience financial difficulty while waiting to recoup costs they paid out of pocket.

In 2015, wildfires swept across the Colville Reservation, destroying 24 homes. Both the state and the tribe applied for Individual Assistance from FEMA, but both requests were denied, based on criteria including the severity of the destruction, the estimated damages and existing insurance coverage. In the absence of individual aid from FEMA, the tribe received public assistance through the state, while volunteers and the Tulalip Tribes helped rebuild the homes.

The process by which tribes submit paperwork for reimbursement can also cause problems. After severe floods hit the Colville Reservation in 2018, the tribe completed nearly a half-million dollars in repairs, and FEMA pledged to reimburse it for response and recovery costs. More than a year later, the Colville Tribe says it still hasn't received payment, and that FEMA delayed because some expenses and volunteer hours weren't correctly coded. The Colville Tribe does not have a full-time employee dedicated to completing FEMA forms.

In response to requests for comment, FEMA said requiring mitigation plans is necessary to ensure that "recipients are simultaneously taking steps to repair and replace infrastructure but also build resilience and reduce risk in the future."

Other tribal nations have had similar experiences. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in North and South Dakota has been hit nine times in the last 10 years by catastrophic flooding and winter storms that knocked out power and washed out roads and bridges. In the spring of 2013, when record flooding swept the state of North Dakota, the Standing Rock Sioux received just under \$240,000 in assistance from FEMA to repair roads, bridges and replace culverts that were washed out. But according to Elliott Ward, the tribe's emergency manager, it wasn't enough: "They sent us college students." Ward said the repairs were done incorrectly and ended up costing the tribe more money.

Nelson Andrews Jr. and other tribal emergency managers have urged Congress to increase their natural disaster aid next year. The amount has been stagnant for more than a decade, he said, and that's unacceptable.

When the emergency managers propose that new budget, they want to drive home one point: Equitable disaster funding must be achieved for tribal communities to protect their citizens and ensure their continued sovereignty.

"It's basically like you're setting us up to fail," said Andrews Jr. □

This story is part of a series about the lack of protections vulnerable communities face as natural disasters worsen in a warming climate. The Center for Public Integrity and four partners — the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Ohio Valley Resource*, *StateImpact Oklahoma* and *High Country News* — are contributing stories.

Allison Herrera is Xolon Salinan from the Central Coast of California and serves as editor of climate and environment for Colorado Public Radio. [@alisonaher](#) Emily Moon fact-checked this story.

Coal state struggles

Coal's stability fueled Wyoming's economy, but the good times are coming to an end

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

AS I APPROACHED GILLETTE, WYOMING, on a cold and grungy March day in 2011, I expected to find the stereotypical Western extraction-reliant town, stuck in the boom-bust cycle, a place where transient workers lived in trailer parks and man camps, the schools were overflowing, and the social fabric and infrastructure were stretched to the breaking point.

So I was rather surprised to roll into a town that felt more suburban Denver than high-plains boomtown. Instead of rowdy bars, there were strip malls and chain restaurants and a spanking-new recreation center. Instead of man camps, I found a residential neighborhood with well-tended homes, boats and RVs in the driveways, and, as the census data would later tell me, a median household income of \$101,000. I saw so many Hummers that it was as if the ungainly SUVs had all migrated to this one county to sit out the financial crisis that was still bedeviling the rest of America.

Over the years, Gillette has been an oil town, a natural gas town and even a uranium town, but somehow it had managed to smooth out the wild ups and downs that usually plague boom-bust communities. Ironically, it was yet another fossil fuel that provided the economic padding: coal. Gillette sits in the heart of the Powder River Basin, where massive mines furnish nearly half of all the coal burned for electricity in the United States. Coal-fired power plants are often touted for their ability to churn out electricity at a steady rate rather than erratically and unpredictably. The data show that coal can behave similarly on an economic level, providing a stable financial foundation upon which a community can grow.

But now that foundation is eroding. The coal industry is fading, giant corporations, from Peabody to Westmoreland, are going bankrupt, and hundreds of Wyoming miners have lost their jobs. After a half-century of coal-fired stability, Gillette — and Wyoming at large — are facing a future without the industry that's been so good to them.

Jonathan Thompson is a contributing editor at *High Country News*. He is the author of *River of Lost Souls: The Science, Politics and Greed Behind the Gold King Mine Disaster*. [@jonnypeace](#)

SOURCES: INCOME, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU; TEACHER SALARY, NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION; SEVERANCE & BONUSES, WYOMING DEPARTMENT OF REVENUE AND CONSENSUS REVENUE ESTIMATING GROUP (CREG)

WYOMING'S CURRENT RELATIONSHIP with the coal industry started in the 1970s. Large, centralized coal-fired power plants sprouted across the Interior West to send power to faraway population centers, and energy crises spurred efforts to acquire more power domestically, leading to contemporaneous uranium, oil and natural gas booms. Miners and roughnecks followed the drill rigs and the draglines, pouring into once-sleepy towns, from Grand Junction, Colorado, to Farmington, New Mexico, and Jeffrey City, Wyoming. Campbell County, home of Gillette, doubled in population that decade. Trailer parks, man camps and shoddily built apartment buildings sprouted in fields and orchards.

The population explosion and the ephemeral nature of the booms had some unfortunate side effects: increased crime, overcrowded schools and stressed infrastructure. These issues were so rampant in Gillette in 1974 that ElDean Kohrs, then-executive director of the Wyoming Counseling Center, gave it a name: Gillette Syndrome.

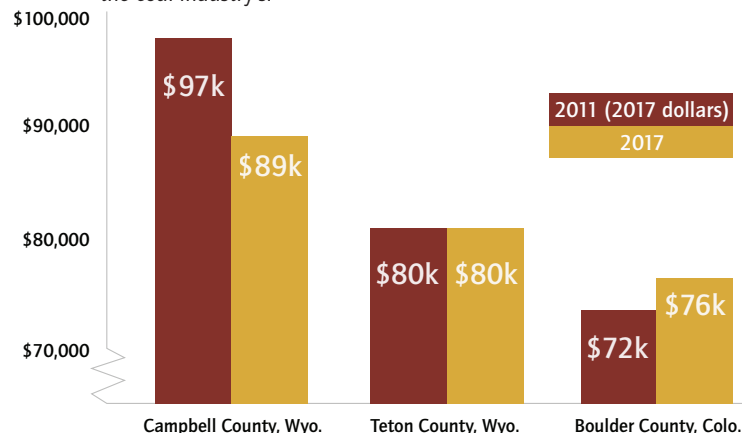
Then, in the mid-1980s, a combination of federal policy shifts and geopolitical forces caused the price of oil, natural gas and uranium to crash, busting those industries. But Wyoming's coal industry stayed afloat. And even when towns that were crowded and thriving a decade earlier shrank, their economies gutted, Campbell County survived: Gillette still suffered, but the population held steady, and within a few years, employment at the coal mines was shooting upward once again.

Coal had become the number-one fuel for generating electricity in the U.S., and Wyoming had become the top producer of coal. That tied the economy of Gillette — and Wyoming as a whole — directly to Americans' collective demand for electricity, which showed no signs of slowing.

For four decades, coal production climbed, providing a steady revenue stream for Wyoming state coffers and insulating the state and communities from the shocks of successive oil and gas booms and busts. In some ways, coal has helped Gillette and Wyoming grow out of Gillette Syndrome: The county has an aquatic center, a 7,000-square-foot science center and nice public libraries; school classes are held in fancy new facilities rather than trailers, as Kohrs feared; and Wyoming pays its teachers better than any neighboring state — all without a state income tax. *Continued...*

Median household income

The coal mines of Campbell County have helped lift its median income far above those of areas generally considered to be very wealthy. However, the county's fortunes are now sliding, alongside the coal industry's.

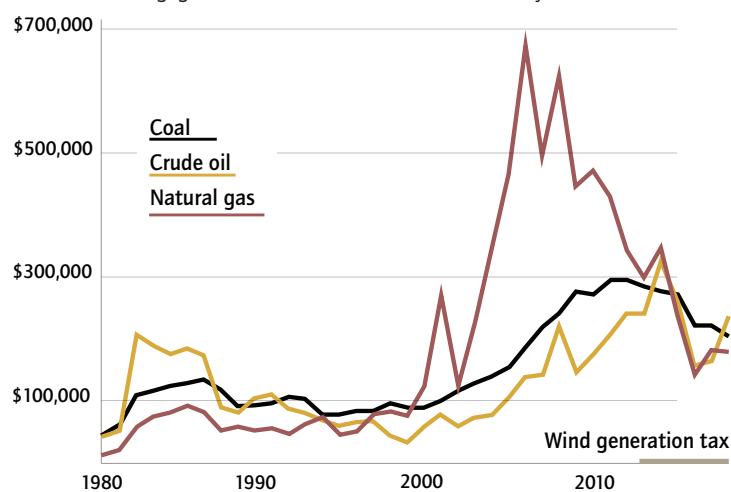


Wyoming state revenue from coal bonuses

When federal land is leased for coal mining, the state gets a share of the "bonus" payment, most of which goes to state schools. That revenue stream has dried up, possibly for good.

\$239 million Revenue from bonuses in 2013
\$5 million Revenue in 2018
\$0 Projected revenue for 2019

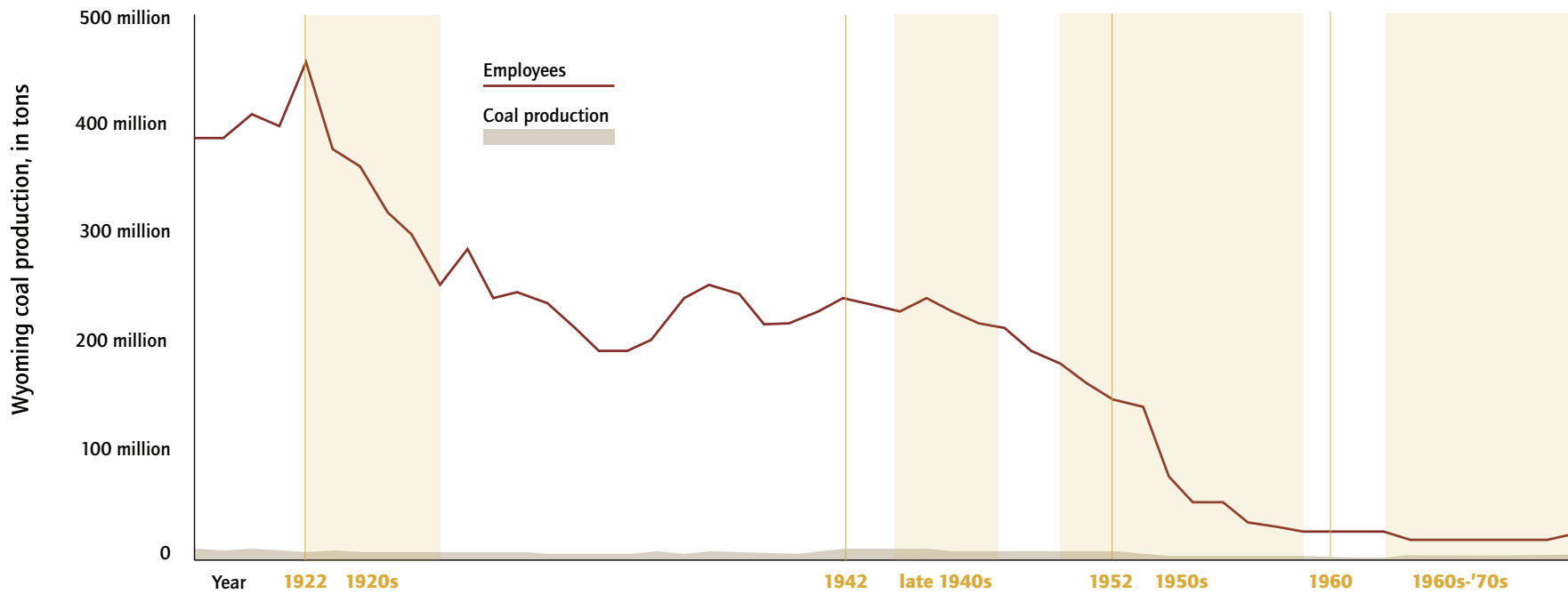
Wyoming severance tax revenue, 1980-2018 Wyoming collects taxes on the extraction of coal, oil, natural gas and other minerals. Revenues fluctuate according to commodity price and production levels. This graph shows the relative stability of coal next to volatile oil and natural gas and the negligible revenue from the new wind industry.



Average salary for public school teachers, 2017-2018

U.S. average: **\$60.5k**
 Wyoming: **\$58.4k**
 Colorado: **\$55k**
 Utah: **\$49.6k**

A CENTURY OF WYOMING'S ECONOMIC TIES TO COAL



1922: Wyoming's coal industry hits peak employment, with 9,000 employees working in mines during a time when fewer than 200,000 people lived in the state. A few years later, a Wyoming newspaper noted: "Next to food, coal and iron are of first importance to mankind."

1920s: Drilling for natural gas gets underway in New Mexico, Texas and elsewhere, and the gas is piped into towns for heating, cooking, electricity generation and industrial uses, displacing coal.

1942: Heightened industrial activity during World War II briefly drives up coal consumption and production. High-voltage transmission lines are developed in the **late 1940s**, eventually allowing huge coal plants to be built near coal deposits and send electricity to faraway urban areas.

The coal industry has made a lot of cash and built up a lot of political power over the years, which it uses to push the government to find new markets for its product. In **1952**, the Bureau of Reclamation releases "A Study of Future Power Transmission in the West," calling for the buildup of large coal-fired power plants in the Interior West, which would then send electricity to distant population centers. It says, "The growth of power in the West will be so great that increasing dependence on its main fuel resource, coal, is inevitable."

1950s: Coal consumption in the West plummets for a number of reasons: Highways replace rails, and diesel locomotives replace coal-fired ones; long-distance gas pipelines are built from gas fields to population centers, making it easier for residents and institutions to ditch coal for heating and cooking; and more than half of the West's electricity is generated by hydroelectric dams, with coal providing only 10%.

Congress establishes the Office of Coal Research in **1960** "to encourage and stimulate the production and conservation of coal in the United States ..." and to "maximize the contribution of coal to the overall energy market."

BUT NOW WYOMING IS GOING TO HAVE TO reckon with a new economic syndrome: The long, slow death of coal. Cheap natural gas, wind and solar power have knocked coal from its perch atop the U.S. power mix, and the economic effects are rippling back to the mines of the Powder River Basin in a big way. The Trump administration's attempts to revive the industry by rolling back environmental rules and meddling in the electricity markets have failed. Utilities are retiring and demolishing old coal plants — diminishing chances of a comeback — at a pace that has not slowed, and several large plants fed by Wyoming coal are slated to go dark in the next decade.

Wyoming's leaders now have no choice but to quit their coal habit. But replacing the industry will not be easy. They will need to figure out how to capture more revenue from other sources, such as tourism,

as well as how to use the cash from oil and gas to diversify the economy. Wind power production in the state — which, like coal, is taxed — has the potential to provide the same stabilizing financial influence, but it will need to grow tremendously to do so. Officials may need to institute an income tax that will require the billionaires of Jackson to pay their fair share. And, in the end, the state simply might have to learn to do with less.

Gillette, meanwhile, is still bustling. About 10% of the county's population works in the mines, and though the median income hasn't gone up since I visited years ago, it also hasn't plummeted. And maybe it never will. Perhaps Gillette will be able to leverage the amenities coal has brought to build a new economy and a new identity. But one thing is almost certain: The gaping mines of the Powder River Basin will diminish, if not disappear. □

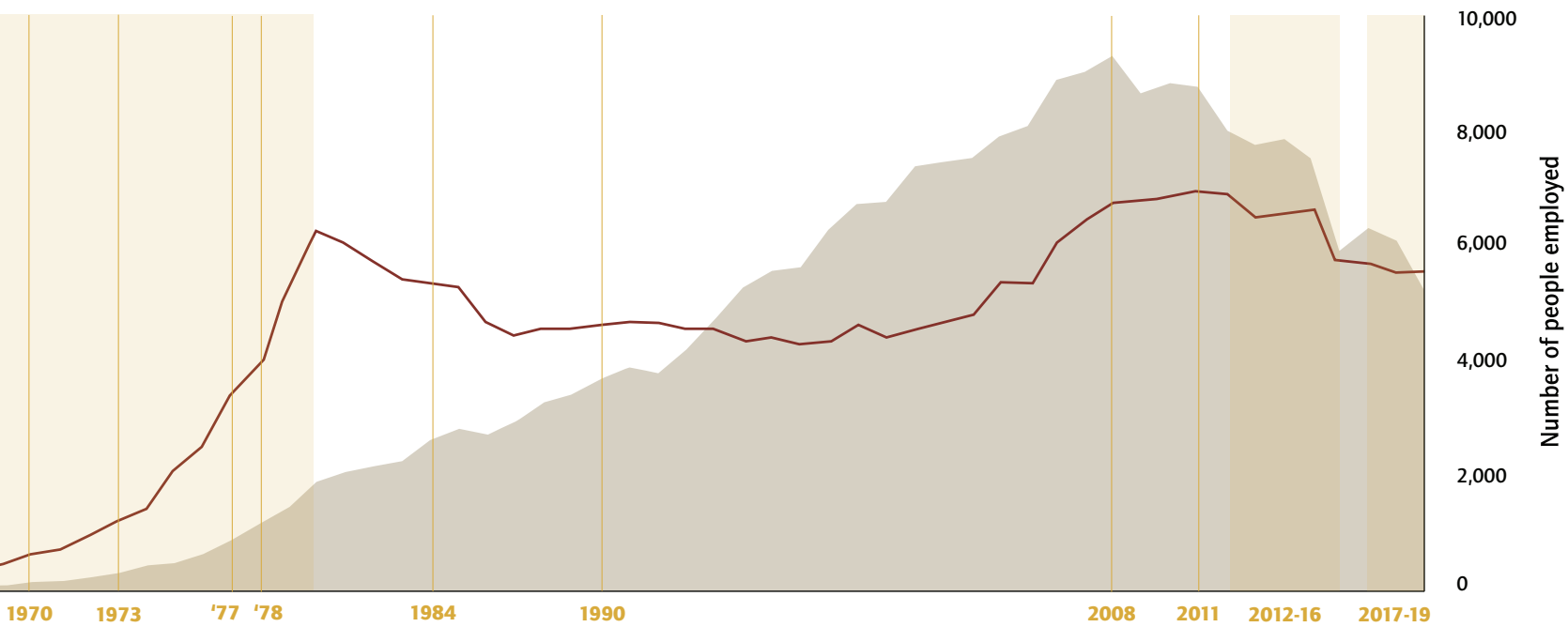
556.3 million

metric tons of CO₂ were emitted by the burning of Wyoming coal in 2018, which is equivalent to the amount emitted by:

1.4 trillion miles driven by a passenger vehicle

118.1 million passenger vehicles driven continuously for a year

62.6 billion gallons of gasoline burned



1960s-'70s: Coal-fired power plants spring up across the West as the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth and other environmental groups join with the coal industry and coal-state leaders in opposing new hydroelectric dams. The Sierra Club drops its opposition to the Navajo Generating Station in northern Arizona to avoid a new dam in the Grand Canyon.

1970: The Clean Air Act is passed, paradoxically leading to more coal production in Wyoming because Western coal is low in sulfur and therefore emits less sulfur dioxide when burned than Appalachian and Illinois coal.

1973: Energy crises erupt, spurring calls for "energy independence." This includes mining for coal and creating government subsidies to develop synfuels, gasoline or diesel from coal and other materials, like oil shale.

Atlantic Richfield Company's coal division opens Black Thunder Mine in the Powder River Basin in **1977**. It will become the largest coal mine in the world.

The **1978** Industrial Fuels Power Act more or less kills the construction of new natural gas power plants, locking in coal as electricity's fuel of choice for decades to come.

1984: The number of coal industry employees in Wyoming begins to drop even as overall production climbs. This apparent paradox is due to a geographic shift in focus among mining companies as they move from labor-intensive underground mines in other parts of the state to the massive surface mines of the Powder River Basin, which produce far more coal per hour of labor.

Congress passes the Clean Air Act amendments of **1990**, which limit emissions of acid rain-causing sulfur dioxide, giving another big boost to Western coal because of its relatively low sulfur content. The Powder River Basin solidifies its status as the nation's number-one coal producer.

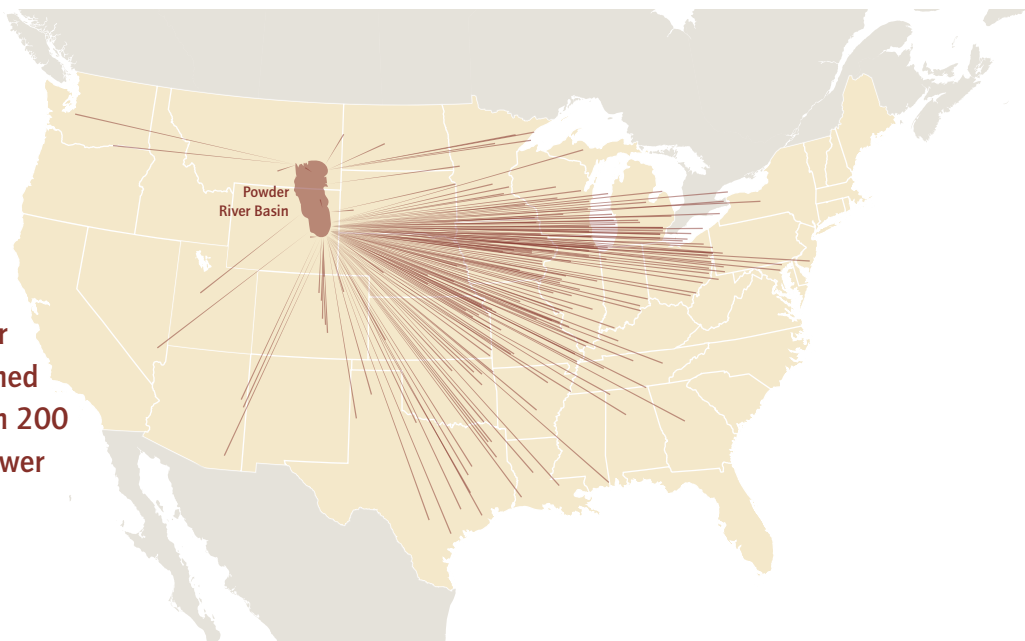
2008: Wyoming coal production hits its peak, then the national financial crisis hits, putting a huge dent in consumption of both electricity and coal.

2011: Wyoming hits peak modern-day coal-mine employment, even though electricity demand and coal consumption have fallen below the highs of 2008. The apparent paradox of rising employment while production falls is due to decreasing efficiency: As easy-to-access coal is gobbled up, companies must switch to less accessible deposits, and it takes more effort to extract the same amount of coal.

2012-2016: Coal production goes into free-fall as utilities start getting more and more power from natural gas plants, solar and wind. Mass layoffs hit the Powder River Basin.

2017-2019: Despite the Trump administration's efforts to prop up the coal industry — by trying to force utilities to keep using the uneconomical fuel and by eviscerating environmental, public health and worker safety protections — coal consumption, production and employment continue to fall.

Coal from Wyoming's Powder River Basin is burned at more than 200 coal-fired power plants in 27 states.



INFOGRAPHICS BY LUNA ANNA ARCHEY
SOURCES: COAL PRODUCTION AND EMPLOYMENT, WYOMING MINING ASSOCIATION, U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, AND U.S. ENERGY INFORMATION ADMINISTRATION; CO2 EMITTED, ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY; COAL EXPORT MAP, KURT MENKE/GISP BIRDS EYE VIEW

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A refreshing change



BY PAUL LARMER

I came to *High Country News* as an unpaid intern in 1984 and got my first taste of journalism under the tough-love tutelage of Ed and Betsy Marston, the husband-and-wife publisher-editor team who had just inherited the organization from a disbanding staff in Lander, Wyoming. Eight years later, in the fall of 1992, I returned to *HCN* as an underpaid assistant editor, young family in tow.

Over the next decade, I had the great fortune to edit, report and write (and rewrite!) stories from across the West. In 2002, I became the executive director of *High Country News*. One of our first goals was to turn the 16-page, black-and-white “paper,” as we called it, into the magazine it had always wanted to be. We wanted great stories, yes, but also full-color printing that more fully captured the nuances of this multi-hued landscape. With the guidance of Art Director Cindy Wehling, then-Editor Greg Hanscom and a plucky consultant, we embarked on a major redesign, producing the first-ever color edition of the magazine in May of 2003.

Over the years, we have tweaked the magazine, but we haven’t done another major overhaul ... until now. A few weeks ago, we completed a half-year branding and design sprint with our consulting partners at Atlantic 57. The first tangible result of this will be the very next issue in your mailbox. I won’t give away too much, but suffice it to say that I think you will really, really like it!

I hope, too, that you will enjoy the new annual publishing cycle of 16 issues a year — 12 monthly issues plus four special issues. Our decision to change the frequency was based on a 2017 reader survey and hundreds of one-on-one conversations. Many of you said that copies of *HCN* were piling up on your coffee tables unread, lost amid all the other reading matter you received. Others said you just wanted good journalism, no matter how often it came. We heard you, and in the new design we’re doubling down on our *HCN*-style “deep dives.” Each issue will be larger, with more of the features, analysis, imagery and perspective you expect. Your annual subscription fee will remain unchanged, and *HCN*’s carbon footprint will be reduced.

The refreshed magazine reflects our continuing commitment to print in the digital age. We firmly believe that, as long as humans have opposable thumbs, there is a place for a physical product you can hold, fold, rip up or stuff in your backpack. The slower publishing cycle is also a nod toward quality: It will allow our dispersed editorial team to spend more

time on the ground finding and reporting stories that illuminate all the complexities of the West — the kind of journalism you won’t find anywhere else. If you have any questions about your subscription, please feel free to contact our customer service department at 800-905-1155 or service@hcn.org, or go to our website: hcn.ws/schedule. We look forward to hearing your feedback in the new year.

AS *HIGH COUNTRY NEWS* PLUNGES BOLDLY into the future, we are also honoring our first 50 years. With the help of former *HCN* intern Josh Garret-Davis, we have produced an exhibit — “High Country News: Chronicler of the West” — that will be on display at the Autry Museum for the American West in Los Angeles from Dec. 17 to Feb. 6. Josh is a curator at the museum, and his team, working closely with *HCN*’s multi-talented Laura Dixon, has done a wonderful job presenting the history, not only of the magazine, but of the West itself as it has grappled with five decades of environmental, social and economic challenges. You can join Editor-in-Chief Brian Calvert, Associate Editor Tristan Ahtone and me at a public program at the museum on Jan. 29. Details are available at hcn.org/50-years. And if you would like the exhibit to come to your community in 2020, please contact Laura Dixon at laurad@hcn.org.

ON A BLUSTERY DAY IN EARLY OCTOBER, I joined more than 100 people at the Old Gallery in Allenspark, Colorado, to celebrate the life of longtime conservationist David Robertson, who died September 21 at the age of 85. The timber-framed building, which sits at 8,500-feet in elevation, was the perfect setting to remember David, who, with his surviving spouse, Jan, spent most of his life climbing, skiing and caring about mountains. A geologist-turned-computer programmer who moved to Boulder, Colorado, in 1963, David served as the conservation chair for the Colorado Mountain Club and on the boards of Western Resource Advocates and the Alaska Conservation Foundation. He was an avid outdoorsman, and in 1969 made the first ski crossing of the Juneau Icefields, from Juneau to Skagway. His passion for Alaska — every time he told a story about an adventure there, his eyes would sparkle — was contagious, and, through his encouragement, *HCN* started covering conservation battles in the state in the early 2000s. We will miss David. □

Paul Larmer, Greg Hanscom and Cindy Wehling celebrate the launch of our last redesign in 2003.

HCN FILE PHOTO



“On the Road to 50” is a series of community gatherings in cities across the region, collecting feedback about *HCN*’s future direction as we approach our 50th anniversary in 2020.

Paul Larmer is executive director/publisher of *High Country News*.

A Cherokee for Tr

Congressman
Markwayne
Mullin may
not look like
a typical
Indigenous
lawmaker. But
the hard-right,
white-passing
Cherokee is
far from an
anomaly.

FEATURE
BY GRAHAM LEE
BREWER

Last April, on the day the country was eagerly anticipating the release of the Mueller report, a small group of seniors in rural southeast Oklahoma woke up early to go have coffee with their congressman. There was concern for a nefarious plot underway.

“The Green New Deal has nothing to do with climate change. It has to do with a federal takeover,” Rep. Markwayne Mullin said as he slowly paced between the lectern and the half-dozen rows of folding metal chairs. “Federal takeover of our buildings, federal takeover of our air, federal takeover of our farms, federal takeover of our school systems.”

In a pressed plaid shirt tucked into blue jeans that hugged his brown cowboy boots, Mullin was in his element. These were his people. He may have been a member of Congress for seven years now, but you wouldn’t have known it by looking at him. Mullin has all the conservative talking points down about abortion and the dangers of socialism, but what his mostly rural Oklahoma constituents like about him is how rough he is around the edges, in all the right ways. He has cauliflower ear from his days of wrestling and mixed martial arts. He speaks with a thick rural accent and often stumbles over common phrases, coming across as less city and more country. He’s routinely direct and unpolished — some might even say crass, especially when he appears frustrated, like the time in a committee hearing when he told Democratic Rep. Ben Ray Lujan of New Mexico to shut up.

There are certainly many members of Congress who are not traditional bureaucrats, but Mullin has to be in the top tier of those lawmakers who would otherwise never choose to spend time in D.C. In fact, he won’t even admit to enjoying his time there. “I enjoy being a father. I enjoy being a husband,” he said to me recently. But as far as being a lawmaker goes, he describes it as more of a duty. Much like the man he and his supporters sent to the White House, Mullin rarely hesitates to speak his mind, and he’s rarely conventional. Oklahoma Rep. Tom Cole calls him “the authentic voice of eastern Oklahoma.”

“Socialism is nothing but a disguised free democracy, meaning that they make you think you have a choice, but you really don’t,” Mullin said as he continued pacing in front of the meager assembly.

According to Mullin, the Green New Deal’s real endgame is not stemming the flow of greenhouse gas emissions from one of the world’s largest contributors, it’s control. The plan calls for free higher education, meaning, Mullin says, that the government will choose where you learn. It calls affordable housing a human right, which means free government housing. It will raze buildings that don’t meet energy standards and make the government give a livable wage to people who don’t even want to work. “It has nothing to do with eliminating my cows from farting, it has to do with that farm being deemed a hazard to the public health,” Mullin explains. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — the vocal and politically galvanizing congresswoman from New York — and her Democratic colleagues want climate change deemed a national emergency so the feds can claim “eminent domain and take over our farms. And now what do they control?” he asks, hanging on that last word.

“Our food,” an older woman in front snaps back quickly.

“Our food supply,” Mullin agrees, nodding his head.

This worldview marries two of Markwayne Mullin’s defining principles: his distrust of government, particularly when it comes to regulatory overreach, and his belief in private enterprise. Mullin left junior college in 1998 to take over the family plumbing business when his father’s health began to fail. The business remains successful today, but after much prayer, Mullin — frustrated by the Affordable Care Act and Environmental Protection Agency requirements his businesses faced — decided to run for office in 2011. He had been approached by a political consultant who was a fan of his mixed martial arts career. But it’s his work in Indian Country that most intrigues me, and likely perplexes both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, inside and outside the capital. Mullin and I are both citizens of the Cherokee Nation, though, as many will tell you, he does not fit stereotypical notions of what it means to be Indigenous, either in how he looks or how he operates as a lawmaker.

Cherokee politics are complicated. They always have been. Our tribe has a history of being internally divided by villages as well as ideals. When Europeans first encountered the Cherokee in the 16th century in the southeastern part of the continent, the tribe spoke three different dialects spread across five settlements, each comprising several

towns. Today, families still hold resentments from betrayals that preceded the Trail of Tears, and tribal elections can be cutthroat and deeply personal. Our leaders have been lobbying in the halls of Congress and the White House for hundreds of years now. Mullin is but one in a long line of influential, and complicated, Cherokee politicians and diplomats.

Mullin is also white-passing. The Cherokee Nation has never required a minimum blood quantum for tribal membership, and as a result we are the largest tribe in the country. That means we also have the largest diaspora, as well as the widest spectrum of political, cultural and racial identities. Like most Indigenous voters, Cherokees have historically voted Democrat. But as the last elections for tribal chief showed, there are many vocal Cherokee Republicans. Mullin is an ultra-conservative, white-passing Cherokee who has been an advocate for both tribal sovereignty and for encouraging tribes to assert that sovereignty by allowing private energy production on their lands. That duality has caused many to ask: Is Markwayne Mullin good or bad for Indian Country?

MULLIN WAS RAISED IN WESTVILLE, Oklahoma, a small farming community of about 1,600 in the far reaches of Adair County along the Arkansas border. It sits immediately east of Cherokee County, home to the Cherokee Nation capitol of Tahlequah, which has one of the highest populations of Cherokee speakers in the state.

We first met at his 2018 election watch party, where he handily beat his Democratic rival, fellow Cherokee and then-Tahlequah Mayor Jason Nichols. In an interview afterward, Mullin told me about his first day on the House floor as a freshman lawmaker in 2013. “Tom Cole came up to me and said, ‘Congratulations, you just doubled the Native American Caucus.’ I had no idea what he was talking about.” How could he not have known that? I recall thinking. That Mullin may have not fully understood the significance of his position is a potentially troubling thought for Indian voters.

“I know it sounds funny, but I mean this sincerely: I didn’t know there was anything special about being Cherokee,” Mullin told me this summer in his D.C. office. The question had stuck with me, and I was curious to know what Mullin meant. In Adair County, he explained, “everyone around you was Cherokee. So it



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"I know it sounds funny, but I mean this sincerely: I didn't know there was anything special about being Cherokee."

—Markwayne Mullin

J.D. REEVES FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

was as normal as anybody else's town, it was just the way that it was."

Rep. Tom Cole, a Republican and a member of the Chickasaw Nation, told me that when he first got to the Hill in 2003, he knew that being Chickasaw would be a big component of his approach to policy. The significance of that responsibility quickly set in for him. Very soon after arriving at the Capitol, he got a

call from Northern Cheyenne Chief Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a former U.S. senator from Colorado. "I'm just calling to tell you you're going to pick up about 2 or 3 million new constituents whether you know it or not," Campbell said. "Because when they figure out that you're there, you're going to start getting Indians from all across the country."

About a month later, Cole said, he

came to his office to find a Native family sitting on the couch. They were there, he said, because his office was the only place in the building that felt "Native" to them. It felt familiar. "And ever since then, they've started coming and coming, and you realize what a special opportunity and I think obligation that you have to be in a position like this. In the entire history, and this includes the arrival of

(Reps.) Deb Haaland and Sharice Davids, there's only been 16 tribal members in the House of Representatives. Eight of them are from Oklahoma." Cole's office today is filled with beadwork, pottery and Pendleton blankets. On a table next to the couch in his office sits a picture of his great-aunt, Te Ata, the world-famous Chickasaw storyteller whom Q'orianka Kilcher portrayed on the big screen in the 2016 film *Te Ata*. Kimberly Teehee, the Cherokee Nation's delegate to Congress and a former Obama appointee, told me Tom Cole would fall on his sword for Indian Country at any given moment,

regardless of what the GOP does. "He's a very much needed voice on the Republican side of the aisle," said Democratic Rep. Deb Haaland of New Mexico, a member of the Pueblo of Laguna Tribe. "I look at him as a mentor."

By contrast, Mullin's reputation

January op-ed, he wrote that the federal government has a responsibility to provide health care to Indian Country: "Anything other than a full execution of those responsibilities is a breach of trust." He cosponsored the Stigler Act amendment, which removed a requirement from a 1947 law that members of the Five Civilized Tribes be at least one-half Indian blood in order for their lands to be held in "restricted fee" status. He also cosponsored the Not Invisible Act of 2019, which established an advisory committee to combat violence on tribal lands. He's been on Trump's Indian Country policy team since the campaign, a place where many, including Cole, think he could have great influence.

IN EARLY 2016, DONALD TRUMP'S

CAMPAIGN began reaching out to tribal leaders, advocates and policy experts to form an Indian Country policy team. Among those tapped for a spot was Tom

Cole. He said that while he was considering the request, he watched the video of Trump's 1993 testimony before a House subcommittee meeting on Native American affairs, where Trump said people on some reservations with casinos "don't look like Indians to me." If Trump won the nomination, Cole decided, he would vote for him as a fellow Republican. But until then, he wasn't going to be part of his team. "Markwayne went the opposite direction, and I'm glad he did because it's given him a relationship with the White House, with the administration, that's been very helpful," he told me in June, well after many of Trump's gaffes and

missteps in Indian Country.

President Trump has had a poor record with Indian Country, from his near-total reduction of Bears Ears National Monument to his suggestion that tribal citizens be required to have a job before receiving treatment through Indian Health Services. He hung a portrait of Andrew Jackson, the president who signed off on the removal of the Cherokee people, in the Oval Office. Mullin seems to have a good relationship with the White House, but if it has borne any fruit for Indigenous people, it's not obvious. When I asked Mullin last summer about Trump's 1993 testimony, he said that he thinks Trump has grown since then. "In this job, your perspectives do change," he said. "At that time (Trump) was looking at it from a business perspective and not as the leader of a nation." Trump also used to be very pro-choice, Mullin added.

Despite vilifying Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez all over eastern Oklahoma, Mullin appears to have a good relationship with just about everyone in his orbit. He leads a bipartisan workout group that includes lawmakers like Democratic presidential candidate Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii and Rep. Joe Kennedy III, a Democrat from Maryland who is also a close friend. There's little if any indication in committee meetings that Kennedy and Mullin are friends, but they have an easy, jovial way of speaking in the hallways of Congress. Both lawmakers said they learned a lot about the possibilities of bipartisan work and finding common ground from each other. When I asked Kennedy if he ever had to defend his friendship with Mullin, he laughed: "Yes, every day." Kennedy said they agree on virtually nothing, but Mullin is kind and never quits, so what's not to like?

Oklahoma Republican Rep. Frank Lucas calls Mullin "the puppy." He's always moving, almost always positive, and constantly motivating himself and those around him. As a child, Mullin had clubfoot and had to wear leg braces and undergo surgeries. He also had a speech impediment. "I couldn't fight with my mouth," he said. But he became a college wrestler and MMA fighter and, eventually, someone who speaks regularly on national television about taxes and presidential candidates. It's an arc he attributes almost entirely to hard work and discipline. His staff likes that he's energetic, direct and doesn't hesitate to speak his mind. It's those qualities at their extremes, though, that usually get Mullin's name in the press.

The day I followed him around the Capitol, he got into an uncomfortably tense back-and-forth with an OB-GYN who was testifying about the Trump administration's move to amend Title X to keep doctors from providing patients with information on options that include abortion. On the way to the hearing, one of Mullin's staff members asked if he had his questions prepared. He responded that he had decided not to use them. Instead, he said he would ask one of the doctors to explain the difference between delivering and aborting a baby. Essentially, he wanted to know: How do you kill a baby? Mullin left the hearing early after getting into a lengthy argument with the chairwoman, who accused him of attacking the witness, found him out of order, and took away his remaining time.

Outbursts like this are frowned upon in Cherokee culture. Many of Mullin's Cherokee constituents mention this when his name comes up. "We don't (publicly) attack people about their person or character based upon their politics," said Kirby Brown, an associate professor at the University of Oregon and a Cherokee author who has written about Cherokee nationhood.

Other Cherokee citizens I spoke to see him as a tribal member who invokes citizenship only for political gain — also a



Congressman Markwayne Mullin, left, joins Vice President Mike Pence, his wife, Karen, and Congressman Kevin Hern as they enter Air Force Two to depart from Tulsa to Washington, D.C., last summer. IAN MAULE/

TULSA WORLD VIA AP

is just as tied to GOP politics as it is to Indian Country policy, and the two don't always coalesce. His legislative record on Indian Country policy is often a sticking point for many in his district. He voted against renewing the Violence Against Women Act in 2013 because he disagreed with its LGBTQ provisions, and in 2016 he disputed a Reuters article that quoted him as advocating for the relaxation of federal regulations so tribes could allow private mineral exploration on their lands. The proposal came from two leaders of Trump's Native American Coalition, which Mullin chaired during the campaign.

Now in his fourth term, Mullin has become a more vocal and recognizable figure in Congress when it comes to Indian policy. He introduced legislation both this year and last to fund Indian Health Services in order to keep it running during a government shutdown. In a

common criticism of the state's governor, Kevin Stitt, another Republican, white-passing Cherokee Nation citizen. But others argue that Mullin has grown into his role as an Indian lawmaker. Having a tribal citizen in Congress is a good thing, they say, for better or worse; at least he understands what sovereignty and treaty rights really mean.

"I would push back really hard on that 'for better or worse' part. It does matter who's in that room with (Trump's) ear," Brown said. In 1835, Brown's ancestor, James Starr, and 19 other Cherokee dissidents signed the Treaty of New Echota without the consent of Chief John Ross. Ross and many other Cherokee leaders had hoped to use their diplomatic talents to prevent the government from forcing them, at gunpoint, on a deadly journey a thousand miles to the West. But others, including Brown's great-uncle, believed they saw the writing on the wall — that the U.S. government would take their homelands and their lives — and through the treaty, the group tried to get as much as they could for their people. That treaty gave way to the Trail of Tears, which impacted tens of thousands of Cherokee people.

"They shouldn't have done that," Brown said. "It was against the law, they knew it was against the law, they did it anyway, probably for a lot of different reasons. But I would have much rather had John Ross in that room talking to those treaty guys than even my own uncle because of the impact of the decision and the impact of what was said had on the Nation as a whole." One of the ways we Cherokees get in our own way, he told me, is the idea that having somebody in the room is better than having nobody. "I think there are limits to that argument, if the somebody in the room is going to argue for privatizing Indian land, or if the somebody in the room is not going to put tribal nationhood and sovereignty front and center and first." Someone, Brown added, who understands that, whether they intended it that way or not, their opinion might be unfairly seen as representative of Indian Country.

One instance that perplexed Brown and caused several meltdowns from others on social media occurred when Mullin appeared on Fox News in response to Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren's controversial DNA test. After being introduced as a Cherokee and one of two Native Americans in Congress, Mullin referred to the Trail of Tears as "the volunteer walk." Mullin has ancestors who came to Oklahoma from the east before forced removal, when tribal leaders were still deliberating with the federal government in a vain attempt to stop the state of Georgia from completely stripping them of their rights and humanity. At the time there was still a glimmer of hope that their gift for diplomacy would help them keep their homes and land. Speaking of his use of the term "volunteer," Mullin told *Fox & Friends* co-hosts

Steve Doocy and Ainsley Earhardt, "And I use that as a loosely term (sic)." He said, "The heritage runs deep in my family. For (Warren), they're just stories."

The people like Mullin's ancestors who left before the Trail of Tears — what we Cherokee call "Old Settlers" — may have "volunteered" to leave, but only in the sense that they chose to move themselves instead of waiting to be forced off their land.

About a month after his TV appearance, Mullin told me that he regretted not being more precise with his language. Still, he stood by the use of the phrase. Missteps like that cause many Cherokees to believe that Mullin knows little about the Indigenous experience or is culturally disconnected. He would argue that he very much grew up Cherokee, on Cherokee lands and with Cherokee people. He said he just didn't appreciate that as unique until he came to Washington.

And on a national stage, being Cherokee comes with some baggage. Many of us are white or white-passing, and we have a tendency to be the loudest in the room. When you're Cherokee, you often have to be particularly sensitive to the Indigenous experience outside your tribe. We were the first to ascribe to assimilation by creating a written language, a Constitution and a court system, and we adopted the practice of owning slaves. Our leaders also became tireless diplomats. Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green described Cherokee leaders in the years preceding removal as "masters of public relations" in their book *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears*. "Their policy was to make certain that no one could forget them. The result is that the Cherokees have become the Indians whose name everyone knows." And we're often the reason that the friendly white couple down the street with the "Native American"-theme living room believes they're Indian, too.

Mullin is by no means completely disconnected from Indian life in Oklahoma. He knows his pocket of Indian Country well. He has close working relationships with several chiefs, and he understands the economic forces their tribes represent. While his district is still mostly Democratic, as it was before he was elected, there is a conservative coalition among Cherokee voters. "He's not even an anomaly in the Cherokee Nation," said Kirby Brown. "There are a lot of conservative, hard-core evangelical Cherokees who believe he is doing exactly the right thing." Mullin may seem like an odd amalgam to outsiders, but he is Cherokee through and through.

"When I got up here ... I was getting the craziest questions, and people's lack of knowledge about Cherokee Nation, saying, 'Did you live on a reservation?' for instance," Mullin said. (The Cherokee Nation has no reservation.) "One of the biggest things I get is, 'Oh, I can see the high cheekbones.' I've got that more times than you can think." Mullin may not be the staunch advocate for Native interests that Cole has come to be, but

members of Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, know significantly more about Indian Country because of him. Last year, Rep. Kennedy introduced legislation to return land rights to the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe. Kennedy attributed his understanding of much of Indian Country to the world Mullin opened up for him. He told me he didn't fully appreciate that tribes still faced many of the obstacles they do until he met Mullin.

IN ATOKA, MULLIN WAS NEARING the close of his talk. He'd touched on the idea that Democrats want to allow the "killing of babies" who are born early due to a failed abortion — something conservatives have been calling "born-alive" — and that they planned to move the country away from a democracy and closer toward a socialist governing structure. Elsewhere, Attorney General William Barr was about to give a live press conference on the Mueller report. But under the fluorescent lights of the Atoka community center, the proposed reroute of nearby Highway 69 was more important.

Throughout the entire day, the Mueller report was only mentioned twice. As the congressman was about to leave a second town hall, a city employee jokingly asked him what he thought of the investigation. Mullin said that his phone had been ringing nonstop, people asking him where the smoking gun was. Mullin, however, had actually forgotten the report was going to come out that morning. He said the same thing later when Choctaw Chief Gary Batton inquired about it.

When we last spoke in November, Mullin said the White House has been occupied with the impeachment inquiry — which he adamantly opposes — keeping the president from being more involved with his Indian Country policy team. Mullin said he still sees a lot of opportunity for economic development in Indian Country under the current administration. And if, say, Elizabeth Warren, whom he has repeatedly denounced, were to be the next president, Mullin says he'd "absolutely" be able to work with her on issues related to Indian Country.

But she won't win, he added, laughing. He believes Donald Trump is a great ally to Indian Country, one of the best presidents for Native people. Mullin's Oklahoma counterpart, Rep. Cole, said something similar about Barack Obama.

Only a few days prior to our last talk, Trump declared November as National American History and Founders Month, a time that has been recognized as National Native American Heritage Month for almost 30 years. Mullin said he didn't think anything of it, adding that he's not that sensitive about those things.

"I've told you before, I never knew I was special for being Cherokee until I got to Washington, D.C.," he said. Later, he added, "I was Cherokee way before I was a congressman, and I'll be Cherokee when I leave Congress, too." ■

"There are a lot of conservative, hard-core evangelical Cherokees who believe he is doing exactly the right thing."

—Kirby Brown, associate professor at the University of Oregon and a Cherokee author who has written about Cherokee nationhood



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PARTY FAV

Should parties pick candidates before voters do?

ON NOV. 21, 2017, IN LAS CRUCES, New Mexico, Angel Peña met Xochitl Torres Small at a coffee shop to talk Democratic politics. Peña was preparing to run for Congress, and Torres Small had come to ask him not to.

“We are running now, so you can step down,” she said, according to Peña.

“We” referred to Torres Small and her husband, Nathan Small, a state representative, who was Peña’s close friend. Peña was shocked: A few weeks before, uninspired by other candidates, Peña had told Small that he planned to run, and Small hadn’t said anything about his wife. Peña hadn’t thought to ask. From 2009 to 2012, Torres Small had run Sen. Tom Udall’s southern New Mexico field office, but she’d been less involved in Las Cruces politics recently. After leaving his field office, she went to law school at the University of New Mexico, three hours away in Albuquerque, and then clerked for a federal judge in Las Cruces before accepting a job in the private sector as a water attorney.

That night, Peña emailed Torres Small. Letting small groups of people select political candidates made him feel uncomfortable, he said, and he declined to drop out. But a few months later, Peña would find himself forced from the race anyway, disqualified by the New Mexico secretary of State and bankrupted by lawsuits, one of them brought by Torres Small’s campaign. His closest supporters called what had happened “candidate suppression.” They believed that the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, or DCCC, which works to elect Democratic House majorities, had rigged the game against him and other candidates, and that the local establishment had followed its lead.

In New Mexico, liberalism flows like the Rio Grande — full in the north and depleted in the south. Interstate 40, which crosses the state horizontally through Albuquerque, roughly marks the divide, and a similar geographic logic organizes the state’s three House districts. The first forms a bubble around

Albuquerque, and the third covers what lies north, all the way to Colorado. Both vote reliably Democratic.

The second, where Peña planned to run, encompasses the portion south of I-40, extending to Texas and Mexico, and almost always votes Republican. It traverses dried lava fields, mountain ranges, dunes of gypsum, the country’s oldest wilderness area, Permian oil country, and the alleged landing sites of extraterrestrials. If you abide by the speed limit, which few do, driving from one corner to another takes about eight hours. Diverse groups of tribes, towns and ranchers populate its lands, stretching across burnt-yellow high-desert plains. It’s hard to form a coherent political coalition out of the district, which is about the size of North Dakota. Hispanics constitute a majority, but they’re not a very cohesive liberal bloc. Like many parts of the Southwest, New Mexico is home to different waves of immigrants spanning more than 400 years of history. Spanish land-grant families — who frequently describe the border as having crossed them — sometimes vote more like nativist conservatives. More recent arrivals often claim more Spanish than Mexican heritage as well, and many work in the Republican-friendly industries of oil and dairy.

Recently, sprawling Western districts like Congressional District 2 have become crucial swing districts in the fight for congressional majorities, and Democratic Party leaders have begun targeting them earlier and more directly. Often, this means picking favorites long before primary voters head to the polls, clearing the field before the race begins. For some, such party control is inoffensive, but others see it as a shrinking of democracy.

ANGEL PEÑA GREW UP A LONG WAY FROM POLITICS. His mother, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, raised him in a small house in El Paso, with help from her father. In middle school, he learned to play the euphonium and enrolled as a music performance major at New Mexico State University, just 40 minutes up the

highway, in Las Cruces.

During Peña’s second year at NMSU, he and his girlfriend, Kasey, had a child together, and Peña’s parents cut off financial support, hoping it would force him to grow up. The couple married soon after, and Peña left NMSU for the cheapest physical therapy program he could find. He picked a program in El Paso, delivering for Pizza Hut to pay his way through, and then started working in a Las Cruces clinic. He also re-enrolled at NMSU, this time in archaeology. Soon, he started getting internships around town; first, with the Bureau of Land Management, and then for a young city councilman, Nathan Small, who needed a Spanish-speaking community liaison. Some years, he found himself interning, working and completing his NMSU degree all at the same time, a hustle that quickly made the city feel like home. Eventually, he landed a job at the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance.

Peña’s journey into public advocacy in Las Cruces, in the early 2010s, meant that he worked on many of the defining projects for the community’s emerging liberal activists. He became treasurer for a group that pushed for a national monument designation of the Organ Mountains, Las Cruces’ postcard backdrop of spiky desert peaks, and served as a board member. Obama designated the monument in 2014, and the Conservation Lands Foundation, a national group based in Durango, Colorado, hired Peña. Over the next few years, he worked on a number of public-lands projects around the Southwest — New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, Utah and Texas — taking stories and translating them into advocacy that lawmakers could understand. It was a bit like playing the euphonium, he told me, tuning his message to whatever audience he needed to form coalitions — county commissions, private industry, ranchers.

By the summer of 2017, the former college dropout, now 29, was working with high-profile members of Congress like Beto O’Rourke. They’d fought to add protections to El Paso’s Castner Range, a feat they achieved despite a Republican

“I kept thinking we needed somebody young and brown, who looked like the district.”

—Angel Peña, talking about coming to the decision to run for Congress in New Mexico’s District 2

O R S



Angel Peña poses for a portrait on a trail in the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument outside Las Cruces, New Mexico. Peña worked to help establish the monument, which was designated by President Barack Obama in 2014.

Congress and a White House intent on rolling back public-lands protections. O'Rourke often relied on the public-lands pressure Peña helped organize to lobby policymakers in Washington.

In the spring of 2017, at conference in Las Vegas, O'Rourke ribbed Peña. "So when are you going to run?"

Peña's colleagues had nudged him before, but O'Rourke made him take the idea more seriously. By the fall, he'd made up his mind. "I kept thinking we needed somebody young and brown, who looked like the district," he told me.

BY THE TIME PEÑA DECIDED TO RUN, the DCCC had already come to District 2 on its usual mission in potential swing districts: to find — and favor — the primary candidate it believed had the best chance at winning the general election. Over the past few decades, picking favorites in primaries has become a controversial feature of the DCCC's strategy, as it has with its Republican equivalent, the National Republican Congressional Committee, or NRCC. Both committees have programs that provide extra support to a subset of candidates, usually ones in

competitive swing districts: "The Young Guns" for the NRCC, and "Red to Blue" for the DCCC.

For Democrats running in 2018, the Red to Blue program set out to target Republican-held districts that could possibly be flipped, recruiting candidates long before primary voters went to the polls. Typically, DCCC picks (and not just those receiving extra Red to Blue support) receive funding and other resources from the committee, including consulting outfits that work in a variety of areas — media strategy, polling,

"We don't care what he stands for, because he'll have to caucus with us anyway."

—Molly Ritner,
the Democratic
Congressional
Campaign
Committee's Midwest
political director,
speaking about
District 2 candidate
Tony Martinez

campaign management and fundraising. Candidates who accept the committee's endorsement agree to hire consultants from a list of approved DCCC partners, or vendors. A candidate's status as the DCCC's pick helps raise money, gather support and signal viability in what political scientists often call "the invisible primary," where party elites and donors coalesce behind a supposed favorite before voters go to the polls. The favorites, in turn, use this to signal their strength and legitimacy to the party establishment, media and the public, creating a snowball of support.

For those without DCCC backing, defeating the committee's pick is challenging. Hans Hassell, a political scientist at Florida State, found that between 2004 and 2016, 68% of party picks won primaries where multiple candidates were running without an incumbent, and where the party didn't clear the field. *The Intercept*, meanwhile, has reported that only two candidates without DCCC support in 2018 defeated the committee's primary picks.

None of this makes the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee look very democratic, so party leaders avoid discussing the issue. When they do, however, they generally offer a few arguments for picking favorites in primaries. Without intervention, they worry, voters might nominate a candidate too liberal, or too underfunded, to win the general election. Second, clearing primary fields behind a single favorite means spending less money and blood attacking other Democrats, resources that are better saved for the general election. Others say that the committee's job is to win majorities, not to be democratic, fair or ethical, and that justifying their tactics is irrelevant. Besides, European democracies offer their voters even less choice in picking party nominees, and if outsiders can't overcome DCCC favorites in the primaries, what hope do they have of defeating a Koch-funded Republican in the general?

In 2018, New Mexico Democrats were dreaming of winning every federal and statewide race, and Congressional District 2 was their greatest obstacle. But there was reason for hope. In special elections across the country, Democrats had flipped more challenging seats, and Ben Ray Luján, New Mexico's representative from its 3rd Congressional District, now chaired the DCCC in Washington. That put him in a perfect position to support a Democrat in District 2, where increasing turnout would also help his cousin, Democrat Michelle Lujan Grisham, who was running for governor. Optimists saw parallels with 2008, the first time a Democrat had won District 2 in decades, during a good cycle for Democrats. That year, the district's incumbent Republican representative, Steve Pearce, left to run for Senate. He eventually lost to Tom Udall and took District 2 back two years later. But in 2017, Pearce had decided to

run for statewide office once more, this time for governor against Lujan Grisham, leaving the seat vacant again.

Initially, party leaders hoped to run Joe Cervantes, a state senator from Las Cruces, District 2's largest city and Democratic base. Cervantes came from the older, more conservative faction of business-friendly Democrats in Las Cruces, and his centrism appealed to party leaders seeking a moderate. But he chose to run for governor instead, a position more powerful than District 2, and easier to hold as a Democrat.

Molly Ritner, the DCCC's Midwest political director at the time, soon came searching for a candidate. In late summer, she met with Tony Martinez, a co-founder of the city's chapter of Indivisible, a liberal grassroots group formed following Donald Trump's election. Martinez had worked for Abbott and Valeant, the pharmaceutical companies, and served in the first Gulf War and in Operation Iraqi Freedom. He announced his candidacy in July. Martinez's ideology was moderate in ways the DCCC allegedly preferred in swing districts. He wanted universal healthcare, though not single-payer. He favored corporate tax cuts, to keep companies from going overseas, but thought wealthy Americans should be taxed more. He spoke softly, the way a wise, calming father might, and he distrusted identity politics. "I think 'We as Americans' is always better than 'I as a Latino'," he told me. It was a lesson the military had taught him.

But his policy preferences seemed of little interest to Ritner. For the DCCC to consider supporting him, Ritner explained, Martinez would need to raise \$300,000 per quarter.

At one point, Martinez's wife, Lisa, butted in.

"Do you know what he stands for?" she asked.

"We don't care what he stands for, because he'll have to caucus with us anyway," she said.

Martinez dropped out in mid-October, disappointed in the Democratic Party, and stepped back from Indivisible. By that time, five other candidates — David Baake, Mad Hildebrandt, Adolf Zubia, Ron Fitzherbert and Thomas Durham — had announced their candidacies. Two of them, Hildebrandt and Baake, took up the DCCC's invitation — which was extended to them even though they hadn't hit the minimum fundraising targets to qualify — to attend one of the committee's training sessions in DC, in October. But none were young and brown. Peña decided to run.

Among the first people Peña told, in early November, was Nathan Small, his former boss on the Las Cruces City Council. The two now ran a horse-trekking business together, and Small pledged to support his friend. Next, Peña consulted Jeff Steinborn, a state senator and one of Las Cruces' most wily political maneuverers. Steinborn, who was

popular with the city's progressives, constantly talked about his past work for former Sen. Jeff Bingaman, and his family was practically its own institution in the city. His father had served as Las Cruces' mayor for three terms in the 1980s, and then became a powerful local real estate developer.

Steinborn reacted to Peña's announcement much the way Small did; he seemed somewhat surprised, but said he'd help him. He then asked more questions. What were Peña's fundraising strategies? How would he collect enough signatures to qualify? He'd taken down other opponents on signatures, Steinborn told him on a walk together, according to Peña. At the time, Peña didn't think much of the comment.

Steinborn also told Peña that he was the DCCC's point person in southern New Mexico, and that he was in close communication with Ritner. This meant Steinborn played an important yet informal role in the DCCC's recruiting process that the Committee rarely acknowledges. That is, that the organization tends to rely heavily on established local political figures, like Steinborn, to recommend and recruit candidates. Given that the DCCC can't possibly know every district across the country, this is understandable, but this also tends to give players like Steinborn inordinate sway, favoring the preferences of establishment politicians. "They go with the people that they know, and that can miss a whole lot of opportunities," Hassell told me.

Peña, at least, knew Steinborn well, and was cautiously optimistic about his support. Over the next few weeks, Peña shared campaign strategies with him and Small, saying he planned to announce in early January. Ritner, meanwhile, began screening him. Then, in late November, Torres Small met him at the coffee shop and told him she'd decided to run.

That night, Peña couldn't sleep. The week before he met with Torres Small, Nathan Small had asked to review a list of the donors Peña would be targeting, according to Peña. Peña gave him the information, suspecting nothing, and now Steinborn and Small knew everything about his early campaign strategies. Small, he felt, had deceived him; in early November, when Peña first told Small of his plans, Small said nothing about his wife considering a run, and Steinborn hadn't mentioned anything either. Later, Torres Small told me she'd decided to run in December, though Tom Udall recalled them discussing the possibility around October. That same month, a public official in Las Cruces informed one of Peña's supporters that a young Hispanic woman with a lot of money behind her would soon be entering the race, and that Peña's candidacy would be hopeless.

Though Peña had developed impressive political connections, Torres Small was probably considered closer to establishment networks, fundraising channels and potential endorsements.

She had worked for a popular U.S. senator, married a state representative, and she and her husband were close allies of Steinborn. Across the country, Democrats were looking to elect women, and Torres Small was in her early 30s and Hispanic — young and brown like Peña. She grew up in Las Cruces, the daughter of a teacher and a social worker, and returned home after studying abroad and attending Georgetown, a living example of fighting brain drain.

By December, Ritner had already been screening Peña extensively, digging into his personal life, including his divorce from Kasey. The couple had since reunited, and Ritner later dismissed these concerns, but someone close to Ritner leaked the investigation, and rumors spread about his divorce. Peña was growing anxious. Ritner had largely gone silent, and county chairs around the district kept asking Peña whether he was the DCCC pick. That bothered Peña: Why did party chairs care more about the DCCC's preferences than voters'?

In December, Ritner finally called Peña. The DCCC would be going with Torres Small, she said, and money and endorsements soon began heading her way. According to Peña, local politicians who had once offered to help him began pulling away as well. The invisible primary had started, and Peña seemed to be losing.

While Peña scrambled to get a head start with his announcement, Torres Small began working to clear the field, advertising endorsements and her status as the DCCC's pick in private conversations, according to other primary candidates. Many left on their own accord. Zubia dropped out in September, citing family considerations — a decision Torres Small called him to confirm — and Fitzherbert happily left the race when he discovered Torres Small was running. Durham met with Torres Small briefly and discussed many issues, including consolidation, and dropped out willingly as well.

But not everyone conceded so easily. David Baake, a Harvard-educated lawyer who announced his candidacy in the summer, met with Torres Small in December. At the meeting, Torres Small indicated that she now had DCCC backing and important financial support. In January, Baake discussed the meeting with other primary candidates' supporters. According to sources present at the meeting, he described feeling upset and pressured to leave the race by Torres Small, who, they said, had asked Baake for his endorsement. Around the same time, Baake also helped review a critical letter sent to the DCCC and other party leaders, objecting to the committee's early role in the primary. (Previously, Baake said, the DCCC had assured him his campaign could operate without interference.) But shortly after reviewing the letter, in January, he dropped out and endorsed Torres Small. (A close associate



of Baake's denied that Torres Small had pressured him to drop out.)

Around the same time, Maria Flores, a Las Cruces school board member, also began to consider running. According to a source familiar with the situation, Torres Small pressed her to leave the race as well, and Flores reluctantly assented.

Still, Torres Small didn't clear the field entirely. Mad Hildebrandt — a professor and Coast Guard veteran from Socorro who'd been running for months — refused to drop out when Torres Small called to ask her to, according to Hildebrandt. Peña, meanwhile, was still charging ahead, and probably remained Torres Small's biggest threat: Outside his sex, he could claim everything vogue in liberal politics that Torres Small could. He was young, brown, fluent in Spanish, and he came from even humbler beginnings. Like Torres Small, he had an impressive background in public service and conservation. "I think it would have been a tough primary," a political figure in Las Cruces told me.

The only thing Peña didn't have, it seemed, was money and party support, which were now flowing to Torres

Small. On Jan. 17, with endorsements from dozens of politicians, Torres Small formally announced her candidacy, and, in mid-February, almost three months before the primary, the DCCC announced her as a Red-to-Blue pick. Torres Small would go on to set fundraising records, while Peña raised just under \$15,000. Still, he remained committed to testing purer notions of democracy.

"We had the people," he said. "Our plan was to out-organize them."

OVER THE WINTER, PEÑA CAMPAIGNED all over the district, visiting multiple counties a day. He loved to travel, and he liked the storytelling involved in public-lands advocacy, which was essential to campaigning. It was a welcome break from what Nathan Small and Jeff Steinborn sometimes called "triangulation," the tactical work of coordinating support or opposition among political elites — and grassroots organizing was a breath of fresh air in comparison. But things soon began to unravel, and Peña ultimately became a kind of victim to political schemes himself.

On Feb. 6, a Tuesday, 623 valid

Democratic Party candidates Xochitl Torres Small, left, and Michelle Lujan Grisham share a stage at a midterm elections campaign rally in Socorro, New Mexico, last November.

Ben Ray Luján, U.S. Representative for New Mexico's 3rd Congressional District, delivers a speech to attendees of a Democratic Party campaign rally in Socorro, New Mexico, in November 2018. He later was promoted to assistant House speaker, and declared his run for Tom Udall's open Senate seat in 2020, with Nancy Pelosi's endorsement.

petition signatures were due to New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver, a Democrat, to qualify for the primary ballot. But just before the filing deadline, a contractor Peña hired to collect them suddenly disappeared. (When I reached him by phone, he said he'd been too busy with personal issues to turn them in.) Peña's campaign rushed to gather backup signatures, submitting 773, leaving little margin for error. The results of the signature filings were scheduled to be posted by the following Tuesday.

Though it would take a week before Toulouse Oliver publicly posted the candidate list, Ben Salazar, an aide to Tom Udall, Torres Small's champion and former boss, received a link to the list the very next morning. He emailed it to the state Democratic Party's Hispanic Caucus, which included a Peña supporter, and Peña learned that he'd been disqualified that weekend. One of Peña's most fervent supporters, Evelyn Madrid Erhard, asked Toulouse Oliver for an explanation. Over the phone, Toulouse Oliver expressed regret that the list had leaked, according to Madrid Erhard, but

held firm on her reasons for disqualifying Peña.

Toulouse Oliver's reasoning, however, struck many as absurd. On some of Peña's petition pages, the "ñ" in Peña and Doña Ana County had printed as "Ó." Before gathering signatures, Peña's staff crossed out the letters by hand with a pen and rewrote the ñ, but this violated a New Mexico elections provision. Nominating petitions, the statute reads, are deemed invalid "if any of the required information is altered." Toulouse Oliver said this rendered those pages moot, leaving Peña short of the minimum signatures.

Peña hired a lawyer, Erika Anderson, and challenged his disqualification. At a court in Santa Fe, Anderson argued that the tilde objection discriminated against candidates with Spanish names, and that the disqualification went against the spirit of the law. There was no intent to deceive, she added, or to confuse voters. Toulouse Oliver's ruling also seemed unusually harsh; precedent afforded some legal room for bureaucratic discretion in making exceptions to the statute, so as not to disenfranchise voters, but Toulouse

Oliver refused to grant this for Peña. (A few weeks later, when another candidate for public office submitted petitions with similarly altered headings, county clerks did not flag them. This case was challenged as well, and the judge ruled in favor of the candidate, declaring there was no evidence it confused voters.)

In the courtroom, two state's lawyers fought hard against Peña. After a day of argument, the judge upheld Peña's disqualification, ruling that the tilde correction technically violated the letter of the law, but invited Peña to appeal to the state Supreme Court. In a later case, he acknowledged that he struggled with the decision, saying he preferred leaning towards the enfranchisement of candidates whenever possible.

Peña planned to appeal, but he was now facing challenges from other directions. A second lawsuit had also been filed against him in Las Cruces, under the name William Thomas Morrow, challenging the validity of many of his signatures. William Thomas Morrow, better known as Tommy, was a close ally of the Smalls, along with his son, Emerson, an aspiring young politician. Emerson Morrow had served as student body president at New Mexico State — he later resigned, facing impeachment — and as state president for the College Democrats. In the summers, he interned for Tom Udall and Ben Ray Luján, and he frequently volunteered for Nathan Small's campaigns. When Peña had reached out to him to speak at NMSU that winter, Emerson often canceled meetings.

When I reached Tommy Morrow by phone, he admitted that Torres Small's campaign had asked to file the lawsuit under his name. "I didn't know many of the details, but I was happy to step forward for them," he told me. "They just needed someone who was going to support Xochitl and Nathan. And I do. Our son has worked for Nathan, and I actually helped him on his campaign." A few months later, FEC filings revealed that Torres Small's campaign paid Karen Mendenhall, the lawyer who brought the Morrow lawsuit, and who was in the courtroom for the tilde case, more than \$18,000 for "legal services" in four payments. The fee was greater than the entire sum of money Peña had raised for his campaign, and its largest installment had been paid shortly after he left the race.

"The FEC has taken a very liberal view of when campaign funds may be used to pay legal expenses," Brett Kappel, an expert on elections law in D.C., told me, when I asked him about the situation's legal implications. But, he added, "if there were a complaint over this, the FEC would want to know why the campaign wasn't the plaintiff in the case." In any case, by the time Torres Small's campaign had to report the payments, there was no use in filing a complaint. Peña's candidacy was over.

The Morrow lawsuit was also shaky.



In February, Torres Small's campaign manager, Brian Sowyrda, had requested Peña's petitions from the secretary of State, and the campaign then sent a volunteer, Ashley Beyer, to Santa Fe to check them against the state's voter files, for the Morrow lawsuit. Beyer, an elections professional in Las Cruces, told me she'd offered to do this as a matter of professional development and education. But the irony was hard to miss. In the past, Beyer had worked for organizations like FairVote New Mexico, and now Torres Small's campaign was tasking her to help with disenfranchisement. Many of the mistakes she ended up citing in court documents, however, didn't withstand scrutiny, and Karen Mendenhall amended some a few days later. Beyer told me she didn't know why many of the errors she cited had been amended — she'd only heard rumors, which she wasn't willing to share with me. After her trip to Santa Fe, she told me she'd grown uncomfortable with how partisan it felt and stopped assisting in the lawsuit.

By this point, the party's reach felt almost comical; Peña had run into a young party boss connected to Torres Small at the lowest level of politics — a university's student body president — and now the young man's father's name was being used to sue him out of the race. Torres Small's campaign, well-funded with DCCC backing, had effectively bankrupted his own candidacy with lawsuits, and Peña, now personally in debt, lacked the money or time left for a legal challenge.

Despite this, with his appeal in the air, Peña still planned to speak at the upcoming preprimary convention in Albuquerque, on March 10. But before the convention, he received a message from Richard Ellenberg, New Mexico's Democratic Party chair at the time, who had previously rejected complaints about party favoritism. (The DCCC, he said, was not part of the Democratic Party or bound by state neutrality laws, and it could support anyone it wanted to.) If Peña planned to speak as a candidate, Ellenberg told him, Maggie Toulouse Oliver would file for a restraining order against him.

Peña's lawyer was skeptical Toulouse Oliver had this authority, but Peña finally gave up. After a month of fighting, they'd run out of time and money. "Erika said I was moot," he told me.

At the convention, Peña instead introduced Mad Hildebrandt, while his supporters watched. Luján, the DCCC chairman, was also in attendance, and Evelyn Madrid Erhard confronted him. In 2012, before winning the Democratic nomination for District 2, Madrid Erhard had made appointments in Washington, D.C., to meet with Steve Israel, then the DCCC chair, and Debbie Wasserman Schultz, head of the DNC. She'd paid for travel expenses out of her own pocket, but when she arrived in D.C., Israel and Wasserman Schultz both ghosted

her. Madrid Erhard ended up meeting with a staffer on a curb. Now, she saw the Democratic Party as having over-intervened in the primary, to the point of usurping democracy.

At the convention, Madrid Erhard found Luján and accused the Democratic Party of favoritism.

"I have the constitutional right to support whoever the hell I want!" he yelled at her, according to Madrid Erhard.

It was a fitting end to Peña's candidacy. In southern New Mexico, favoritism had begun with the DCCC, but nothing stayed national. As in all states, ambitious ladder-climbers were everywhere in local politics, and their incentives for career advancement didn't tend toward opposing the their party's wishes. A few weeks later, Toulouse Oliver and Attorney General Hector Balderas, also a Democrat, endorsed Torres Small. And, despite previously telling Peña he wouldn't be supporting anyone in the primary, Martin Heinrich, New Mexico's junior senator, endorsed her as well.

"They circle the wagons fast. It's like Chicago politics, but spread across 120,000 square miles," a New Mexico political donor told me.

Mad Hildebrandt, meanwhile, fought to the end. But coming from Socorro, a much smaller city than Las Cruces, her base of support was limited, and she faced an uphill climb. At a candidate forum in Las Cruces organized by the Doña Ana County Democratic Party, Peter Ossorio, an adjunct professor of government at NMSU who later endorsed Torres Small, was chosen to moderate. Before Hildebrandt walked on stage, a man passed her briskly and whispered, "You're dead," according to Hildebrandt.

In June, Torres Small won the primary in convincing fashion, with over 70% of the vote. A few months later, *The New York Times* ran a puff piece on first-time candidates for U.S. House races, and quoted Torres Small. After suing her strongest competition out the race behind someone else's name and attempting to clear the primary field, she gave the *Times* a quote that stretched the imagination.

It was potentially fertile ground for Democrats this year. So Torres Small, a former U.S. Senate aide whose husband is in the state's Legislature, began trying to rustle up the right candidate.

"I called some people," she said. "I asked a few folks to run."

Torres Small retweeted the story, as did her campaign manager, Brian Sowyrda.

"Always love seeing the boss get a little ink in a @nytopinion story!" he posted.

TORRES SMALL WAS HARD TO FOLLOW during the general election, and cautious about exposure. Her campaign rarely sent public announcements of upcoming speaking engagements. Afterwards, they posted carefully curated photos of events

online — Torres Small with a sheep, with ducks at the Great American Duck Race in Deming, with the elderly at a diner. When I finally tracked down an event in advance, Brian Sowyrda called me beforehand. He spoke to me as if I were a corporate advertising client. Was there anything, he asked, I'd like Torres Small to talk about when she spoke?

The first campaign event I attended, in August, was held in Hillsboro, a small village on the eastern side of the Gila Wilderness. At an old stone house, Torres Small spoke and took questions. At the time, her stump speech felt a little mechanical and focus-grouped; she frequently glanced upwards, as if looking for her script somewhere in the sky, and fielded questions with a rote "Thank you for that question" before responding. During the primary, Peña had campaigned differently, less careful with his words. "I think it's a stupid idea," he once said, when asked about Trump's border wall. That approach was a sharp contrast to Torres Small, who cautiously avoided straightforward answers to straightforward questions. Was she for Medicare for all? Thank you for that question, I'm for protecting the care we already have. She hunted, she wanted better access to the internet and health care for rural New Mexicans, and, if she had to talk about guns, she wanted improved education about safety, though she avoided mentioning bans. When national outlets covered her campaign, this moderate message — the political strategy — was what most intrigued them: Could moderation coming from a liberal young Hispanic woman flip a conservative district on the border? But mostly I found her positions evasive, careful to avoid committing to anything in plain language. My attention kept drifting to swarms of hummingbirds zipping around feeders behind the house. They looked much happier than I was, oblivious to politicians, far nimbler and more acrobatic.

But her stump's awkwardness quickly disappeared. Working the crowd afterward, Torres Small was personable, with a nuanced understanding of her district, always smiling and clearly the most intelligent person in the room. I liked her, as did everyone else, but her campaign's caution never went away. In Hillsboro, when I spoke with Torres Small about access for a short profile, Sowyrda insisted that our first conversation be kept off the record, and then pulled out a tape recorder. I came to see those moments as unfortunate bugs in the campaign — signs of overly cautious control, particularly vulnerable to lawyerly sensibilities.

In Las Cruces, a sign rested proudly inside the doorway of Torres Small's office: "Las Cruces DCCC Battle Station." It read like a proclamation of her status as the chosen one, and it made me wince. That sense of entitlement — to a nomination that was in theory democratic — would never stop bothering her

In Las Cruces, a sign rested proudly inside the doorway of Torres Small's office: Las Cruces DCCC Battle Station. It read like a proclamation of her status as the chosen one, and it made me wince.

"Candidates that are the favorite of the party in the primary don't do better than outsider candidates, and may actually do worse."

—Hans Hassell,
political scientist at
Florida State

critics, though I personally found it less offensive than they did. I viewed Torres Small more sympathetically, as a well-intentioned person navigating a terrible system. Dangling an establishment coronation that brought money and resources in front of aspiring politicians invariably encouraged bad behavior, and exploiting these advantages seemed forgivable. But the Democratic Party's embrace of these incentives was less admirable. The party prided itself on getting money and favoritism out of politics, and promoting the opposite in primaries felt hypocritical. And yet, it was probably unfair to view the DCCC's behavior in a vacuum either; the amount of money required to run for public office now dictated that fundraising begin early in primaries.

Torres Small's branding, anyway, seemed to be working. On Election Day, *The New York Times* featured her on *The Daily*, its popular podcast, and I listened as I drove to the convention center in Las Cruces, where the city's Democrats were gathering for a party. When I arrived, the room was buzzing, familiar faces from Las Cruces politics everywhere. TV screens were scattered around the room, and the scene reminded me of a game show, of the reality TV series that American politics had become. The bar was serving a cocktail called "The Blue Wave," a mixture of coconut rum, blue curacao and sour mix that left me with a stomachache the following morning.

At around 11 p.m., Torres Small was a couple thousand votes behind, and multiple outlets had called the race against her. Yvette Herrell, her Republican opponent, gave a victory speech. But in the convention center, Torres Small hadn't conceded. She worked the room, Brian Sowyrda in tow on his cellphone, looking solemn. By midnight, the Doña Ana County clerk's office announced that there were still about 8,000 absentee votes to count, most of them from Doña Ana County, the district's Democratic stronghold. On New Mexico Media Twitter, some of the state's best political reporters still hadn't called the race. Torres Small had a chance.

The clerk's office counted the absentee ballots in a warehouse the next day, with assistance from staffers from both campaigns. It was an odd scene: Lindsey Bachman, Peña's former campaign manager, had recently been hired as the Doña Ana deputy county clerk, and she was now overseeing a count that might give Torres Small an upset win. If she was aware of the irony, she didn't show it; she wandered the room, chatting amicably with Sowyrda and with Jeff Steinborn, who was acting as the Torres Small Campaign's challenger, for ballot oversight. Around 6 p.m., after a full day of counting, Sowyrda left the warehouse and embraced Nathan Small, who'd been pacing outside. With the absentees counted, Torres Small had won by just under 3,000 votes.

Throughout the count, I'd been

exchanging texts with Peña, who was watching the results from home. When I left Las Cruces that night, I asked if I could stop by.

"Getting my kiddos bathed up and ready for bed," he texted back. "What a turn of events though. I am at my daughter's school tomorrow morning. It's college day and I am manning the NMSU booth. Tomorrow I am for sure around, might ask for the evening to digest. What an emotional roller coaster."

FOR MANY OF THOSE PUSHED OUT of the primary, Torres Small's victory brought complicated emotions. Yvette Herrell's politics disgusted them, but there was also a sense that the Democratic Party had manipulated democracy, and that Torres Small had embraced its meddling. Everyone dealt with their frustrations differently. Martinez stayed away from Indivisible meetings. Hildebrandt cut her hair short, and didn't vote for Torres Small. For Peña, humor helped; he now signed his emails with a single ñ, and his brother had baseball caps made with the emblem. A few months after the election, a Peña supporter sent a letter to Michelle Lujan Grisham and Jeff Steinborn, who was heading an ethics commission in the Legislature, seeking to reform the election statute used to disqualify Peña. A boilerplate response from the governor's office was sent back in response.

Still, Peña expressed conflicted feelings about what had happened. As an activist, he survived by constantly looking forward and never looking back. During the general, he'd forced himself to make fundraising calls for Democrats and Torres Small. Doing otherwise, he felt, would betray his constituents, who were still owed a Democratic representative. Following her victory, he posed in pictures with her, along with colleagues and friends. "Just smile and wave, boys ... just smile and wave," he told me, describing his thoughts at the time.

Whenever we spoke, Peña was hesitant to complain, but a restlessness always percolated in the background. "There's something broken here, right?" he once said. "Money shouldn't be this important." And it was hard to forget what had happened, since his life was filled with constant reminders. One day, when Angel went to pick up groceries from Walmart, the store's computer system didn't take the tilde correctly, and the cashier couldn't find his reservation. Hotel bookings often got messed up as well. When the midterms approached, Peña began hiking obsessively, and campaign season nearly drove him mad. After the election, he went hunting with his daughter. They stalked a buck but it ran away.

Others swallowed what had happened, for practical reasons. Last winter, Ashley Beyer, the volunteer who'd gone through Peña's petitions for the Morrow lawsuit, suddenly stopped taking my calls, and, soon after, Torres Small's office hired her. Privately, Baake had admitted

he regretted succumbing to pressure to drop out; Torres Small, he lamented, had changed the platform they'd discussed during their December meeting, before he left the race. As the election approached, Baake began feeling that Torres Small would say anything to get elected. Still, the day before the election, he changed his Facebook photo to a picture of himself with Torres Small, her campaign slogan displayed across the frame. Co-option was probably a better career move, easier than protest, and Baake was now working in political circles close to her in Las Cruces. Activists close to Baake said that he later told them Torres Small's people promised to help with his campaign expenses, though the money never materialized. Baake did not talk to me for this story, though a close associate of his denied these claims.

PROPOSERS OF PRIMARY FAVORITISM

stress that it's necessary to win house majorities, however dirty or unseemly they may become. This view is almost unquestioned in circles of D.C. political consultants, but the best available research from political science suggests exactly the opposite — that picking favorites in congressional races doesn't increase winning percentages in the general. "Briefly," Hans Hassell told me, summarizing, "candidates that are the favorite of the party in the primary don't do better than outsider candidates, and may actually do worse."

In research that is still ongoing, Hassell has surveyed 812 primaries in competitive swing districts between 2004 and 2016 without an incumbent, identifying party favorites based on which candidate shared the most donors in common with the DCCC or NRCC. Party picks won the general election only 26.1% of the time. Those without party support — or with less of it — won the general 53% of the time. In even tighter swing districts, party favorites who won primaries did slightly worse, winning 25.9% of the time, compared with outsider candidates, who won 43% of the time.

For party gatekeepers and consultants, this fact — that even with decades of experience in politics, they might not be any better at picking winners than primary voters — is uncomfortable. When I shared my own experiences reporting this story, listening to political strategists insist that they could pick the best, most electable candidates, Hassell described similar conversations in his own academic research.

"I wholeheartedly believe that the DCCC really thinks it's trying to pick the best candidate. Whether they're good at it is an entirely different question — and that I'm skeptical of," he told me.

Hassell's findings, though surprising to some, build on a strong current of thought in political science that many political professionals don't like to acknowledge: that campaign strategy and candidate selection, or even ideological

bent, probably matter far less in determining the outcome of general elections than larger fundamental phenomena — the economy, social movements, a president's first congressional midterm, or demographic changes. Donald Trump's presidency and the grassroots opposition to his administration, in other words, are likely more responsible for Democrats winning 40 seats than the DCCC's ability to pick the right favorites with the right ideological hue in primaries. But it's easy for the DCCC and party elites to mix up the causal variables to justify their tactics — especially when they win, as with Torres Small and the Blue Wave she was part of.

Yet fundamentals are exactly the kinds of forces that candidates, campaigns, consultants and parties can't control. Journalists don't like to acknowledge them much either, preferring to chronicle campaign maneuvers to the American public as if every move, pivot or scandal is an exciting game-changer for election outcomes. Political consultants, meanwhile, have little to gain from acknowledging them, since they're paid to overcome fundamentals with strategic genius. And as for the DCCC, doing something rather than nothing in primaries is harder to pull off PR-wise, not to mention psychologically, since humans generally feel better when they feel in control. "These committees are just incredibly risk-averse," Casey Dominguez, a professor of political science at the University of San Diego, told me.

FOR THE MOST PART, PARTIES KEEP QUIET about their involvement in primaries, or frame programs like Red to Blue carefully. "The committee has to be very careful not to put its thumb on the scale very often, and if it does, to not do it publicly," a former chair of the DCCC told me. Many argue this makes concerns around the party's intervention irrelevant, since most voters don't know what goes on. But this dismissal ignores important cracks beneath the surface that the Democratic Party would probably be unwise to ignore. When strong primary fields — and thus more substantive debates — are cleared, fissures grow deeper, swept under the rug and gilded over, and suppressed talent can grow discouraged.

Those tensions were evident in Las Cruces, which was still navigating the effects of its own political transformation. In the mid-2000s, the city's first Progressive Voter Alliance was founded, and its momentum pushed the city council further left. Many of its leaders were seen as transplants from elsewhere — the liberal north, or from outside the state — and tended to be on the whiter side. Their rise in power sometimes clashed with older, more moderate local factions and organizations like the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

"I call them so-called progressives," Pablo Martinez, a moderate 11th-generation New Mexican and LULAC's state director, told me. "They're the ones that

come from back east and they've come into New Mexico and want to run, and they haven't even lived here. There's a lot of bad race relations, and the party has just kind of hush-hushed them."

Indivisible was a recent addition to the mix as well, its politics less defined but with a similar demographic makeup. A Democratic primary many considered rigged only made these tensions worse, especially after 2016. "That Bernie-Hillary divide, people pretend it doesn't exist, but it's still there," Tony Martinez, the candidate discouraged by Ritner's fundraising targets, told me. Pablo Martinez had encouraged both Torres Small and Martinez to run, and though Torres Small's eventual victory thrilled him, he echoed concerns about primary intervention — that it furthered the divides in the district.

"In future elections, if they want to gain the respect of people, they should play by fair rules," he told me. "If we're going to be democratic, let's be democratic. Let's be consistent, and not show preferential treatment to anyone."

"If you do (primary intervention) in an insensitive fashion, you're harming your relationship with people on the

ground, with people in those communities," Robert Boatright, a professor at Clark University, added. "If you've got a year like 2018 where you have many people eager to run, you want to make sure that the people who don't run, or don't get the support of the political elite, still wind up feeling good about the political process, and are willing to support you down the road." The occasional emergency, of course, probably justified party intervention, he added; a figure, say, like Alabama's Roy Moore could alienate enough voters to cost parties a safe seat. Otherwise, though, primary meddling could be risky.

District 2, however, had been a far cry from this situation. The early field had been full of good candidates, yet the party and Torres Small had still worked hard to clear them. Why not have the DCCC jump into the race after the primary finished many asked? Primary intervention often discouraged good people from getting involved in politics, hurting the party's long-term health and sometimes leading to disenchantment. That certainly applied to Martinez, who withdrew from Indivisible meetings, and others described

A woman stands in front of a campaign poster at a Democratic Party rally in Socorro, New Mexico, shortly before the 2018 midterm elections.



I often sensed a growth of circumstantial conspiracy thinking among Torres Small's detractors on the left. It was reasonable to conclude the primary was rigged, but some used it as a diving board to take bigger leaps.



Will Ford is a journalist based in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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jaded feelings as well. On Twitter, two pictures were circulating comparing the incoming Republican class — comically white and male, in a country that was neither — to the Democratic one, a historically young, energetic and diverse coalition, just as Peña had hoped for. But judging by what had happened in District 2, it was hard to trust them completely. Faces had changed, but was the nature of politics really changing that much?

But the loss of trust in institutions was what most troubled me. I often sensed a growth of circumstantial conspiracy thinking among Torres Small's detractors on the left. It was reasonable to conclude the primary was rigged, but some used it as a diving board to take bigger leaps. Like many Republicans, Yvette Herrell accused Democrats of rigging absentee ballots, and hired a team to investigate. They found no proof of conspiratorial wrongdoing, but many liberals who disliked Torres Small's behavior in the primary weren't convinced. I heard other theories I couldn't confirm, and I knew liberals so distrustful of Hillary Clinton that they bought into QAnon conspiracy theories, which felt dangerous. When conservatives had grown disenchanted with their own side's establishment and institutions, Donald Trump hijacked the their party and won the presidency.

Others who excused the primary's politics reduced themselves to the weakest of arguments — that, ethically, Republican sins made any tinkering in primaries by Democrats pale in comparison. The Republican primary in District 2 had certainly been abhorrent, devolving into a contest over who could shower Donald Trump with the most flattery. I'd reported from China for many years, and it surpassed any sycophancy I'd seen Chinese officials display toward Xi Jinping. But citing Republican sin to let the Democratic Party do whatever it wanted, immune to criticism, was a weak justification for a process that left scars and resentment among its base, and it didn't appear to increase the party's chance of winning.

The week before the election, I went hiking with Peña in the Organ Mountains, and I brought up an audio clip that leaked to *The Intercept*, whose frequent coverage of the DCCC many activists often mentioned to me. In it, Steny Hoyer, the Democratic House whip, asks Levi Tillemann to drop out of a primary in Colorado, to clear the way for the DCCC's pick, Jason Crow. Hoyer tells Tillemann that the DCCC picked Crow long ago, and that he wasn't involved in the decision, but that he'll still be backing Crow. "Frankly, that happens in life all the time," he tells Tillemann.

Wasn't that the problem? Peña asked, as we hiked up the trail, stopping to look back over Las Cruces. The ones who relied on favoritism and manipulation always went to Washington. And didn't that make them the weak ones?

I left early to catch Torres Small's

campaign, and Peña kept hiking upwards,

IN CONGRESS, TORRES SMALL has governed largely as she campaigned. She joined the Blue Dog Coalition, a group of moderates, and became an honorary co-chair for Third Way, a centrist think tank that frequently draws the ire of progressives. In February, she voted for a bill requiring federal background checks for gun sales, but voted against closing the Charleston Loophole, which allows gun buyers to purchase firearms if checks take more than three days. On impeachment, she has remained incredibly cautious, and instead continues to champion safer issues, like improving rural health care and internet access. This moderate approach seems eminently reasonable for a swing district and consistent with her campaign. But amid grumblings among liberals that she isn't doing enough, some have already begun looking for a primary challenger, and her moderation has reinforced progressive accusations about the DCCC — that the committee only picks moderates who can fundraise but don't stand strongly for anything. (Hassell's research, interestingly, brings these progressive assumptions into question as well. Party picks don't necessarily skew more moderate, he's found; there are lot of other variables that affect the selection process.)

Peña, meanwhile, still works with Torres Small frequently. "Generally working to make her more appealing to the conservation folks given her lack of action on other things," he told me this fall, before helping organize a public-lands event for her in the Gila. Recently, he'd visited her office in Washington, looking for commitments on the border and lands protection, but Torres Small was hesitant. "Took the middle, didn't commit to anything. Election season coming up. You know how it goes," he told me.

In Las Cruces, Torres Small's closest supporters have spent a lot of time tempering such expectations. They stress that, in such a moderate district, Torres Small has to govern as a pragmatic centrist — she can't be Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Steve Pearce, her Tea Party predecessor, was a disaster by comparison, and it was refreshing to see Torres Small at so many town halls, they argued. But others found her centrism disappointing, and I couldn't help but wonder whether the party's tactics in the primary had hardened these resentments. The election had anointed her as a kind of savior, a model for how to win a conservative rural Western swing district, but this crowning felt inconclusive; the party hadn't given others a fair chance. If they had, I suspected her critics might now have viewed her as more legitimate.

The DCCC, meanwhile, emboldened by its 2018 wave, has shown little interest in staying out of primaries. "It's a complete non-issue inside the party. It's like asking baseball players if it's controversial to go to spring training," the head of a D.C. think tank that works with the

DCCC told me. In March, the committee announced plans to tighten its control even further; any political consultant who contracted for challengers of 2020 incumbents would be taken off the DCCC's approved vendor lists it provided to its picks. The Democratic Party has also rewarded the DCCC's 2018 leaders: A few weeks after the election, Luján received a promotion to assistant House speaker, and, in April, declared his run for Tom Udall's open Senate seat in 2020, with Nancy Pelosi's endorsement.

In New Mexico, his chief opponent on the Democratic side was Maggie Toulouse Oliver. She dropped out in October, but it was strange to watch the narrative created around the race while it lasted. Toulouse Oliver was largely portrayed as the underdog progressive, and Luján as the establishment favorite. But both played important roles in derailing Peña's candidacy on behalf of the Democratic Party establishment, and I viewed these distinctions as completely manufactured ones, emblematic of the fickleness of politics. A new race, a new narrative constructed, moving like a freight train, previous maneuvers forgotten or hidden. And the squeamishness of American political professionals to discuss these issues always disappointed me. In the past, I'd done the occasional story on sensitive human rights issues in China, yet I'd found discussions of internal Democratic politics in Las Cruces to be even less transparent, and absurdly sensitive for a democracy. The Torres Small campaign declined requests for comment on this story, and, when I asked a DCCC spokesperson specific questions about the organization's policies, I received the following response: "The DCCC is proud to have led the charge to flip the House of Representatives in 2018, which has allowed House Democrats to put families and workers first, by fighting for lower healthcare and prescription drug costs, higher wages and more."

For the most part, Peña had moved on, though he'd briefly considered running against Torres Small, and he was still paying off his campaign debts. He hoped to run for public office again someday, but other opportunities lay ahead. This year, in October, he left the Conservation Lands Foundation for new nonprofit work, and one day I called to ask about the business he and Nathan Small owned. Since the primary, Peña had wanted to dissolve it, but he and Small had been stalling. The two were still cordial, but there was a new distance between them. The memory of the election, of feeling undermined by a close friend, of the ugliness of politics — dissolving the business would remind Peña of everything in the past, and these thoughts contradicted his instincts as an activist, to move forward.

When I called him, Peña was driving back home from northern New Mexico. "Brutal, man," he'd said, discussing the trekking business, and then politics. "Just brutal." □

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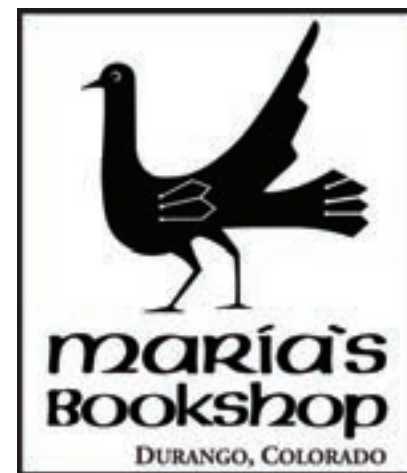
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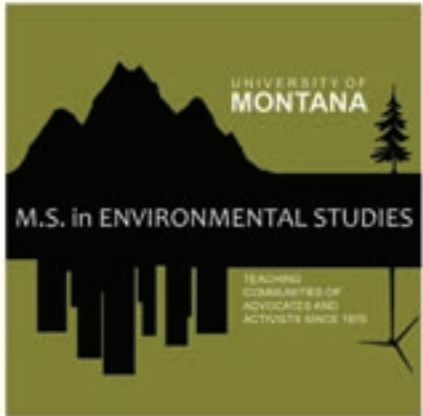
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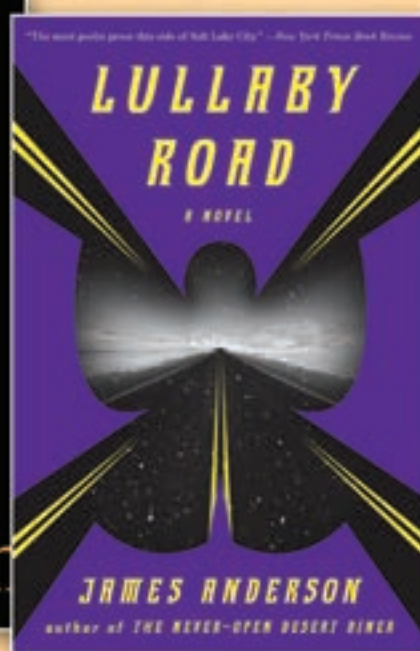
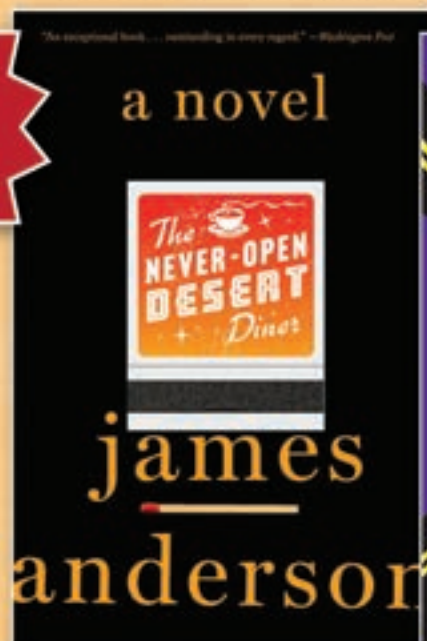
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The water nightmares of the California Dream

My mother grew up on a tiny farm on the outskirts of Bakersfield in the 1960s. When I was little, she told me stories about the Basques who sheared their sheep, and described a childhood spent wandering among the family's fruit and nut trees. It was a bucolic picture of California's Central Valley, the type of picturesque image that journalist Mark Arax, in his sprawling new treatise on water and agriculture in the Golden State, is quick to undermine: Today, small family farms are vanishing, agribusiness is expanding, the earth is sinking, aquifers are emptying, rivers run dry, and laborers toil for a pittance.

In *The Dreamt Land: Chasing Water and Dust Across California*, Arax roams the state and plumbs its history to reveal the causes and consequences of its current water crisis. He reports on farms and the pipelines that supply them, interviewing fieldworkers and billionaire landowners, and interjecting tales of his family's own agricultural forays and failures. His scope is impressive: He describes the cultivation of specialized grapes with the same clarity and finesse with which he unravels the state's great mass of dams, aqueducts and complicated

water rights. The result clearly depicts "the grandest hydraulic engineering feat known to man" — "one of the most dramatic alterations of the earth's surface in human history."

This engineering feat is at the center of the book's most urgent questions. Despite recurring drought and a rapidly changing climate, each year the Central Valley produces another bountiful harvest. "How much was magic? How much was plunder?" Arax asks. The region accounts for over a third of the country's vegetables, over two-thirds of our nuts and fruit; it boasts a million acres of almonds alone. Stewart Resnick of The Wonderful Company, the biggest grower of them all, shuttles 400,000 acre-feet of water per year to his 15 million trees, mostly almonds, pistachios, pomegranates and citrus. (The city of Los Angeles, for perspective, consumes 587,000 acre-feet annually.)

The bounty is largely plunder, of course, not magic. The plunder is as embedded in the state as the dream that made it possible. Arax traces this history from the Spanish colonial subjugation of Indigenous peoples to the conquering of the territory by U.S. forces, to the excavation of mountains for gold, to Los Angeles'

theft of the Owens River, to urban sprawl and suburban tracts — an unending cycle of supply and demand. Restraint was never an option. "No society in history has gone to greater lengths to deny its fundamental nature than California," he writes. "California, for a century and two-thirds now, keeps forgetting its arrangement with drought and flood."

Time and again in *The Dreamt Land*, we watch farmers ignore the certainty of drought, planting "to the absolute extreme of what the water could serve." When farms in Tulare and Kern counties exhausted their local rivers, they drained the San Joaquin, which also proved insufficient. Such excessive planting and pumping, paired with the natural pendulum of flood and drought, perpetuated the fast disappearance of water. This "gave rise to both the need and ambition of a system": the immense Central Valley Project and the State Water Project, which mine Northern California's rivers and redistribute water to the Central Valley and the urban centers of the south.

Both projects were largely constructed between the late 1930s and early 1970s and designed to allow farmers to grow in both wet and dry years. But "the System," as Arax methodically shows, was based on the flawed, idealized theory of an average year of weather; it presumed to deliver a constant, predictable supply, as if wild variations in precipitation did not exist or could be evened out by mathematics.

In reality, "the actual water captured and delivered (by the System) fell short of the normal or far beyond it." When it fell short, which happened frequently, farmers were forced to confront the nearly 2 million-acre-foot difference. When the floods arrived, they again forgot the dry years and sowed new fields. Cities did the same and boomed. Then true drought set in, as it always does, and everyone scrambled to survive: The cities grabbed from the System; the government supplied subsidies to farmers; some farmers dug new wells and watched the ground sink beneath them; still others fallowed their land and sold their water to the highest bidder. As climate change accelerates, the cycles of drought and flood and the severity of their effects have only been exacerbated.

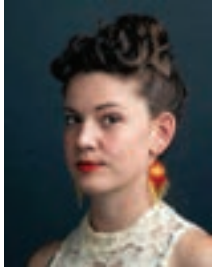
These are the stories of a people who refuse to face the limits of their landscape, whose attempts at control end up dirtying their own beds, and whose production, for now, is remarkably inflated. "Highest mountain, lowest desert, longest coast, most epic valley — (California) made for infinite invention." This multitude is both the source of the state's bounty and the substance of its myth. The California Dream is the American Dream with a dash of rouge and citrus — just as tantalizing, just as exclusive. Arax throws back the curtains, but a deeper question endures: Does his audience rise and respond, or do they remain asleep?

BY SEAN MCCOY



The Dreamt Land:
Chasing Water
and Dust Across
California
Mark Arax
576 pages,
hardcover: \$30
Knopf, 2019.

The U.S. has spent more money erasing Native languages than saving them



NEWS
COMMENTARY
BY REBECCA
NAGLE

Ricky Duvall's first language was Cherokee. His mom spoke Cherokee; his grandparents spoke Cherokee; his siblings and cousins all spoke Cherokee. When he was growing up in Lyons Switch, Oklahoma, everyone around him spoke Cherokee.

But when Duvall went to kindergarten in the mid-1970s, everyone spoke English. As one of the few Cherokee-speaking kids in his class, he was told by his teachers to stop using the language. At the time, he says, they believed Cherokee bilingual students weren't as smart and would fall behind students who spoke only English — a theory that research has since proven unfounded. When Duvall spoke his own language, his teacher kept him inside for recess. He remembers being 6 years old, watching the other kids play through the window.

So Duvall worked hard to be a good student and speak English, and only English. First at school, then at home, and eventually everywhere. And like thousands of other Cherokee-first language speakers of his generation, he lost his language.

"Speakers under the age of 40 are few and far between," Duvall says today. "It was everywhere when I was a kid. ... We're losing it."

There are roughly 2,000 fluent Cherokee speakers alive today, and most are over the age of 60. In 2018, the Cherokee Nation allocated nearly \$6.2 million to its language programs, including child and adult immersion programs, translation, online classes, a radio show and more. Last month, Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. announced that an additional \$1.5 million would be dedicated to language-program operating costs annually over the next five years, along with a \$5 million capital investment in a new language center. That funding boost was signed into law last week. (Disclosure: I serve as an apprentice in the Nation's Cherokee Language Master Apprentice Program.) Despite this effort, the tribe is losing fluent speakers at a rate more than 10 times higher than it produces second-language learners.

In 2018, only 47 language projects received funding — just 29% of all requests, leaving more than two-thirds of applicants without funding, according to ANA.

According to *Ethnologue*, of the 115 Indigenous languages spoken in the U.S. today, two are healthy, 34 are in danger, and 79 will go extinct within a generation without serious interven-

tion. In other words, 99% of the Native American languages spoken today are in danger. Despite the Cherokee Nation's efforts, the Cherokee language (Gʷʷ ʂʉḥ.ʂḍḍ) is on that list.

There are 573 federally recognized tribes in the United States, and most are battling language extinction. Since 2008, thanks in part to the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act, the Administration for Native Americans (ANA), through a competitive grant process, has allocated approximately \$12 million annually to tribes working to preserve their languages. In 2018, only 47 language projects received funding — just 29% of all requests, leaving more than two-thirds of applicants without funding, according to ANA. The Bureau of Indian Education, the Department of Education's Department of Indian Education and the National Science Foundation allocated an estimated additional \$5.4 million in language funding in 2018, bringing the grand total of federal dollars for Indigenous language revitalization last year to approximately \$17.4 million. Compared to how much the United States spent on exterminating Native languages, that sum is a pittance.

At the height of the Indian boarding school era, between 1877 and 1918, the United States allocated \$2.81 billion (adjusted for inflation) to support the nation's boarding school infrastructure — an educational system designed to assimilate Indigenous people into white culture and destroy Native languages. Since 2005, however, the federal government has only appropriated approximately \$180 million for Indigenous language revitalization.

In other words, for every dollar the U.S. government spent on eradicating Native languages in previous centuries, it spent less than 7 cents on revitalizing them in this one.

"The funding stream is so minuscule, considering the breadth of need and the number of languages that are falling into the endangered category," said Christine Sims (Acoma Pueblo), associate professor of educational linguistics at the University of New Mexico. "It's literally just a drop in the bucket."

After the Trail of Tears in the 1830s, the Cherokee Nation re-established itself as a sovereign nation in "Indian Territory," or present-day Oklahoma. During that time, the tribe created a bilingual public education system. When the tribe governed its own schools, students learned everything from Latin to algebra in Cherokee. In the 1880s, Cherokee students had a higher literacy rate — in Cherokee — than their white neighbors in Arkansas and Texas.

When the Cherokee Nation and four other tribes in Oklahoma were forced to go through allotment in the early 1900s — a process in which their treaty territory was divided up into individual, privately owned parcels later opened for white settlement — the government began its takeover of tribally run school systems through the Curtis Act of 1898. John D. Benedict, superintendent of schools in Indian Territory during the transition, deplored the schools' priorities and in an 1899 letter complained about educators speaking to their students in Native languages and female students studying mathematics instead of learning domestic skills and housekeeping.

Native students' attendance plummeted. In the Choctaw Nation, attendance in rural schools fell by 43% between 1892 and 1907, and college attendance dropped to zero. Eufaula Harjo, a Creek leader at the time, said, "We were proud of our schools, and our children went to them until the white man came in and crowded us out and took our schools away from us."

Over the tribes' protest, the educational infrastructure they had built was seized by the United States and turned into an English-only system where Native children were punished for speaking their own languages. Such punishment continued in



Ardina Moore shows students how to play a dice game during Quapaw Tribal Youth Language and Cultural Preservation Camp.

LAURIE SISK/THE JOPLIN
GLOBE



She would say,

‘V ʔʔ
GwY hθ
əyθθ’

– ‘How do you think you would tell me that in Cherokee?’ And then I would try to talk to her.”

– Ricky Duvall on speaking to his mother

rural Oklahoma into the 1970s.

During that same time period — the early 1900s — Cherokee children were also sent to Chilocco, an Indian boarding school on the Oklahoma-Kansas state line. The model, pioneered by Gen. Richard Henry Pratt, a veteran of the “Indian Wars” and founder of the notorious Carlisle Indian School, was designed to assimilate Native Americans into white society and strip future generations of their culture. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, an estimated one-third of all Native children were forced to attend Indian boarding schools, according to a report prepared for the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

When the U.S. created Indian boarding schools, the goal was to save money. Then-Secretary of Interior Henry Teller estimated that assimilating Indians would cost only a fraction of the ongoing military conflict with tribes. The children at Indian boarding schools, which were chronically underfunded, often lacked basic food and medical care. To help fund the schools, children were rented to local townspeople for unpaid labor. Still, the U.S. government allocated exponentially more money to Indian boarding schools than it has spent since then on reversing their effects.

One of the many tribes fighting to save their language today is the Sac and Fox Nation in Oklahoma. Two years ago, a perfect storm caused the abrupt closure of its adult language immersion program: A fluent speaker passed away and the tribe’s Administration for Native Americans grant dried up after two rounds of funding. According to ANA staff, ANA grantees can receive up to six consecutive years of funding but are then required to sit out for three. “That’s not enough time to grow a new generation of language speakers,” says Christine Sims. The Sac and Fox still run community classes, but lack programs to build fluent speakers. Of the tribe’s roughly 3,700 citizens, fewer than five are fluent speakers and all of them are over the age of 80, according to Sac and Fox Language Director Katie Thompson. But while some tribes become ineligible or are denied funding, many smaller tribes lack the capacity to even apply.

In 2018, Mosiah BlueCloud, the director of the Kickapoo Language Program, was furloughed after the tribally funded initiative ran out of money. BlueCloud doesn’t know when, or if, the pro-

gram will begin again, and the tribe doesn’t have a grant writer. “I was trained as a teacher. I can teach all day long,” said BlueCloud. “But as far as grant writing goes, it’s just beyond my scope.”

In the northeastern corner of Oklahoma, the town of Quapaw is the headquarters of the Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma — “O-gah-pah” in their language, a word that translates to “downstream people.”

At 88 years old, Ardina Moore is the last living speaker of Quapaw. To Moore, there is a connection between language and culture: “You can’t have one without the other,” she tells me. Without a grant or any other kind of funding, Moore gathers a few Quapaw families every Tuesday night at the tribe’s museum. Over sandwiches and Kool-Aid, she teaches students the names of animals and foods and how to pray in their language. One family attends every week despite living two hours away: a mother, daughter and grandmother.

“When I am gone,” says Moore, “I don’t know who is going to be able to do this.”

Given the deliberate role the U.S. government played in pushing Native languages to the brink of extinction, what is its responsibility to support Indigenous language revitalization today? Whatever the debt may be, the U.S. is very far from providing the funding to tribes necessary to prevent a wave of language extinction. Instead, tribes are competing with each other for funding that is a mere fraction of what the U.S. was willing to pay for their possible eradication.

Last December, Ricky Duvall graduated from an adult Cherokee language immersion program. He spent eight hours a day, five days a week for two years, relearning his first language. For the first time since he was a child, Duvall can speak to his family in GwY. “What do you think makes us Cherokee? It’s our language,” he says.

One day last summer, Duvall was driving his mother to Tulsa for a doctor’s appointment. They started talking to each other in Cherokee.

“I would say a bit of Yoneg (English); she would say, ‘V ʔʔ GwY hθ əyθθ’ — ‘How do you think you would tell me that in Cherokee?’ And then I would try to talk to her.”

And for the first time since he was a child, he did. □

Ricky Duvall, with his parents by his side, accepts his certificate of graduation from the Cherokee language program.

WILL CHAVEZ/CHEROKEE PHOENIX

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WEB EXTRA

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Gilded Age problems — and remedies — echo in today's economy



NEWS
COMMENTARY
BY ADAM M.
SOWARDS

In 1866, San Francisco was at a turning point. California officials had confirmed that the city owned roughly 8,000 acres of land near the waterfront, a remnant of Mexican land claims. That meant San Francisco faced a decision: Sell it off to speculators or retain much of it for public space. The burgeoning city chose immediate profit over long-term community interest. A local journalist named Henry George covered this issue carefully and with deepening objections.

Over the next two decades, George developed a stinging critique of concentrated land ownership, which he saw as driving inequality and poverty. His radicalism sprang from the particular Western experiences he observed. And it still speaks to us across more than a dozen decades, at a time when inequality is again rising, common resources are becoming more concentrated in private hands and equity remains under attack. George's solution? Tax reform.

Today's economic giants — think Google and Amazon — function much like 19th century railroads and mining corporations in driving up land prices and concentrating wealth while poverty swells. These echoes have led some to call this era a Second Gilded Age. Perhaps it's time to reconsider the "radical" ideas of the past and the boldness and creativity they showed in diagnosing and attacking persistent problems.

George was born in 1839 to a large lower-middle-class Protestant family. He landed in California in 1858, amid a society that was fluid with opportunities for both upward mobility and failure. His most recent biographer, Edward T. O'Donnell, notes in *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality: Progress and Poverty in the Gilded Age* that George's "restless personality and an unpredictable economy" kept him constantly insecure and frequently insolvent. He fell into the newspaper business — typesetting, printing, writing — and moved from one paper to another in San Francisco and Sacramento. When his prospects sputtered, which they did frequently, he sent his wife and children to live with his family in Philadelphia. Although this instability grew partly out of George's temperament, it also exemplified the era's economic cycling, the booms and busts that brought calamity every couple of decades.

Seeking stability, Americans tried to promote economic growth through legislation — but those laws often failed, or exacerbated inequalities. The Homestead Act of 1862 epitomized this approach: It took Indigenous land acquired by conquest, theft and treaty out of the public domain and gave it to citizens and immigrants who promised to become citizens. Another central initiative was the Pacific Railway Act. Congress gave two railroad corporations, Union Pacific and Central Pacific, massive land grants the size of states and set them loose to connect the continent across its wide middle. These government investments in individual and corporate enterprises constituted an enormous subsidy that wholly transformed the West, from who owned and

controlled the land to how value was extracted from it through mines, timber towns and ranches.

While most Westerners welcomed the trains, George viewed the Transcontinental Railroad with skepticism. In *Overland Monthly* in 1868, he penned a speculative but prescient essay titled "What the Railroad Will Bring Us." Writing merely six months before the line bridged the coasts, George understood that "the completion of the railroad and the consequent great increase of business and population, will not be a benefit to all of us, but only to a portion. As a general rule (liable of course to exceptions) those who have, it will make wealthier; for those who have not, it will make it more difficult to get." When California and the West became "netted with iron tracks," he warned, both progress and poverty would increase, refuting the presumption that economic growth helped all, or even most.

George saw the problem as rooted in land. In San Francisco, he witnessed a troubling quickening: "The spirit of speculation doubles, trebles, quadruples the past growth of the city." He foresaw that as landlords subdivided growing cities like San Francisco and more people moved in, land prices would rise and the gap between the comfortable and the less well-off would widen. Land policy, including the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Act, put too much property in too few hands, allowing landlords to create scarcity and drive up rents. George's famous 1879 tract, *Poverty and Progress*, fully explored this theme and has found followers — Georgists — ever since.

George's remedy was a tax levied on land values. A property's worth increased because of broad developments a growing citizenry made collectively: booming business districts, for instance, or infrastructure such as roads. Rents rose and landlords amassed income less because of anything they did individually than owing to that mutual growth. To short-circuit this engine of inequality, George proposed eliminating all taxes except one on land values. No taxes on income or capital or machines; rather, a "single tax" to redirect that wealth to society.

Today, it is not the railroads that dominate our economic lives, but other corporate forces and government policies — from offshoring to tax cuts — that produce chasms of inequality. Yet, with median house prices in San Francisco topping \$1.6 million and 42 million acres of the West owned by just 100 families, land remains a key piece to the puzzle. In recent years, others have found in George ideas and policies worth pondering, because, now as then, poverty is still associated with progress. Silicon Valley's technological promises don't guarantee advancement any more than the train whistles coming to town 150 years ago, full of false assurances that all is well. □

When California and the West became "netted with iron tracks," Henry George warned, both progress and poverty would increase, refuting the presumption that economic growth helped all, or even most.

Adam M. Sowards is an environmental historian, professor and writer. He lives in Pullman, Washington.
✉ AdamMSowards

WEB EXTRA

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A close-up photograph of a pair of brown canvas work pants. The fabric has a coarse, textured weave. A small, dark, rectangular brand label with the word "patagonia" in white script is visible on the right side of the pants. The lighting is warm and focused, highlighting the texture of the material.

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THE BORDER

Something there is that doesn't love our border wall with Mexico. President Trump is a fervent fan, of course; he lauds the new barrier, with its 18-to-30-foot-tall steel slats grounded in concrete, as "virtually impenetrable" — a "Rolls-Royce that border crossers cannot get over, under or through." U.S. agents, however, have found that the thick panels, called bollards, are anything but impenetrable. They can be sliced through in less than half an hour, reports the *Washington Post*, no heavy equipment needed. The agents, who insisted on anonymity, said a "cordless household tool known as a reciprocating saw that retails at hardware stores for as little as \$100" does the job easily. Once the steel is pushed aside, "an adult (can) fit through the gap." Some of the damage is happening in the San Diego area, where electronic sensors, which could detect vibrations from saws, have yet to be installed. Ronald Vitiello, a former Border Patrol agent who was acting director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement until April, blamed the breaches on "poking and prodding" by cartel smugglers. Given more funding, he said, "better deterrent features" could have been added: "The bollards are not the most evolved design; they are the most evolved that we could pay for." Meanwhile, some ingenious people have figured out not just how to cut the bollards but how to return them to their original positions, disguising the breaches. They also try to trick agents by applying putty to a cut or welded panel so that it appears intact. The Trump administration has so far completed 76 miles of new barriers in areas like San Diego, replacing older, shorter and dilapidated fencing.

ARIZONA

It was "a baffling act of thievery," reported CNN, when a 1-ton boulder was stolen this fall from the edge of a highway in Prescott National Forest in north-central Arizona. Heavy equipment was employed to remove "Wizard Rock," a beautiful black landmark striped with white quartz, which District Ranger Sarah Clawson called a



IDAHO The Older-Than-Hell Angels. DAVE ENSNER

community treasure. It's not the first incident: In the past four months, two other boulders, weighing from 750 to 2,000 pounds, were snatched as well. Clawson said she hoped they would be returned and that "these recurring events will become an educational opportunity." That hope was borne out in November, when Wizard Rock magically reappeared in its old spot. Back in 2009, another geo-pilferer also had a change of heart, returning an 80-pound heart-shaped rock to a wilderness area after "reading how much the rock meant to local residents." We Westerners don't take our rocks for granite.

NORTHERN ROCKIES

Naturalist Rick McIntyre doesn't do things the easy way. In order to study Yellowstone wolves for his new book, *The Rise of Wolf 8: Witnessing the Triumph of Yellowstone's Underdog*, he spent more than 6,000 days between June 2000 and February 2019 observing the private lives of several packs. Some of what he discovered surprised him, he told *Newsweek*. Wolves are fierce hunters, but he saw two male wolves show forbearance as well, allowing their defeated rivals to escape with their lives after battles for pack dominance. He focused most on Wolf 8, the smallest of the male wolves introduced into the park in 1995. When Wolf 8 was the canine equivalent of a teenager, McIntyre

said, he came across a mother of eight pups whose mate had been shot. This alpha female, "the true leader of any pack," accepted 8 into her family, and "he suddenly became an alpha male with a lot of responsibilities." Those included giving the pregnant females preference at the kills the male wolves made, working "tirelessly to feed and protect pups," and accepting rejection with good grace from females in the breeding season. McIntyre also found lots to admire in the "incredible teamwork" that wolves employ to bring down large prey: "Young females tend to be the fastest wolves, and their job is to catch up with an elk, bite into a hind leg and act as a drag. That could enable a big male ... to catch up and make a killing bite by getting in front of the elk, then leaping up and biting its throat." There's no reason

for humans to worry, though, he said, because wild wolves fear and avoid us: "I think they see us as superior predators."

COLORADO

Wilderness ranger Tony Weiss, 74, who patrols the Trappers Lake area of western Colorado's Flat Tops Wilderness, seems tailor-made for his job. He got to know the area as a boy, hiking and fishing with his dad, and after retiring as a state park ranger, he continued to relish Trapper Lake's unspoiled natural beauty and quiet. At his age he may not have needed a paying job, but after he volunteered for the Forest Service for four years — putting in 700 hours last summer — the agency decided to un-retire him, encouraging Weiss "to join their team as a paid employee," reports the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel*. A fellow staffer said Weiss always knows his stuff when hikers ask about local history or directions, and he particularly enjoys telling people about the values of wilderness. "The outdoors — that's my office," Weiss says.

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org or tag photos #heardaroundthewest on Instagram.



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